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Abstract: Transcendentalism is erroneously perceived as a movement that has its origin and end in the nineteenth century. The purpose of this essay is to prove the essence of Transcendentalism is not only present nowadays but is part of American Literature's roots as Asselineau declares in his book "The Transcendentalist Constant in American Literature." In order to discuss the main themes of the movement "Nature" by Emerson, "The Great Lawsuit" by Fuller and "Resistance to Civil Government" by Thoreau are used and connected to more modern examples. To better understand this movement, it is also necessary to view some of the ideals of its contemporary movement, Romanticism. This paper will be focusing on the symbolism of nature and the Environmental Movement.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, nature, union, environment, equality, Anthropocentrism, action, Biocentrism.

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0. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to discuss Transcendentalism and its ideas by using examples from its most known representatives and analyzing some of the Romantic ideas that influenced the movement. As a means to defend the conception that Transcendentalism has not perished but rather evolved throughout American history according to the cultural norms

of each time, examples of posterior authors will be provided, and they will be centred on the Environmental Movement, or rather the defence and description of nature.

1. Transcendentalism and Nature.

In *The Transcendentalist Constant in American Literature* Roger Asselineau states that "Transcendentalism, far from being a dead and irrelevant philosophy confined to the first half of the nineteenth century, is a fertilizing undercurrent, a constant in American literature from Emerson down to our own time". And that, moreover, "most American novelists are essentially poets, who write romances rather than true novels. They believe in insights rather than ideas, in intuitions rather than cold reason" (5). Both Romanticism and Transcendentalism originated as a reaction against the Age of Enlightenment, in rejecting their paradigms and those of their contemporaries they sought influence from the past and other parts of the world.

Progressively, as their focus varies, we find their attention is diverted to everyday subjects, as Emerson said: "The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common" (*Nature* 1110). For, as long as we are not ready to embrace this knowledge, it is as if we were blind. This idea of focusing on the simple things of life can also be appreciated in the Romantic Movement, where we encounter authors like Wordsworth, who endeavoured to portray the life of common people. More importantly, he described Nature as "the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul Of all my mortal being."¹ This idea of learning from nature can be observed in Emerson's *Nature*, where he remarks: "Space, time, society, labor, climate, food, locomotion, the animals, the mechanical forces, give us sincerest lessons, day by day, whose meaning is unlimited. They educate both the Understanding and the Reason" (1085). This concept can likewise be found in posterior American compositions like *The Lay of the Land*, where Sharpe writes: "Down in the loneliest marshes of Delaware Bay I know a lighthouse keeper and his solitary neighbor, a farmer: both have been touched by this nature spirit; both are interested, informed, and observant" (116). An idea Emerson defends regularly, saying we ought to learn from nature but that even the most knowledgeable naturalist is aware of the fact that there will always be something else to learn, as there is a never-ending erudition from the world.

Yet, the most important characteristic expressed by Romantics is the concept of being able to see a hidden truth when in nature. In Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*, the child that will grow up in the countryside is declared to be able to see and hear 'The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible'² of God's eternal language, he, likewise, describes nature as the 'Great universal teacher'. Moreover, Emerson states few can genuinely appreciate nature as it "shines into the eye and the heart of the child". That "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" (1074). Likewise, Fuller refers in *The Great Lawsuit* to the poet as that who, together with the priest and artist, is cognizant of the truth. They too see the poet as the extra-sensitive creature that can put into words the truths of this world, as a sort of prophet of the people, as we find in succeeding poets like Frost³ or Simms⁴.

As Asselineau very well puts it, the essence of American Literature was established by the act of taking the Romantic revolution a step further than their western contemporaries, and this was carried out by the American Transcendentalists. They defended the notion that the self and the universe are one; that the soul of each individual is that of the world. As Emerson states, each particle of nature is related to the whole⁵. This coincides with Fuller's idea, as she declares that "union is only possible to those who are units" (1624). And each of us is a unit in that we are all individual microcosms.

Among the themes of Transcendentalism, great importance is given to self-reliance and individualism, this can be clearly observed in Thoreau's *Resistance to Civil Government* (1849). In it, he declares we should not tolerate a tyrannical government, for most people who disapprove of something will not take action until they are a great group of dissidents, however, this only means you ultimately become a conformist. He states that by being reliant on societies we eventually lose our ability to function by ourselves, as we depend on the mass. He, nevertheless, encourages us not to wait until we are a majority to act "For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever" (1759). On the grounds of a fair State, he declares there will not be one until the State is just to all.

Focusing on the three most representative writers of the Transcendentalist movement, we find that Thoreau, Emerson and Fuller share the same idea of a plausible better world if there is equality for all. They not only refer to the disparities between sexes or the abolition of slavery but also to humankind as treating nature as its equal rather than its inferior; that is the concept of Biocentrism. They claim we ought to act on our beliefs. Thoreau states "Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right changes things and relations" (1757). Which is the same idea we find in Emerson and Fuller; that if thoughts are not put into action there can be no improvement. To quote another Romantic author such as Blake, we ought to "expect poison from standing water."⁶ That is, if there is no movement forward, we might as well say we are stuck in the past, for we become compliant with situations we are not supporters of. This idea of non-conformism can be seen throughout history, but especially be appreciated in this time and age when people are manifesting their principles and fighting for what they believe is right.

In both Emerson and Fuller, we see the idea of the incompleteness of man and woman, which is what the former declares as the reason why the world lacks unity, that is because "man is disunited with himself" (1100). They argue that, either by social restrictions or the limitations we set ourselves, we are uncomplete beings and that until we dispose of these shackles that push us down we will not be able to live in a harmonious society in which everyone is the best version of themselves. Fuller declares we are all victims of the 'slavery of habit' (1624). Much like how Thoreau says those who become compliant with a system they allege they are against eventually become that system's supporters. We too tend to follow the paths set by others before us, not questioning what might be wrong with it or if there are other, and better ways. And it is true that we are, indeed, habitual creatures, the problem occurs when we settle for detrimental customs as Benjamin Franklin warned us about in *Almanack*.⁷

These two authors also defend the idea of helping each other in order to improve instead of competing amongst ourselves. Fuller begins her essay saying we ought to do our best and faithfully follow our light since hope will lead us through the right path. She advocates that we "Help others, without blame that they need thy help. Love much and be forgiven." (*The Great Lawsuit* 1594). On declaring that women should be given the same opportunities as men she does not derogate them to portray her sex as superior but rather states that men are likewise victims of their way of thinking. That those preconceived notions they have are what prevents them from growing to become complete individuals, the same way the lack of opportunities thwart women from demonstrating they are as able as men. She declares "that to learn and to do all men must be lovers" (1595), which very aptly summarises the previous statement. It is not from a position of hate or revenge that we are going to accomplish something as a society but through humanitarianism and empathy with one another. A similar idea can be found in the writings of Goethe, who states that only through love could we come near nature, for love is its crown.⁸ Other quotations that support this idea can be found when she declares that natural harmony arises "where Truth and Love are sought in the light of freedom." Or when she expounds that if our emblem becomes a lamb instead of a lion; that is, if we live conciliatingly among ourselves, humankind "will be as children of one spirit" (1622-1626).

In a contemporary context, the transcendentalist values can tie nicely with the Ecological Movement we are seeing grow every day. To further link these two movements, it is necessary to include Emerson's accurate statement in *Nature*. As he says:

Nothing in nature is exhausted in its first use. When a thing has served an end to the uttermost, it is wholly new for an ulterior service. In God, every end is converted into a new means. Thus, the use of commodity, regarded by itself, is mean and squalid. But it is to the mind and education in the doctrine of Use, namely, that a thing is good only so far as it serves; that a conspiring of parts and efforts to the production of an end, is essential to any being. The first and gross manifestation of this truth, is our inevitable and hated training in values and wants, in corn and meat. (1087)

This quote perfectly represents the problem of industrialisation and the subsequent problem of the consumerist society that would develop afterwards. Here we find the recurrent misconception that humans can exploit mother nature and it will eternally give them what they want. When in actuality, we are now facing the consequences of having abused nature for so long. And this all comes from the concept of Anthropocentrism; the idea that humans have the right of dominion over nature.

Years later, during the Progressive Era citizens were alarmed by the heavy exploitation the land had suffered and conservationists called for federal supervision of these resources that to the Americans appeared to be an inexhaustible supply. And President Roosevelt, who is known for his dedication to the protection of wildlife and natural resources, stated in his "Conservation as a National Duty" speech of May 13, 1908, similar ideas to those addressed by Emerson. He declared that even though Americans had experienced a great growth of

assets, they should think about the repercussions taking so much from nature would bring about in the future (*Nature* 1087).

2. The Early Environmental Movement.

Throughout the Early Environmental Movement, we find John Muir, who became known for his articles praising the natural world, as well as his environmental activism and establishment of parks. In *Our National Parks* (1901) he not only minutely describes nature in different parts of the country but calls the Government to take measures protecting it and makes a statement which could also fall into the category of equality discussed before. He says that even though those who have not experienced the greatness of nature will be against the protective measures needed for the environment "The United States Government has always been proud of the welcome it has extended to good men of every nation, seeking freedom and homes and bread. Let them be welcomed still as nature welcomes them, to the woods as well as to the prairies and plains. No place is too good for good men, and still there is room" (391). Which perfectly aligns with his situation, as his family emigrated to the States. He could be compared to the Romantics as well in the sense that he too, was blinded. Although his was a physical blindness, when he recovered his sight, he was enlightened and, since then, devoted himself to nature.

A significant event in this movement is the publication of Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1979), one of the most influential books about conservatism. In which he addresses the already discussed notion that we regard the land as a commodity that belongs to us. In his view, we have to see the land as an equal to us and treat it with love and respect to live harmoniously. He additionally notes that by believing us to be superior, take on the 'conqueror role'. It, nonetheless, is a self-defeating one because we assume, we know "just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves" (Leopold 204).

Alongside the Counterculture movement in the United States, we find Reform Environmentalism. At its beginning, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* (1962), it greatly revolutionised the American society as it revealed the impact of pesticides and radioactivity from atomic bomb testing had on both humans and the environment. In her book we encounter the same criticism observed in texts from previous times, she criticises man's quenchless desire to have dominion over nature, which always leads to havoc.⁹ And she further states that no matter how much we try to separate ourselves from nature, we are still part of it, and every disaster that affects it befalls unto us as well. It had such an immense impact that a year after its publication, U.S Congress passed the Clean Air Act and the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed. However, by the end of the decade the fatal Santa Barbara Oil Spill that killed 10,000 birds with other events like the Love Canal disaster (McKibben 992-996) or the Libby Asbestos Contamination that followed. These events mobilized citizens all around the country in defense of the environment and against pollution. To such an extent, that by the end of the millennia we encounter an emphasis on

'community-based conservation'. And here we find once again an echo from our Transcendentalists, the idea of unity discussed in Fuller and Emerson's works. Moreover, it is worth indicating that this movement became known to the public because there were individuals who were not afraid to voice their opinions even when people did not believe what they were stating. Because if they would have waited until the majority shared their ideas, the movement might not have had the growing impact it has today.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, although the explanation of the movement's characteristics has focused on naturalistic symbolism and evolution of the Ecological Movement, they are nevertheless quite general and can, therefore, be applied to any other movements that fight for equality in a non-violent way. Transcendentalism has never really ended, due to its few established attributes it has received different names throughout history and has adapted itself to the needs and desires of the culture and society of each time. As some of the movement's beliefs discussed above, we still find the strive for self-reliance and the non-conformity with unfair situations in our society, and it will continue to be present in the far future because these traits form part of human nature.

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¹ This quotation is extracted from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798" (Lines 109-111).

² The lines referred to are: And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/ Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters, who from eternity doth teach / Himself in all, and all things in himself. / Great universal Teacher! he shall mould / Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask (58-64).

³ In "A Boundless Moment" Frost states: "And then I said the truth (an we moved on)" (11). Indicating he, as a poet, has the ability to not only perceive but speak the truth.

⁴ Simms tells the artist in "Hast Thou A Song for A Flower" that the music he plays for an element of nature such as is a flower "Must in a true spirit be wrought, / And the passion of mine thou singest / Must be pure as the child's first thought" (12-14).

⁵ "A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" in *Nature*.

⁶ One of the proverbs we find in Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" (17).

⁷ As we see in the quotation: "It is easier to suppress the first desire, than to satisfy all that follow it"(28).

⁸ In *Nature* Goethe declares "Her crown is Love. Only through Love can we come near her" (6).

⁹ Indeed, at the beginning of chapter 7, entitled "Needless Havoc", she declares that: "AS MAN PROCEEDS toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but against the life that shares it with him" (51).