

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TRANSCENDENTALISM: RALPH WALDO EMERSON (1803-1882)

#### I/ THE AMERICAN (RE)NAISSANCE

The expression "the American Renaissance" was used by a very famous literary critic (F. O. Matthiessen) as the title for his 1941 study on the literature of the first half of the 19th century (and essentially on Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman). Indeed, with Emerson and his followers, began a new period in US literature : after Cooper, who had created the US "romance", full of adventures and habited by the figure of the US hero, a group of thinkers, led by Emerson, very consciously proposed a definition of what a real US culture should be. According to them, time had come for a new writing ; historically, it was the perfect time for a real revolution in American culture. Indeed, the country was in full territorial expansion, economic and political development, but desperately needed a cultural and mental maturity. Those thinkers therefore wanted to break free from various influences that kept dominating the American intellectual life, and advocated a new era. In your book, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, the two authors discuss the expression "American Renaissance" and say that in fact it was a "naissance" more than a Renaissance (hence the brackets I used in the title of this part) : indeed, it was not simply another chapter in American cultural history but an entirely new start, a new beginning.

This period started with the publication of R. W. Emerson's *Nature*, an essay, in 1836. This text had a tremendous influence on many thinkers of the time, and was considered as the manifesto of a new movement, that was soon called "Transcendentalism". Transcendentalism inaugurated the American Renaissance, giving it both a necessary impulse as well as its foundations. It gave birth to many texts, essentially philosophical essays, which analyzed the intellectual, but also moral, social, religious and political situation of the USA in the 1830s, 40s and 50s, and advocated a resolutely independent spirit. Even if the Transcendentalists were essentially philosophers and thinkers, novelists such as Hawthorne or Melville, and poets such as Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson (we will study them in the following chapters of this course), also felt profoundly indebted towards Transcendentalism which deeply

influenced them in many different ways. The American Renaissance, which started in 1836 with *Nature*, lasted for several decades, until the beginning of the Civil War, in 1861, which made the USA enter another period.

During the period of the American Renaissance, several genres emerged : novels, but also poems, short-stories, essays and what was called lectures or addresses, that is texts that were written to be delivered to an audience, and which later on were published. Intellectual life, indeed, was intense in that period. And all this took place essentially in New England, and more precisely in and around Boston, which became the center of cultural life at the time. In fact, Boston was such a lively and attractive center that writers who came from other areas (Poe from the South, for instance, or Melville and Whitman from New York) joined New England at some point in their lives, feeling the curiosity or necessity to experience the intense intellectual life that developed there. In Boston, you could find women writers (Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, the famous author of the world-famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), numerous vocal abolitionists, thinkers, philosophers, religious reformers... It is therefore no surprise, in a way, that Transcendentalism appeared in such a place.

## **II/ RALPH WALDO EMERSON (1803-82) AND THE TRANSCENDENTALIST CLUB**

Let us first see the origins of Transcendentalism and the preceding movements that influenced it, namely Unitarianism and Romanticism.

### **a) the double influence of Unitarianism and Romanticism**

Unitarianism, first, was a movement that appeared in the beginning of the 19th century, and which developed in Harvard (New England), a university, by the way, in which most Transcendentalists were students. It came as a revolt against Calvinism, a religious doctrine at the heart of American Protestantism. Calvinism was based on very austere beliefs, such as man's original fall (man was conceived as a sinner, with no possible redemption) or man's predestination (no personal freedom nor progression). Unitarianism started as a reaction against the deep influence of Calvinism on American religious and also intellectual life. What the Unitarians believed in was

- the Unity of God (all religions was the expression of the same faith),
- the divinity of man (man was good, guided by an immanent spirit in himself)
- and the sanctity of Nature.

Unitarianism offered, therefore, an optimistic conception of religion, very much influenced by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, as you can realize : to sum up, just as the philosophers of the Enlightenment had written it, man was now seen as good and perfectible, God was benevolent, and Nature was the place where He (God) could be found.

The second movement that deeply influenced Transcendentalism was Romanticism, which developed first in Europe and then in the USA at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. The main characteristics of Romanticism were :

- the glorification and celebration of the individual
- a belief in the goodness and perfectibility of mankind
- a celebration of nature, harmonious and benevolent, which is seen as the main inspiration for society and the arts
- an emphasis on emotions, feelings and intuition which are both the sources and the subjects of artistic expression
- an emphasis on imagination, which is described as a creative force much stronger than education or reason
- an optimistic belief in a social and political system that is conceived both as protections and as stimulations for the development of the individual

Both Unitarianism and Romanticism developed in the USA in the Boston area, and found a perfect expression in Transcendentalism, which was one of the many movements (but also the most famous one) that were born in the USA after 1820, in a period of intense intellectual, spiritual and cultural changes. The founder of Transcendentalism was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), who was born in New England, studied in Harvard and became a unitarian minister (it was a family tradition) before suddenly breaking free from his Church, in which he felt stifled. Emerson, when he decided to abandon his position as a unitarian minister, did not become an atheist, but devoted himself to another sort of religion, if one may say so, that could be described as a personal and non-institutional form of faith, a faith that needed no church, no ministers. He first took time to travel in Europe, and became familiar with the fashionable European ideas of the time (essentially Romanticism and German idealism) ; he then came back and settled near Boston, in a town named Concord, where he became a teacher, a lecturer and a writer (essays and poems). There, he published a first and short text, *Nature*, which gave birth to Transcendentalism ; thanks to this essay, many thinkers of the period who were trying to find their own ways felt immediately attracted to Emerson's new ideas (in which they recognized their own preoccupations and questions) and came to Concord, which thus quickly became an intellectual and spiritual center.

### **b) *Nature* (1836) : a manifesto**

In *Nature*, Emerson first expresses his pantheistic view of the world : Nature is the place where God can be found, he writes. Nature is thus sacred ; it is a source of nourishment, of beauty and inspiration. It is in Nature, therefore, and in Nature alone, that man can find what he needs : it is where God speaks to him ; it is where man can regenerate himself, without the help of traditional, institutional religion— since his only religion, indeed, is Nature. Man, therefore, must turn to Nature in order to discover what Emerson calls his true « self »— a key-word in this work, and in Emerson's whole work. Emerson, therefore, firmly repudiates his former Unitarian Church, in spite of the influence that Unitarianism first had on his thought, and chooses Nature as his new religion.

In *Nature*, Emerson also advocates the necessity for a new way of looking at the world : man, just like him, must learn to open his eyes, as if for the first time in his life, and must learn to look at the world differently, getting rid of his preconceptions and of his moral or educational influences. "I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all", he writes. The "I", therefore, becomes the "eye", and Emerson explains that it is thanks to this new and fresh way of looking at the world that the self is going to discover itself.

Although *Nature* was only read by a few intellectuals, it had an incredible influence : many thinkers who recognized their preoccupations in Emerson's essays came to join him in Concord ; Transcendentalism was born and the "transcendental club" was founded. The members even created their own newspaper, *Dial*, in which they expressed their ideas. Ironically, the word « Transcendentalism » was first used by people who laughed at the new movement and wanted to mock the members' philosophical pretensions. But it finally came to design a philosophical movement that advocates the immanence of the divine in the world (immanence means that the divine is to be found everywhere, naturally), as well as man's capacity to regenerate himself, to find himself, thanks to Nature and without the help of conventional and traditional religions or Churches.

### c) "The American Scholar" (1837)

The following year, Emerson delivered a lecture, entitled "The American Scholar", which was extremely successful and described as the "American intellectual Declaration of Independence". In this address, he urges his fellowmen and women to reject tradition, imitation and foreign influences. Emerson therefore used many arguments already used by many different authors in the preceding century (cf preceding course), who also advocated the rise of a national culture, typically American and no longer linked to European cultures. But he added another dimension to this plea : indeed, the notion of the "self", that he had already introduced in *Nature*, is developed again in « The American Scholar », and placed at the center of Emerson's discourse : a writer who wants to discover new forms and write a

truly national literature, Emerson says, must be true to his own self— which means that he must first discover his self, therefore, in order to listen to it, and trust it without yielding to exterior influences. Which means, therefore, that this writer must be independent— the key-word in this lecture. The American Scholar (the word means "learned man", or « intellectual »), like Emerson himself, must be intellectually, spiritually, culturally independent ; he must listen to his own self only, and endeavour to express it.

#### **d) "Self-Reliance" (1841)**

Finally, and logically if you keep in mind the previous works, Emerson wrote "Self-Reliance", an essay, in 1841. In this text, he advocates "the age of the first person singular", that is the beginning of a new era of which the individual must be the center. Once again, you recognize, in Emerson's idea, the influence of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, which both insisted on the individual. This individual, this "self" that Emerson wants to place at the heart of US society, does not mean, of course, that Emerson advocates selfishness ; on the contrary, Emerson's conception of the self supposes a personal development which, alone, can produce a harmonious society. In "Self-Reliance", indeed, he describes an ideal society which must be built on distinct individuals and not on a crowd of similar people. What Emerson rejects, in fact, is conformism (a danger which he identifies in the 1840s USA), and once again he advocates individuality. It is less necessary, according to Emerson, for a society to possess learned people, educated people, than to possess individuals who have developed their own selves, their own culture and education. Emerson wanted men to free themselves from too strict habits and conventions, from a traditional and stifling education, from preconceived ideas— he urged people to reform themselves, and not to wait for global reforms coming from society. A self-reliant man, therefore, is someone who can define his own needs, rules and beliefs ; someone who no longer needs external influences (embodied either by educational institutions, Churches...); someone who has found himself in a harmonious relationship with Nature.

Emerson had a tremendous influence on his period. First because he firmly repudiated the past, and advocated a national culture and literature, of course, but more than that, he celebrated the self, the individual, and he urged every American to discover their true self, to become self-reliant, to free themselves from too rigid traditions and taboos. Emerson, therefore, advocated an intellectual revolution, and dealt with new issues, suggesting new ideas as well as a new future. At the very heart of his works, one finds a notion that hasn't been mentioned yet : the "Oversoul" ("la sur-âme"). The Oversoul, in Emerson's work, is the

divine spirit of the universe, and is present both in Nature (you remember that the all-loving God is present everywhere in Nature) and in man (it is what can be called the Transcendent Self, that is the sacred dimension of man). By developing his self, by discovering it, man aims at merging it with the Oversoul, thus reaching self-knowledge and harmony. The Oversoul, therefore, is the universal spirit that men share ; but it is also the promise for self-discovery, and thus a most private and personal achievement.

In searching for a new, spiritual identity and way of life, Emerson came to distrust society and its rules— educational rules, religious, moral rules etc... He thought that the USA was becoming too interested in money and commerce, material success, and he saw the growing expansion and industrialisation of the country as a major danger jeopardizing the original US ideals. He therefore ceaselessly urged people to develop their individuality and to resist the uniformisation of society. In many essays, he sometimes bitterly expressed his doubts about the future of the USA if a profound intellectual and moral revolution did not take place.

Emerson was nicknamed "The Great Awakener", and this expression perfectly conveys his influence on mid-nineteenth century America : he tried, indeed, to make people open their eyes on a new era, and new possibilities for all. He had many followers, among whom his main disciple was Henry David Thoreau.

## **CHAPTER SIX :**

### **TRANSCENDENTALISM (2) : HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817-1862)**

- a) the experience of Walden Pond
- b) from "Civil Disobedience" (1848) to "Life without Principle" (1851-55) : Thoreau's political commitment

## CHAPTER SIX :

### TRANSCENDENTALISM (2) : HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817-1862)

#### a) The experience of Walden Pond (1845-1847)

Thoreau was born in Concord, the town in which Emerson settled and founded the Transcendentalist club. Just like Emerson himself, he attended Harvard, in which he became familiar with revolutionary ideas— such as the new principles of Unitarianism or the Romantic ideas coming from Europe. Just like Emerson, he first worked as a teacher, but he decided to resign when he was forced to administer corporal punishment, refusing methods which, in his view, did not respect the basic rights of the individual. He soon joined the Transcendentalist movement. Emerson really became his mentor and deeply influenced him. Thoreau started to write in *Dial* (the Transcendentalist newspaper) ; he then wrote essays and his Journal.

In 1845-47, Thoreau decided to launch into an experiment which truly changed his life. Indeed, he decided to try out Emerson's ideas and principles ; he therefore decided to cut himself off society, to reject its materialism and commercialism as well as its too rapid pace. He felt isolated in the modern US society, and therefore decided to isolate himself, to free himself from it and to see what kind of life he could build for himself. He therefore chose a place in the heart of nature, called Walden Pond, near Concord, and decided to experience solitude in order first, to distance himself from society, and secondly, to discover his self. By doing so, Thoreau considered that he was concretely following Emerson's principles, establishing a new relationship with Nature in which he hoped to find his self, his true individuality.

The project was ambitious and extremely simple at the same time. On the fourth of July, 1845, quite a symbolic date, Thoreau left for Walden Pond. He began by building himself a hut in the middle of the woods, which he arranged in a most simple way, taking with him only the basic objects he needed. Then, he spent two years by himself, in complete solitude, living the simple and ascetic life of a truly self-reliant man : he work hard to find and produce his own food ; he grew his own vegetables ; he cut his own wood ; he fixed his hut when needed, etc.... In that respect, he proved he could be independent, able to live alone, with no external help, taking care of his own needs.

He also spent a lot of time studying the flora and fauna, paying attention to the smallest details of natural life, the weather, the light, the cycle of seasons for instance. He took long walks, getting to know the neighborhoods of his hut with great accuracy : the pond,

at the heart of his world, offered him hours of peaceful observation ; the animals inspired him greatly ; the vegetal life was source of infinite contemplation.

But Thoreau did not simply spend his time living like a savage, away from society. On the contrary, the distance he had put between society and himself allowed him to better reflect on social matters. He therefore devoted a lot of time to thinking, meditating on various subjects such as the dangers of religion or of material success, the development of civilization that threatened nature, the importance of the individual who must be the true reformer of society and not wait for improbable reforms coming from the system. Little by little, he realizes that being away from the tumult of society helps him to distinguish between what is necessary and what is futile ; he realizes that he has a much better vision of the USA from his natural shelter in Walden Pond, and a better analysis of how man should live in the modern world. By considering the principles on which the US rest, he discovers which ones he should accept as his, and which ones he should reject as incompatible with the life he now wants for himself.

During the two years he spent in Walden Pond, Thoreau wrote his Journal regularly, and he finally published the narrative of his experience in 1854, in a book simply called *Walden*, a book which is very difficult to precisely define : it is, of course, not fiction ; it sometimes sounds like an autobiographical account of two years in the life of a man ; but it also sounds as a philosophical, or sociological essay ; and very often, it also presents itself as a most documented essay on American nature. This book remains, therefore, as an extraordinary testimony on solitude, as a document on an extreme experiment with the self and on the progressive development of inner life ; it is also a reflection on autobiography and on American nature. Even after the experiment at Walden Pond and the publication of the book, Thoreau continued to spend as much time as he could in nature, going on with his patient and loving observation of it. Definitely influenced by Emerson's theories, he never stopped considering nature as a powerful force, the only one, indeed, that could offer man this necessary physical, intellectual and spiritual regeneration.

#### **b) from "Civil Disobedience" (1848) to "Life without Principle" (1851-55) : Thoreau's political commitment**

If Thoreau remains essentially famous for his original, solitary and mystical experience in *Walden*, his life was nevertheless also characterized by an important and original political dimension. Thoreau, therefore, was not simply this strange man who decided to live as Rousseau's « good savage », in the middle of the woods. He also concretely got involved in many fights, giving his life a very committed dimension, fights which required decisive political choices and difficult positions. Thoreau was a deeply honest man, a

relentless defender of freedom and the human rights, someone who could simply not stand injustice. For instance, he supported the cause of the abolitionists (a minority at the time) and firmly denounced slavery as one of the most terrible sins of the USA, attacking it on religious and moral grounds. He also opposed the Mexican war (1846-1848), denouncing what he saw as the never-ending imperialist desire of expansion of the US ; this war aimed at dispossessing a people from their lands, he said, warning his contemporaries against greed and power. Several times, he did not hesitate to speak against the decisions of the government of his country, feeling it his duty to give his opinion when it was radically different from that of the government. In "Civil Disobedience", an essay published in 1848, he turned this personal way of life into a principle : in this famous text, he advocates the right, for the individual, to express his disagreement when he judges that his country, his political representatives, no longer respect the basic principles of democracy : in other words, when you disagree with what your government does because you feel it goes against the very identity of your nation, against what your nation should stand for, then you have the right to say so and, even more, you are allowed to refuse to support your government. Thoreau thus encouraged a form of action which he called "passive resistance" (for instance, at one point in his life, he refused to pay his taxes as an expression of his disagreement, and went to jail for that). This theory was revolutionary at the time, and aimed at turning the individual into a politically responsible person. Thoreau's belief, indeed, was that too strict a respect for the law suppresses the sense of political responsibility in man, and is, therefore, dangerous : a whole people can thus follow a tyrant, simply because the people is trained to blindly obey the law, which is in the tyrant's hands. Thoreau, therefore, urged his fellowmen to develop a critical mind, to think about the important social, economic and political issues with an analytical and independent mind. He warned the US people against the dangers of political manipulation, propaganda and consensus. Think independently, he kept repeating ; use your mind and critical sense ; do not follow the majority because it is the majority ; shape your own principles, ideals and rules. Every man , he said, should be a reformer.

He went on developing this theory in his Journal, a passage of which was later published under the title "Life without Principle" : he advocated self-study and meditation, which he considered as the only tools leading to the definition, for a man, of his own principles. Once again, the matter at stake was first spiritual and intellectual independence, and secondly the discovery of the self. Patiently, devotedly, Thoreau therefore spent his life trying to find the Emersonian self. He had a tremendous influence on a large number of people : even in the 20th century, many pacifists, for instance, used Thoreau's concept of « Civil disobedience » in order to justify their refusal to go and fight for their country, arguing that they disagreed with their country's decision to wage a war and that they were allowed to refuse to obey— it happened during the Vietnam war, for instance (1964-1973), and many young Americans reread Thoreau at that time and claimed his influence. Gandhi himself, who

came to embody non-violence, mentioned Thoreau's concept of « Passive resistance » as a major inspiration for his own philosophy.

