

# **The American Transcendentalist Movement**

GENT 11: Age of Progress  
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# Who were the Transcendentalists?

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- ▶ Generally speaking, the Transcendentalists were a generation of people in New England, mainly Boston, who were well educated.
- ▶ The movement was at its height in the decades before the American Civil War (1861-1865), and were a product of the divided sense of “nation” of that time.
- ▶ The Transcendentalists were trying to create a uniquely “American” philosophy in the decades after American Independence.
  - ▶ Since the U.S. now had political independence, it now should seek literary independence.
  - ▶ The Transcendentalists consciously worked to craft essays, literature, novels, poetry and philosophy that was clearly distinct from the cultural products of France, England, Germany, and other European nations.



# Major figures in the Transcendentalist Movement

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Ralph Waldo Emerson 1803-1882

▶ Works:

- ▶ *Nature* (1836)
- ▶ “The American Scholar” (1837)\*
- ▶ “The Eternal Pan” (p. 1903)

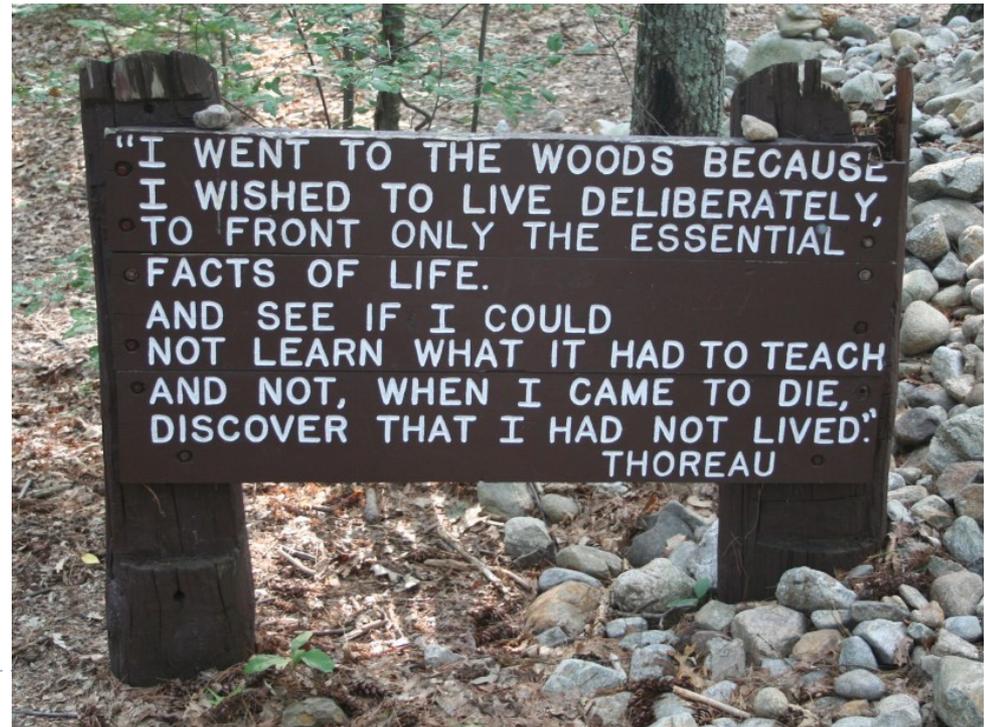
Margaret Fuller 1810-1850

▶ Works:

- ▶ *The Great Lawsuit* (1843)
- ▶ *Summer on the Lakes* (1844)
- ▶ *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)

Henry David Thoreau 1817-1862

- ▶ “The Inward Morning”
- ▶ “Nature doth have her dawn each day”
- ▶ *Life on Walden Pond*
- ▶ *Civil Disobedience*



# Social Critiques and Transcendentalism

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Part of the belief of the Transcendentalists was that all humans were part of one human community, and this led many Transcendentalists to become involved in social reform movements.

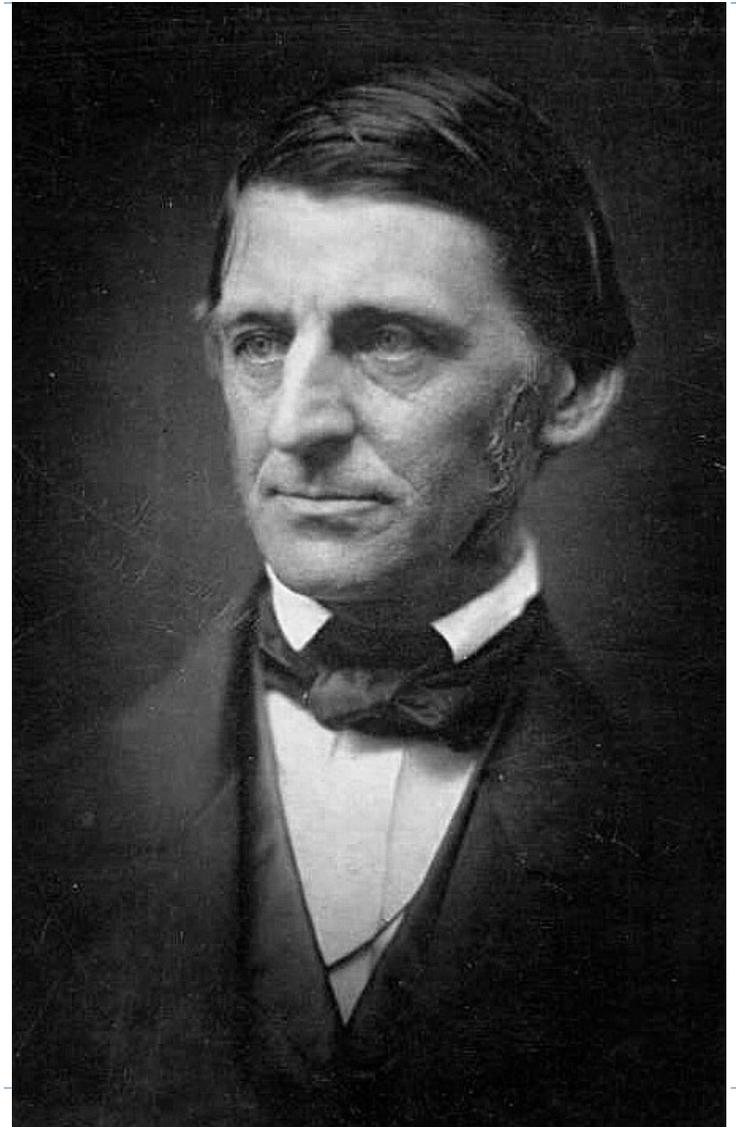
- ▶ Anti-slavery reform, and sometimes Abolition
- ▶ Women's rights
- ▶ Indigenous Land Rights



# Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

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- ▶ Born in Boston
- ▶ Became the leader of the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century
- ▶ Published his seminal work, *Nature*, in 1836 which outlined his philosophy of Transcendentalism
- ▶ The next year he gave a speech students of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Mass.
- ▶ The speech was then published as “The American Scholar”



# “The American Scholar”

## The divided self

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Emerson tells of an “old fable” about the divided self.

- ▶ “...the gods, in the beginning, divided Men into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into five fingers, the better to answer its end” (p. 520).
- ▶ “...there is One Man,—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier” (p. 520).

## “The American Scholar”

### The divided self as mere function

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“Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of the Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship” (p. 521)

# “The American Scholar”

## *Man Thinking* or mere thinker

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The problem is that people have been separated from their true nature.

- ▶ “In this distribution of functions, the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state, he is, *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking” (p. 521).

The American Scholar has a duty to break away from the role of mere thinker, and strive to become *Man Thinking*. This involves looking at the world in a fresh new way, and not being tied down to traditional or conventional practices and world views. Their education has three main influences.

1. Nature is the best teacher and most important influence on the mind
2. The Past should be explored through Books
3. And understanding of action and how it relates to experience

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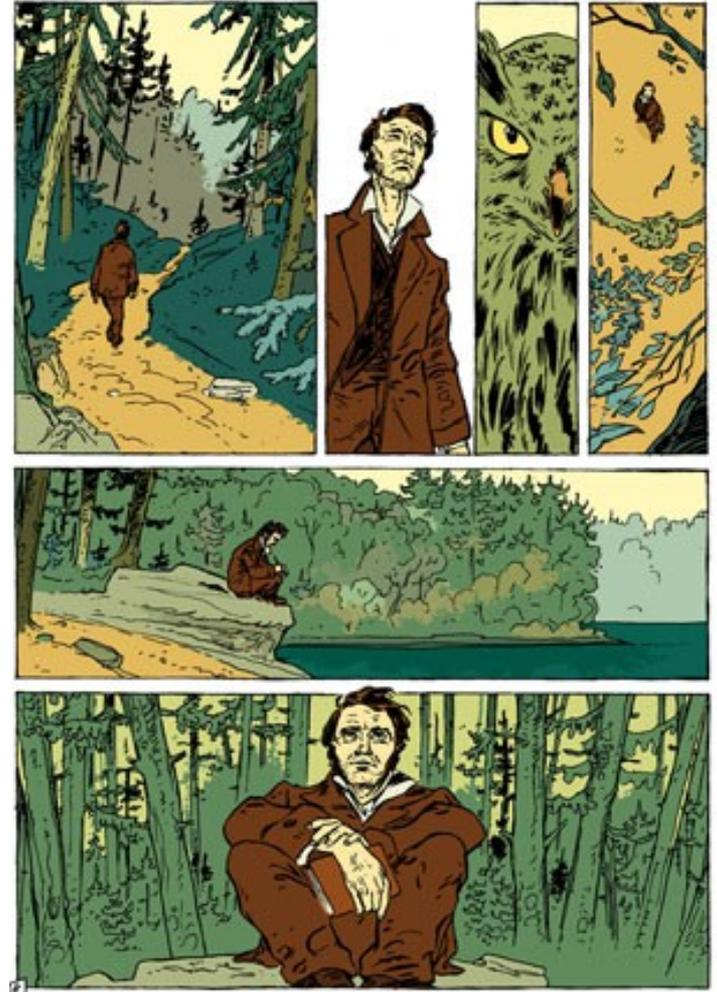
▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Norton*, 520-532.

# “The American Scholar”

## Nature as best teacher

Emerson sees other similarities between the Scholar and Nature, which are outlined here, and in his important work *Nature*.

- ▶ The natural world at first seems like a chaotic assemblage of individual objects and facts
- ▶ The developing mind then starts to recognize systems – classifying these facts creating categories which serve tools to make distinctions and comparisons.
- ▶ The scholar can understand nature’s laws because there is a similarity between those law’s and the workings of the intellect.



- ▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Norton*, p. 520-532.

# “The American Scholar”

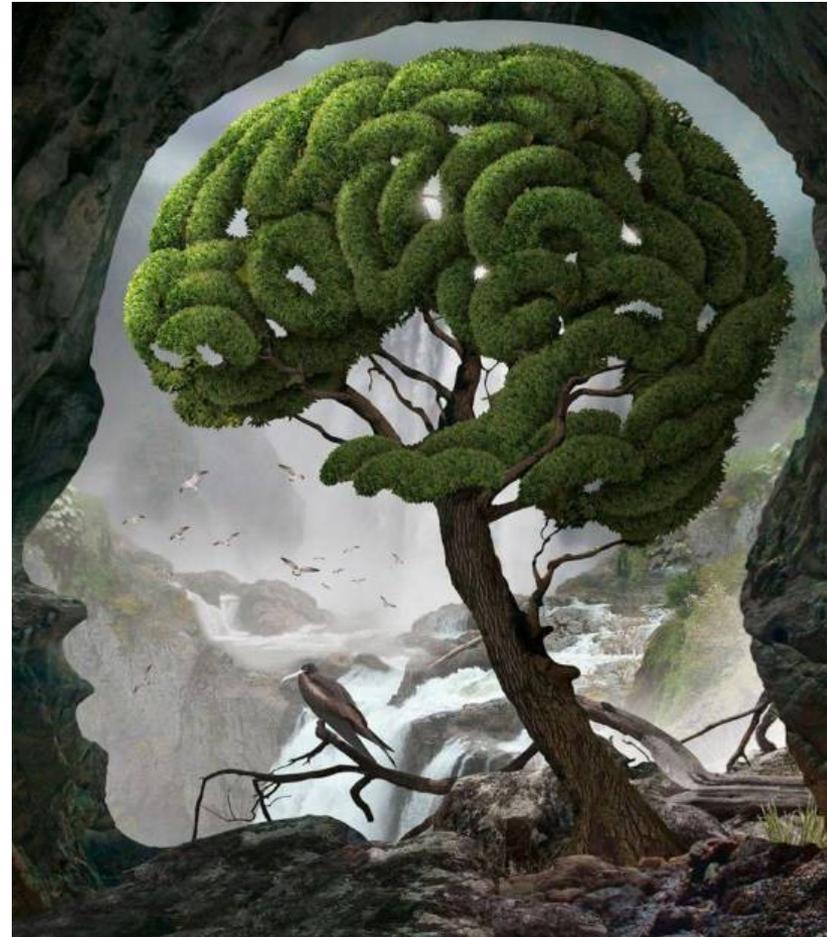
## Nature as best teacher

The scholar eventually understands that the spirit and the natural world mirror each other.

- ▶ “Thus to him, to the school-boy under the bending dome of day, is suggested, that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein. And what is that Root? Is not that soul of his soul?” (p. 522)

The scholar learns that the soul and nature are one.

- ▶ “Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim” (p. 522).



- ▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Norton*, p. 520-532.

# “The American Scholar”

## Knowledge of the past through Books

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The second influence on the mind, after nature, is learning of the past, or, as he says it, the influence of books.

- ▶ Books contain what people in the past have learned.
- ▶ However, they can be dangerous. Though books turn “short-lived actions” (or mere facts) into “immortal thoughts” (or timeless truths), books are only partial truths.
- ▶ Each perspective and each book inevitably biased by the standards of the time and the society in which it was written.
  - ▶ “But none is quite perfect. As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to contemporaries, or rather to the second age” (p. 522).
- ▶ Because this is the case, each age must discover nature and the past and write books for itself.
  - ▶ “Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each general for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this” (p. 522).

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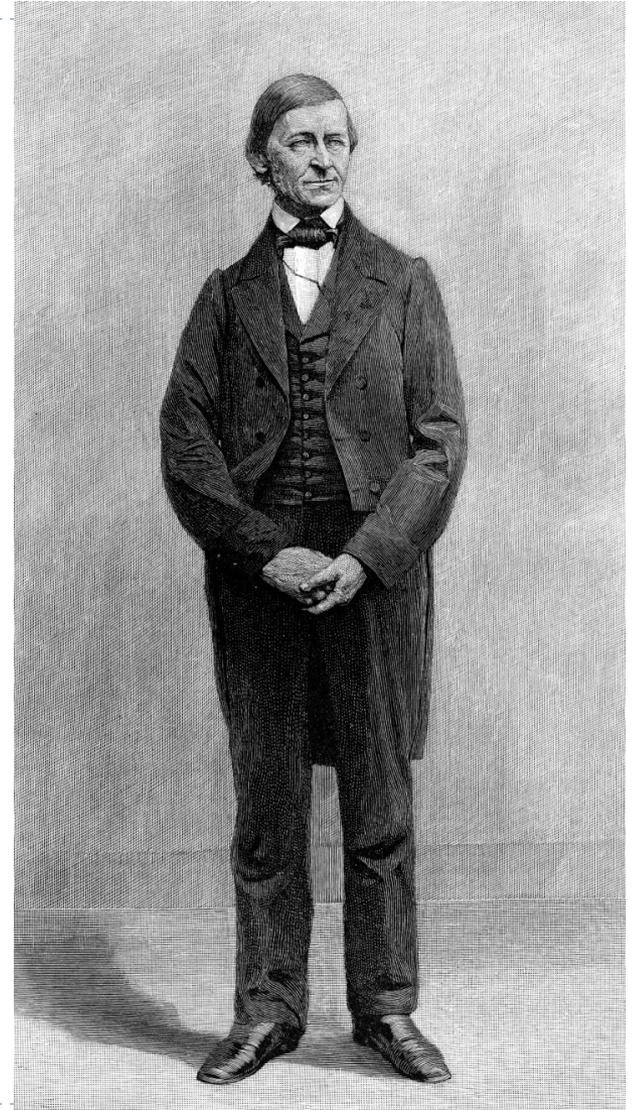
▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Norton*, p. 520-532.

# “The American Scholar”

## Knowledge of the past through Books

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- ▶ Books are dangerous because they lead us away from individual thought if we have excessive respect for past thinkers.
- ▶ The worst version of this is the bookworm:
  - ▶ “Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence, the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and to the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul” (p. 523).
- ▶ Books should be tools in the study of nature, not an end in themselves:
  - ▶ “Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (p. 523).



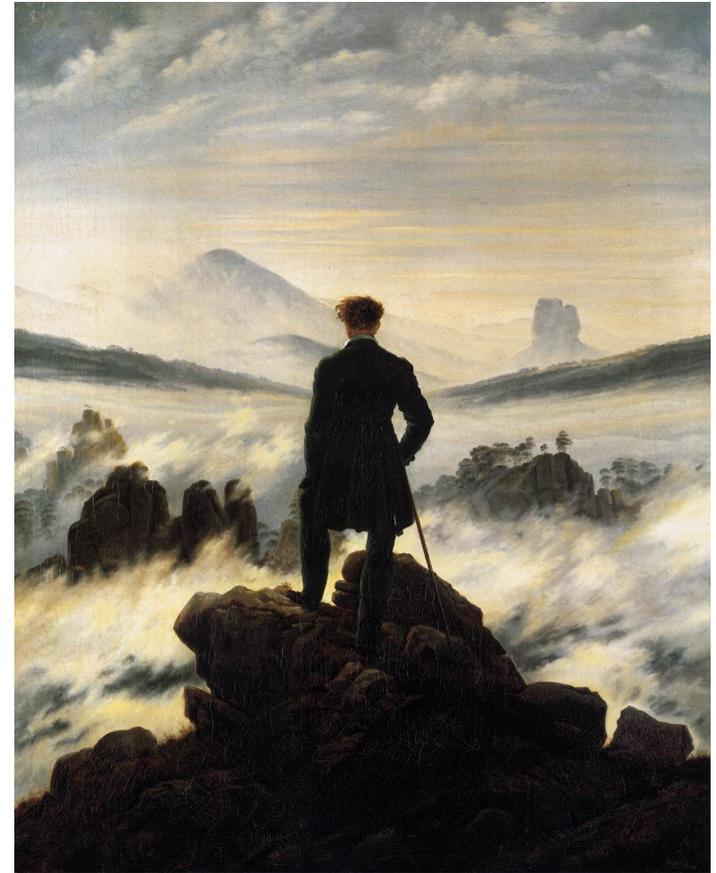
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- ▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Norton*, p. 520-532.

# “The American Scholar”

## Thought, Action, and Experience

The third aspect of the American Scholar’s education or influence is that of action and experience.

- ▶ People need action and physical labor as part of their education.
- ▶ Emerson rejects the idea that scholars should not engage in practical action.
- ▶ Though he says that action is secondary to thought, Emerson claims that it is still necessary:
  - ▶ “Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential.”
- ▶ To not act (failing to put theory into practice) is cowardly.
- ▶ Action allows us to understand our true nature:
  - ▶ “The world,—the shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself” (p. 525).



Caspar David Friedrich - “Wanderer Above the Mist” 1818

- ▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Norton*, p. 520-532.

# “The American Scholar”

## The duties of the scholar

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Part of what Emerson wants to explore in “The American Scholar” is the notion of duties, in particular, the scholar’s duties to society.

- ▶ The first duty is to develop self-trust through self-knowledge and understanding.
  - ▶ But also to raise others:
    - ▶ “The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (p. 527).
  - ▶ This duty is difficult because the scholar must endure solitude, tedium, and, oftentimes, poverty.
  - ▶ What consolations?
    - ▶ “He is to find consolation in exercise the highest functions of human nature. He is one who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world’s eye. He is the world’s heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever into barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history” (p. 527).
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- ▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Norton*, p. 520-532.