

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalism and the Problem of Individualism

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the leading light in the Transcendentalists of nineteenth century America. Here is a small part of his most famous speech – to the Divinity Faculty of the University of Harvard in 1838 to final year divinity students about to become ministers:

“Once leave your own knowledge of God, your own sentiment, and take secondary knowledge, as St. Paul's, or George Fox's, or Swedenborg's, and you get wide from God with every year this secondary form lasts, and if, as now, for centuries,—the chasm yawns to that breadth, that men can scarcely be convinced there is in them anything divine.”

“Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation of Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say, 'I also am a man.' Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it, because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's.”

I defy you to find a more strident declaration of the individualism that is a common feature of our Unitarianism.

When I first went up to University I thought that I would read Logic and Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy. I suppose, like many serious-minded adolescents, I was engaged then, as now, with the great questions of life and death, of purpose and meaning and of what is good. But I soon ran into trouble. The Professor of Logic and Metaphysics lectured to us on Descartes, famous for his 'I think therefor I am' and for his dualism, his division of all reality into mind and body. I was required to write him an essay on Descartes. I was very critical of Descartes. The essay came back with forty two percent and the comment “How dare you treat Descartes so cavalierly”. Later that year I read my own criticisms in a book of essays by the Logical Positivists who were the dominant school at that time. So I had

been right enough after all. I learned that Professor Wright's favorite philosopher was Descartes. I passed Logic and Metaphysics but dropped it.

Moral Philosophy was a different experience. The Universities of St Andrews and Dundee were not yet separated at that time and a different course was taught in Dundee from the one in St Andrews but for some reason the exam paper had the questions for the St Andrews course on one side and those for the Dundee course on the other. I can't have done much work for the exam because I found the questions for the Dundee course much more interesting and did not notice that those on the other side of the paper were meant for me. When I came out of the exam I discovered that I had answered all the wrong questions. I passed. But I dropped Moral Philosophy too. I had lost faith in the integrity of both subjects. Probably I was wrong and it was my loss.

Exploring the European and American religious philosophy of the nineteenth century makes me think of Alison in Wonderland. I hope you will forgive me for this analogy. It is like diving out of the light of our twentieth century existentialism where all serious thinking about meaning and purpose begins with my own existence and my own nature, diving down into a huge rabbit warren with intersecting tunnels and caves where there is partial light from time to time and you can suddenly arrive unexpectedly in a place you soon realise you have been in before with people you thought you had left not too long ago but realizing this cave is familiar yet confusingly slightly different! (aaarrgh!) The analogy is not meant to be degrading or bathetic but, if it comes across as that, I apologise for at present I can think of no better way to convey the experience, which you too may have had, the halls of smoke and mirrors you go through. I experience European and American philosophy of religion as a huge network of striving people linked in many ways by what, today, Richard Dawkins would call memes - that is similarities of ideas and experiences but each with subtle differences.

James Martineau of the mid nineteenth century is the last theologian and philosopher of religion who could be called Unitarian and also had an international impact in the sense that he was read and acknowledged by several other leading thinkers not just in the UK but on both sides of the Atlantic and in Europe too. Perhaps, in asserting that, I may be doing an injustice to James Luther Adams of the twentieth century but Adams has never stirred as wide an interest as Martineau did in his particular day. But it is not of Martineau that I want to speak of today, but rather of the Transcendentalists of America who influenced him and especially of Ralph Waldo Emerson who, like Martineau, preached and

lectured and was briefly a Unitarian minister and then gave up membership, turned on much of the ministry of his day as a critic and continued on his own path, following his own inner promptings.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was, in my view the most interesting Transcendentalist. Transcendentalism is a philosophical, literary and spiritual movement that developed in the 1830s and 1840s mostly around Boston, a place then riddled with, and heavily influenced by, Unitarians. For our purposes today the Transcendentalists were basically Romantic Idealists. This may sound as if they were just too good and impractical to live! But that is not so, so I must explain a little of what I believe these labels, Romantic and Idealist, might mean in the context of European and American philosophy.

For centuries there has been a tribal difference between the Empiricists, mostly UK, and the Idealists, often German, over how we know anything. Do not be confused by the common meanings of 'idealists' who can sound like some Utopians who believe in a never-never land sometime in the future or by the common meaning of idealists as perfectionists. Idealists in European philosophy were just people who thought that that there are some organisational principles of understanding that we bring to every situation, every pattern, every perception. In other twentieth century words, we are 'pre-wired' to organise our perception of every situation along certain lines. The Empiricists, in contrast thought that, when we met a new puzzle or a new situation, we brought nothing to it, we just responded to our senses without any pre-existing organising principle. In my student studies of the experimental psychology of perception in the 1960s it became clear to me that both sides had a hold on a part of the whole truth, that from birth, we humans do bring some basic organisational principles to the interpretation of the essential raw stream of data that our sense organs bring us. The idealists emphasised the inherited internal organisational principles we all bring to our interpretations of reality. For them, the internal values inspiring us from within us in the form of an inherent sense of justice, a perennial critical search for truth, for example, were the most important aspects of our experience of existence. So, in that sense, Ralph Waldo Emerson was an Idealist in so far that he believed that our inherent sense of justice, truth and other values or, as my parents used to call them, our principles were the most important part of our being human and being religious.

The Transcendentalists were also Romantics in the sense that, like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake, they thought and felt that there had been too much of an emphasis on thinking, and on the intellectual, in the Enlightenment movement. These Transcendentalists saw

that very distortion of emphasis in the formal preaching and teaching of their Unitarian kin. Emerson once called this Unitarian preaching 'corpse cold' and the Transcendentalists tried to put strong emotion, personal inspiration and imagination back where they belonged as an equally important part of spiritual life.

The rationalism of the time believed in a process of empirical study, in observation through the senses and on arrival at truth by rational inference from historical and natural evidence. These had been the dominant ideas of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution and, of course, they drove the fantastic technical and scientific achievements of Western Europe. But, in the early to mid-nineteenth century, this dominance, here and there, was giving way to the dominance of the view of Immanuel Kant who saw the most important knowledge as based on innate transcendental principles, unfalsifiable by science or logic but deriving from the inner spiritual essence of what it is to be human, for example on the idea of the categorical moral imperative. In 1842 Charles Mayo Ellis wrote, "Transcendentalism, as viewed by its disciples, was a pilgrimage from the idolatrous world of creeds and rituals to the temple of the Living God in the soul. It was a putting to silence of tradition and formulas, that the Sacred Oracle might be heard through intuitions of the single-eyed and pure-hearted. Amidst materialists, zealots, and skeptics, the Transcendentalist believed in perpetual inspiration, the miraculous power of will, and a birthright to universal good. He sought to hold communion face to face with the unnameable Spirit of his spirit, and gave himself up to the embrace of nature's perfect joy, as a babe seeks the breast of a mother."

In the background, too, at that time, the higher Biblical criticism was leading to the point where, famously among the trainers of Unitarian ministers, James Martineau would lead the rejection of the literal truth of the Bible. And educated people were beginning to read and value the sacred writings of the Hindus and the Buddhists. Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions - particularly organized religion and political parties - ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They were very critical of organised religion. As Emerson so stridently put in his famous Divinity School Address, they had faith that man is at his best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed. As Emerson elsewhere wrote, "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men."

Ralph Waldo Emerson lived from 1803 to 1882, through the influences from the French Revolution and the American Civil War to the abolition of slavery. He was ordained as a Unitarian minister in 1829 but left the church to travel in Europe in 1833. During his period as a minister he records his increasing disagreement with the Unitarian establishment and with his church and he noted that he preferred the freedom to lecture and write what he thought regardless of any institution. He made his living lecturing and writing independently. Although another Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing was the main Transcendentalist influence on Martineau in the UK, Emerson was a major influence on Channing himself. Thomas Carlyle and Nietzsche were also considerably influenced by Emerson and his stance contributed to the development of the existentialism that is the philosophical mainstream of our age.

Emerson himself was strongly influenced by the Hinduism of the Vedas as is demonstrated in his idea of the Oversoul which he understood as being transcendent (beyond the universe), immanent (within the universe) and within the individual.

(I quote) "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul."

His essay 'On Nature' was the flagship of the Transcendentalist movement. Like many of the Romantics (Wordsworth, Blake) he rejected the environment of Blake's 'dark satanic mills' and the increasing urbanisation of the industrial revolution and found his peace and his sense of divinity in the direct experience of the countryside. Here I am reminded of the kind of natural paganism that runs through many Unitarians without becoming the kind of organised development of artificially reconstructed rituals of the Druidism.

According to Emerson we could have direct intuitive experience of the wonders of nature and through these of the great oversoul that sounds so like the Vedic Atman of whom 'Tat Twam Asi' translating as 'you are a part of that wonder too'.

In a famous passage he imagines himself standing beside his beloved pond in a clearing in the New England forest (I quote) "Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God".

But it is not so much his unorganised paganism or even his individualism, which we saw expressed so strongly in our opening reading today, but his valuing of inner inspiration which I want to focus on today.