

## AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM



*Mary Moody Emerson (1774-1863)*

Fifty years after America won the Revolutionary War with Great Britain, American Transcendentalists began fomenting an intellectual and spiritual revolution. Their goal was to create a uniquely American body of literature to overthrow the Euro-centrism of American life and letters. Through their writing, the American Transcendentalists expressed an original relationship to nature, asserted the importance of the individual and self-cultivation, and demonstrated a divinity within the human soul. Three of the most significant American Transcendentalists are Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Mary Moody Emerson was Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt and muse; Henry David Thoreau was his intellectual heir.

On August 31, 1837, the Harvard educated Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered a paper entitled "The American Scholar" to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge. The address, a critique of education at Harvard and a clarion call for Americans to throw off the yoke of European culture, became legendary. Oliver Wendell Holmes called it "our Intellectual Declaration of Independence." In his essay, Emerson tells

us the American student, or “scholar,” must be “brave and free;” must have “a heroic mind;” and must learn the lessons taught by nature and action, as well as those taught by books. A prolific writer, Emerson later elaborated on these themes in an essay on “Self-Reliance” and in the book, *Nature*. Emerson’s view of nature was influenced by his study of Buddhist and Hindu scripture. He came to believe that nature is ruled by “Polarity” or opposites – what in the East is understood as the opposition of Yin and Yang. This “Polarity” is, for Emerson, both a natural and a spiritual law.

If Ralph Waldo Emerson is the great philosopher of American Transcendentalism, Mary Moody Emerson is its defining spirit. Two years old in 1776, Mary Moody Emerson grew up to become a vivacious companion to her nephew, his first and best teacher. A woman of extraordinary intellect and determination, barred from institutions of higher learning because of her sex, Mary Moody Emerson refused marriage to become an autodidact. Throughout her adult life, she kept extensive journals that vividly chronicled her spiritual and intellectual development. She celebrated independence, an inward communion with the divine, and solitude in nature. When her nephew set out to develop his philosophy of Transcendentalism, he diligently studied her journals, often copying out long entries into his notebooks. More importantly, he recorded how wonderfully she *lived* her beliefs, and always cited her as his greatest influence. Because her journals were never published, Mary Moody Emerson lingered in obscurity for many, many years, only recently becoming a subject of scholarly research. Hopefully, in the not too distant future, her journals will be printed in book form for a general audience.

If Mary Moody Emerson made Ralph Waldo Emerson possible, then, in his turn, Ralph Waldo Emerson made Thoreau possible. Ralph Waldo Emerson provided both the financial support and philosophical groundwork necessary for Thoreau, another Harvard graduate, to flourish. Thoreau, whose birthday is July 12, built his cabin on Walden Pond on land that Emerson owned. He moved into the cabin on July 4, 1845, where he lived and worked in solitude for over two years. During that time, he completed drafts of *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Both works are deeply indebted to the three pieces of Emerson's writing I have mentioned, "The American Scholar," "Self-Reliance," and *Nature*. This does not mean Thoreau was merely Emerson's disciple, someone who simply parroted Emerson's ideas. On the contrary, Thoreau offers us an evocative and sensitive account of nature in which the details of the woods, a pond or river, in the changing seasons, are all symbols of his own inner vision.

In these lazy days of summer, our thoughts often drift toward the beauty of the natural world and away from the hustle and heat of overcrowded cities. It is a time when many read – or reread – Thoreau's *Walden*, while few recall the work of the two Emersons. Yet without the generosity of spirit and the writing of both Mary Moody Emerson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau's *Walden* might never have come into being.