

6. Nature as Spectacle

American Transcendentalism

ENGL133 Imagining Nature



“Romanticism is the primitive, the untutored, it is youth, the exuberant sense of life of the natural man, but it is also pallor, fever, disease, decadence, the *maladie du siècle*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the Dance of Death, indeed Death itself.”

-Isaiah Berlin, “The Roots of Romanticism”

-Why did Berlin think that Romanticism was the most important intellectual movement in the West?

-the Romantics resisted “objectivity” and Enlightenment models of reason

Critique of Romanticism: Ruskin on the Pathetic Fallacy (1856)

“They rowed her in across the rolling foam—The cruel, crawling foam.”

The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the 'Pathetic Fallacy'."

-John Ruskin, from *Modern Painters* (1856)

- 'Pathetic' from the Greek *pathos* or emotion
- The poet's desire to see their feelings reflected in nature was a type of bad anthropomorphism for Ruskin (opposite of Coleridge, "To Nature")
- effect? Ruskin seeks to demarcate a 'humans only' zone, to put back up the dividing wall between humans and nature that the Romantics tore down

American Transcendentalism: Transcendental how?

Asher B. Durand, *Kindred Spirits* (1849)



American Transcendentalism (ca. 1820s-1850s)

- extends British Romanticism's belief that nature is created in the subjective experience of human encounters

 - similarly opposes the primacy of the imagination to Enlightenment rationality and objectivity

 - emphasizes the importance of individuality and personal freedom

 - spontaneity over artificiality and restraint

- associated with New England and the tradition of Unitarian thought there as well as its progressive social reforms (abolition, suffrage)

- as well as the Hudson River School of painting (cf the British Romantic painters who were interested in the sublime)



Thomas Cole (1801-1848) *Evening in Arcady* (1843)

How does American Transcendentalism differ from British Romanticism?

Much common ground between the two but a difference in emphases:

1. Transcendentalism was rooted in the American experience of a new, utopian society out of the American wilderness compared to British Romanticism that often explored themes of memory and nostalgia (cf. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey")
2. Emerson and Thoreau emphasized "self-reliance"
 - Transcendentalists believe that society and its institutions—particularly organized religion and political parties—could potentially corrupt the purity of the individual
 - instead of organized religion, Transcendentalists believed in the inherent divinity within each person and the importance of living in harmony with nature to achieve self-realization
3. Transcendentalism often admires the individuated hero who breaks free of social convention; the poet is frequently recast as prophet or visionary

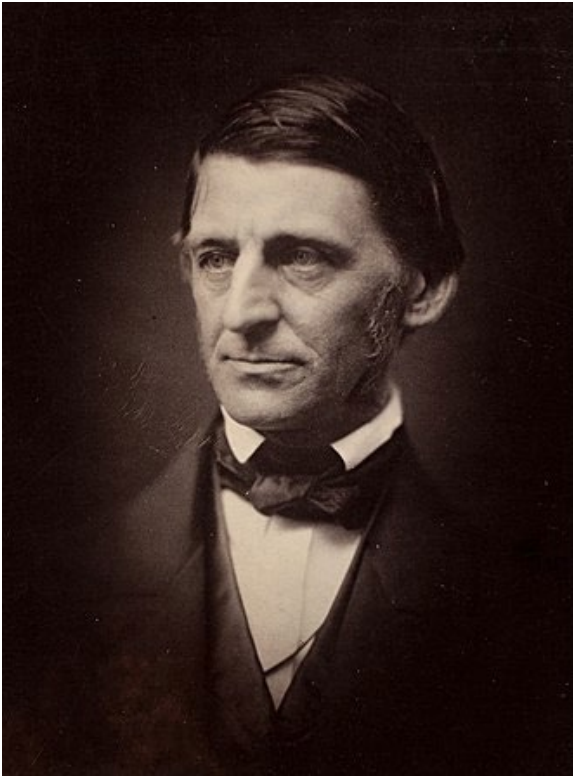
Transcendentalism and the Hudson River School of Painting

- the Hudson River painters such as Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and Frederic Edwin Church embodied the desire to unite humans and nature that was expressed in the writings of Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau
- The goal of observing nature is to transcend its physical structure in order to uncover the eternal and divine within it
- often contrasted idyllic landscapes with rapidly industrializing America (spot the train!)
- So what?
 - these painters were the first important American landscape painters
 - they helped shape an emerging national identity by convincing Americans that they had a unique relationship to their land
 - Cole was a conservation advocate
 - the Hudson River School's images convinced Americans that they had something that Europe did not: pristine forests that needed protecting



Thomas Cole, *River in the Catskills* (1843)

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

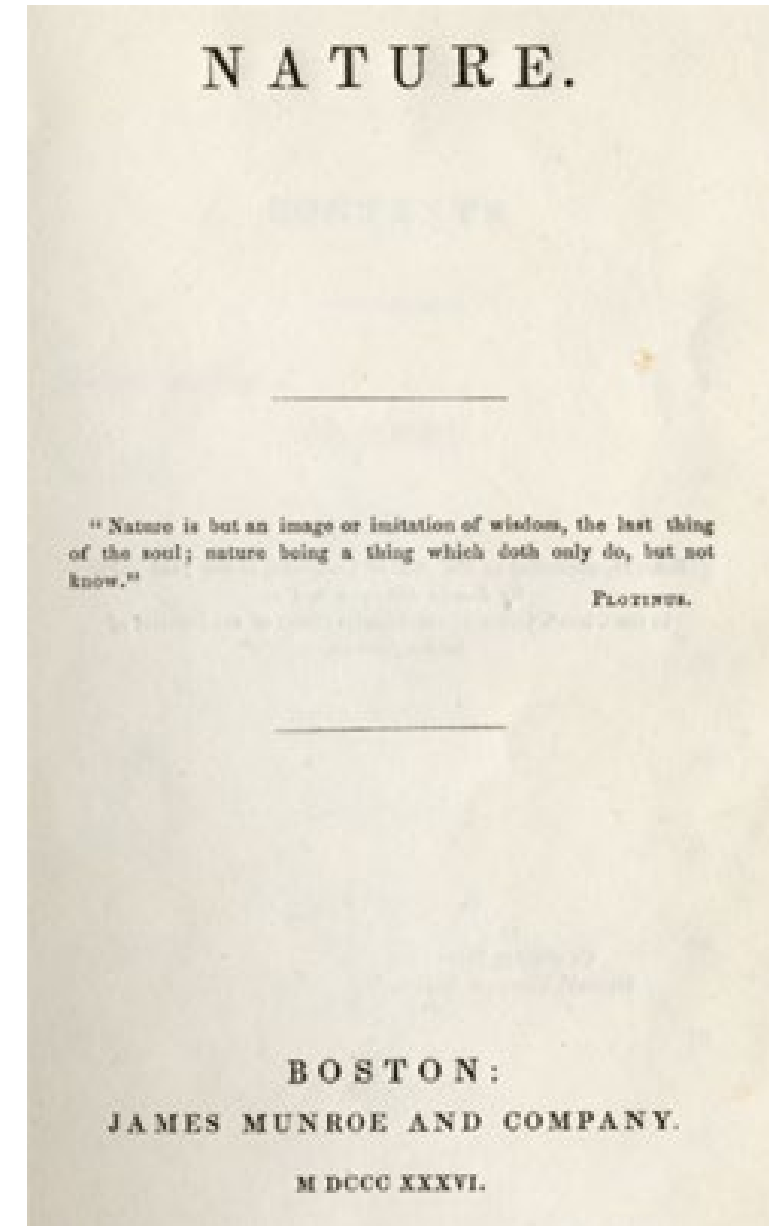


Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)



Emerson's 1836 essay "Nature"

- sets out the foundations of Transcendental philosophy
- Look at the world!
- Emerson believed in a "radical correspondence of visible things and human thoughts."
 - nature is like a mirror of the human mind
 - cf Alan of Lille in the 12th c.: "nature is a book, a picture, a mirror."
- Nature makes man feel accompanied and acknowledged: "Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both." (7)





There [in Nature] I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. 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 particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, -- master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.

-Emerson, "Nature" (6)



"Standing on the bare ground - my head
bathed by the blithe air, & uplifted into
infinite space - all mean egotism vanishes.
I become a transparent eyeball." *Nature*, p. 13.

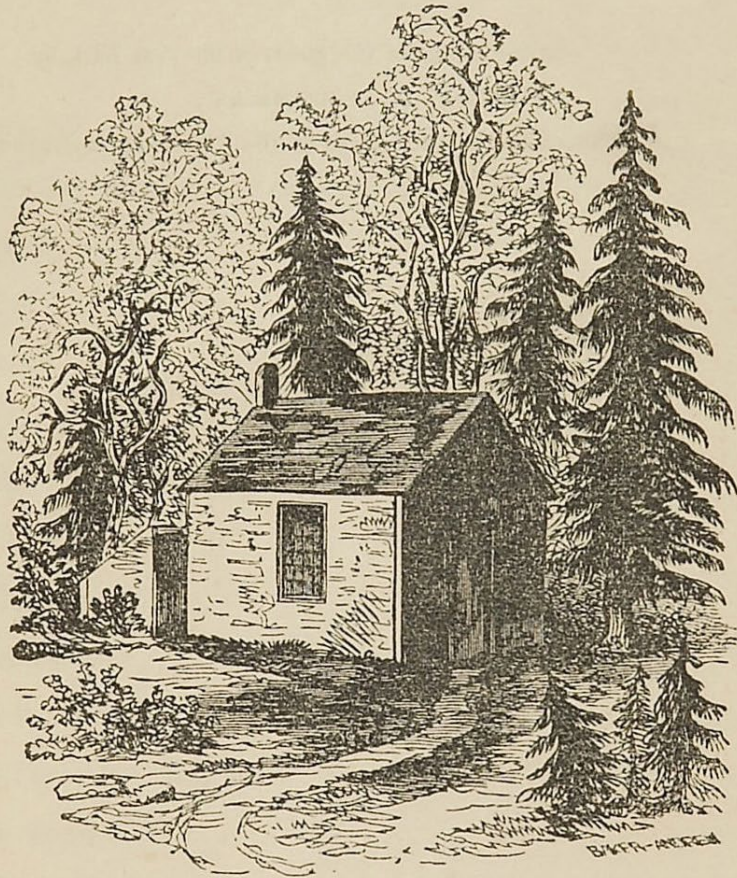
I expand, and live in
the warm day, like corn
and melons.

Nature, p. 73.

Christopher Pearse Cranch (1813–1892) | c. 1840

WALDEN;
OR,
LIFE IN THE WOODS.

BY HENRY D. THOREAU,
AUTHOR OF "A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS."



Thoreau's Walden experiment (1845-57)

- in 1845, Thoreau built a small one-room house on land owned by Emerson near Walden Pond, not far from Concord MA
- he lived there for 2 years
- Walden* is part memoir and part spiritual polemic
- it compresses his experience into a single year that follows the seasons
- this is not wilderness but ex-urban land

In class writing: Thoreau's *Walden*

Work with a partner but write down your answers separately with your name on it so you can turn it in at the end of class (unless you are both in the same section). Feel free to consult the excerpts from Thoreau but no other resources.

1. What are the values that nature has taught Thoreau? Why does he find them important?
2. What institutions does Thoreau critique?
3. Thoreau published this book in 1854. What would he critique in 2025, particularly about our attitudes toward nature?

American Transcendentalism: So What?

- the beginning of American nature writing tradition
- articulates the importance of nature for the American national creation story
- their reverence for nature is often cited by later environmental movements and set the stage for the establishment of a national park system
- their view of nature—that it is created partially within the mind—still influences us to this day
- its emphasis on individualism and self-reliance becomes central to the myth of American identity