THE ROLE OF TRANSCENDENTALISM IN SHAPING AMERICAN CULTURAL IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to provide an overview of the most significant American current, Transcendentalism, in its relation with American cultural ideology and with the creation of the enduring myths of the American Dream and of the exceptionalist status.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, exceptionalism, Puritanism, American ideology.

Transcendentalism is generally acknowledged as the philosophical current which incorporated the principles of the American Dream and gave them the shape that is recognizable nowadays. While these principles existed since the beginning of the American colonization in a rudimentary form, this 19th century mode of thought gave them a vigorous theoretical shape.

It is generally implied that the sources American Transcendentalism go back to the Kantian apriorism, which is basically sustained by the existence of pure forms of the sensibility and of the intellect which are essential to reason. Each people's conscience innately possesses these elements which facilitate the experience of the outer world. For Kant, knowledge is the result of the interaction of sensitivity with the intellect. Only experience can give substance to pure forms of thought. The idea of knowledge innately given to man, transcending senses and preceding experience, is pure illusion.

This is where transcendentalists' innovative thought makes a clear distinction from the kantian apriorism and respectively from the European school of philosophy. The foundation of the Transcendentalist theories aims exactly this kind of innate knowledge. In *Nature* (1836), the leading figure of the current, Ralph Waldo Emerson, claims that there are some fundamental truths, which are not derived from experience, which are unsusceptible of demonstration and which transcend human nature and are perceived directly and intuitively by the human mind. This intuitive perception of truth confers the possibility of man to become the spiritual centre of the universe, which opens the access to authentic life. By positioning man in the centre of attention, by conferring powers and capacities which are traditionally attributed to divinity, transcendentalism translates into philosophical theory the myth of the limitless human potentiality that Americans embody.

"Transcendentalism is the philosophy of the American Dream", says Carpenter (11) as it gives philosophical shape to a myth which had already gained currency by the time of the emergence of the current, in 1836, the year when Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" was published. The main contributions that Transcendentalism brought to the

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growth and maturation of the American myth are two basic ideas revolving around a system of philosophical belief: the concept of the New World as a place to start over and affirm one's capacities to the fullest and an ardent belief in the powers of a self reliant American.

If prior to the appearance of this purely American current the American dream as a concept existed only as an embryo, Transcendentalism embraced and theorized ideas which were part of the myth. Transcendentalism is a uniquely American response to romanticism, by its opposition to a "philosophy of emotional escape" (ibid.) and to the challenges of the European culture. It proved the capacity of the American culture to formulate original and vigorous bodies of thought and to act lively and personally. It characterizes the spirit of the new land unaffected with centuries of dogma and oppressions, out of which emerged a philosophical thinking which radically redefined man, land, nature, God and the interrelations these elements imply.

A paradoxical initial explanation of the essentials of this new philosophical American thinking is given by Alexis de Tocqueville. The French observer of the American reality of his times notes the absence of a philosophical school of the country, but he nonetheless points out the foundation of the current which would emerge some years after the publication of his book on America. One may easily identify the same traits which are universally acknowledged as components of the Dream, a proof of the endurance and vitality of the concept: "The Americans have no philosophic school of their own and are very little bothered by all those which divide Europe; they hardly know their names. However, it is easy to see that the minds of almost all the inhabitants of the United States move in the same direction and are guided according to the same rules; that is to say, they possess, without ever having gone to the trouble of defining the rules, a certain philosophic methodology common to all of them.

To escape the spirit of system, the yoke of habit, the precepts of family, the opinions of class, and, to a certain extent, the prejudices of nation; to adopt tradition simply as information and present fact simply as a useful study in order to act differently and better; to search by oneself and in oneself alone for the reason of things; to strive for the ends without being enslaved by the means and to aim for the essence via the form: such are the main features which characterize what I shall call the American philosophic method.

If I venture still further and if, amid these different features, I seek the main one, the one which may sum up all the others, I discover that, in the majority of mental processes, each American has but recourse to the individual effort of his own reason" (Tocqueville 493-4).

Tocqueville clearly anticipates Emerson and Thoreau in his formulation of the philosophic principles of the Americans, thus touching the very essence of Transcendentalism. The new concepts of self reliance, of escaping the "spirit of system" and the new value given to tradition, the "search by oneself and in oneself for the reason

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of things", the great emphasis put on the individual – these are the basic precepts of Transcendentalism and, by extension, of the Dream.

Transcendentalism marks a cultural shift from the religious culture of the Puritan tradition, a shift through which a secular concept emerged. It owes Puritanism its origins, the ideas which it popularized within a different concept: it reinforced and enhanced the ideas of spiritual self-examination, of individualistic pursuits which Puritanism implied and it also began as a protest against the injustices of the world. Puritan ideas of God, religious freedom and immortality began to be understood as American principles of "natural law, liberty and the infinite potential of the individual" (Carpenter 12). "The transcendental dream was", says Frederic I. Carpenter, "a faith inherited from the puritan past" (ibid.) and although "later Transcendentalism sometimes seemed to deny old Puritanism, it rejected only part of the old religion" (Carpenter 11).

This is where the germs of the Dream, initially rooted in Puritan soil, mark a profound, dramatic and original turn being integrated into a unique system of belief. All the principles that the Puritans brought along to the New World originated in the European culture and they contained the century-long western European ideas. However special and determined in their endeavors, and however consistent their pursuits may have been, the Puritans were not Americans, they were Western Europeans who left their countries in search and a new home and in the hope of realizing an ideal. Their convictions were rooted in a tradition which could not be ignored; they were conditioned by a historical reality which inescapably marked their beliefs.

On the other hand, transcendentalism is a 100% American accomplishment, one which owes its originality and novelty to the special historical conditions which colonizing a new continent brings about: it defies tradition, it focuses on self-confidence and individualism and it reformulates relations in the universe from a fresh, unique perspective. Such an innovative philosophical outlook on life needed virgin land in order to fully manifest itself, a space unfettered by centuries of dogma. Only in such conditions could the spirit of man reveal itself and exploit its full potential, trying to touch and go beyond the limitations of its condition.

Coming back to the difference between the Puritan outlook and the transcendental innovations, it has to be noted that principles such as equality and democracy (which only existed in a germ form) are given new dimensions in the new philosophy. This new perception of rapports comes from a dramatic shift in the definition of the locus of power and control.

The traditional manifestation of the idea of equality and rapport of power and authority in the European civilization always implied an external source of power and control for the common man. Catholicism was a system of belief which invested God with the prerogatives of the absolute authority, one to be found in the outside reality: either in the Church (religious authority) or in the king (secular authority). It is the Unitarian movement which is responsible with the concept of self-reliance in an inner

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moral consciousness, which Transcendentalists transformed into the core of their philosophic thought.

The essential novelty that Transcendentalism produced, in religious terms, was the reconciliation of the debate between the Catholic Church, the Protestants and the Puritans. While Catholicism found the church as the perfect embodiment of the kingdom of God, the Protestants opposed this view, bringing the argument of the corruption of the church which had become a worldly institution and the Puritans assumed the difficult task of purifying the church of its worldliness and failed to do so. Transcendentalism assumed that since these religions failed to establish without possibility of contesting the place of absolute power and potential, the kingdom of God had to be somewhere else, beyond the limitations of worldly institutions which are so easily corrupted. This supreme force is not external, but internal, lying within all people's selves, and the way to realize this is by self-observation and by the contemplation of the self. The new wave of philosophers, whose main representatives are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, "appealed anew to the kingdom of God within the individual self" (Carpenter 13), by urging the individual to look inward, and not outward for the knowledge of the truth.

This is how this new, revolutionary group of people rebelling against the European philosophical tradition gives an outline of an unprecedented democratic system, one in which the locus of power and control is redefined, being juxtaposed with the interior moral self. No other external source of authority is to matter for the individual's spiritual accomplishment but his own intuitive capacities and the will to put them into practice.

Transcendentalists insisted on the antithetical nature of the relationship between the individual and the state with a definite focus on the former. Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* (1849) is the best example of the current's tendency of refusal of the state hierarchical organization in favor of a focus on the individual. The individual is in itself exceptional, due to his extraordinary intuitive capacities in his consciousness; this exceptionalism is to be asserted by introspective analysis and by the full use of his innate abilities. Man is the own creator of himself, in an extravagant and original reversal of his relationship with God. The passing over the boundaries between self-preoccupation and self-transcendence is at the same time a conscious effort of the self to create and re-create itself, which is an assertion, in philosophical terms, of the self-made man. This voluntary act of creation takes the form of knowledge of the self, an act of knowledge which is dedicated to man, and not to divinity. Within the individual's intuitive knowledge of his own self, a parallel process occurs, which consists of the individual's relations with the world. In order to experience one's true self, a separation of the "I" from the rest of the world is necessary to attain a state of detachment which is a condition of knowledge. One has to disconnect oneself from both the objective reality and the divine one, which cease to be the subject of the knowledge.

This human solitude is transposed under the form of an individualism which again owes its origins to Puritanism, within a changed context. The changed context refers to a

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cultural transmutation which operates on a conceptual level: transcendentalism witnessed the separation between the concepts of the Puritan soul (which is a metaphysical definition of the "I", defining an entity which is parallel to reality, derived from religious tradition) and that of the modern self (a psychological definition). If Emerson speaks of the Over-soul as the absolute whole, "that unity […] within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" (1), as the transcendentalist current gains shape and grows, the concept is replaced by the "self", the new term favored by American modernity.

This is how Transcendentalists propose a concept which is indebted to Puritanism for the morality of the idea, but a morality which relocates God and nature, conferring them new roles. God does not disappear, but He is no longer the source of ultimate authority to be found in the church. Man becomes God, in the sense that divinity loses its centrality as objective reality; it becomes incorporated into each person's consciousness, acting as a moral standard. God assumes the form of moral consciousness residing in each people's inner self, an entity which can be attained and assimilated by intuition, by senses rather than by reason. Starting from the Puritan conviction that God's grace revealed through the "elected" individuals, the transcendentalists preached that the kingdom of God resided within every self, as moral law, in opposition with the traditional formal morality. They also insisted on the axiom that all things in the universe have a form in accordance to their function. Form follows function, therefore, in an organic relation, being the result of a requirement to accomplish a task. Consequently, physical laws are evidence of moral laws residing within the individual: "It has already been illustrated, that every natural process is a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation and every process" (Emerson "Nature" 39). According to this theory of form and function, man is the intermediary whose form is the result of his function as an organic link between man and God, in process which combines man, God, physical laws and moral laws.

This symbiosis empowers man with unprecedented abilities. He no longer has to look elsewhere for grace, redemption, and divine spirit: by taking complete charge of himself, by relying on the moral law inside him, he is the container of all these elements.

This essential reversal of values triggers consequent modifications in other concepts which originate in Puritanism: liberty becomes a moral obligation of the man to assume his new position of master of himself and of the universe. Similarly, the individual assumes his potentiality with a renewed vigor of his co-existence as God, with all the strong determination, extraordinary vitality and self-confidence that this new status presupposes.

Another concept which is indebted to the Puritans for its original form, but to Transcendentalism for its appurtenance to the national myth of the American dream is that of spiritual development, in close connection with the discovery of the self which constitutes the core of transcendental thought. It is peculiarly specific to religion, as one's

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journey towards the divine redemption, but transcendentalists reinforced and enhanced the spiritual examination, the search for the self and the individualistic impulses which characterized the Puritan thought and incorporated it into their system of belief, by bringing these topics within a different context. Individual's spiritual advancement is the purpose of the contemplative analysis of one's intuitive capacities; once the individual grows aware of the infinite powers conferred to him, he can act up to these powers and do great things. Intuitive perception is followed by the practice of the knowledge achieved, which renders the transcendentalist experience meaningful. An essentially religious practice and belief was thus transformed into a far-reaching secular one.

Man's essential loneliness is no longer considered in religious terms, it is not the blind acceptance of puritan fatalism. Instead, it is a voluntary act, a condition to achieve spiritual advancement and accomplishment of one's true self. How this change of values occurred is explained by the organicist theories of transcendentalism adopted by Emerson. The universe was not conceived as a copy of an ideal reality, the echo of a perfect form, nor was it seen in the way it was imagined by the rationalists of the 18th century, in the form of machinery; it was seen as a living being, pulsating with life. Therefore, man's solitude is not a tragedy, but the privilege, the joy and the awareness of being integrated into the universe. As the spiritual development of the individual is rooted in this organicist type of thinking, vital processes are not perceived as eternal (death included) but as continuous transformations, hence the basic optimism characterizing this current.

This profound cultural shift and relocation of values which occurred in the perception of the world is to be explained by the clash between old traditions transplanted into new land. The Puritans brought with them strict, limiting convictions: the Covenant of grace, the theory of total depravity, the burden of the eternal sin, the impossibility of man to escape his destiny. They were told that, regardless of their deeds and moral conduct, a merciless external God has decided their fate before they were even born and there was no way of influencing one's future.

These theories could not hold in an unpolluted, untouched place which offered infinite possibilities to whoever had the audacity and determination to reach it. All these religious beliefs could not be sustained in the presence of the boundless frontier. The unavoidable transcendental dream caused this relocation of values, urging the colonists to embark on a new route, one which allowed them to maintain their morality and faith and, at the same time, incorporate natural law into their system of belief. Religious principles were thus secularized and incorporated into a philosophy which, while never denying God's infiniteness, manages to shift focus to the individual, to whom divine powers are conferred. Religion is not rejected; it simply undergoes a change of perspective, a totally new and innovative one, which confers American culture singularity and identity.

Once the focus has been directed towards the individual, this change of perspective also involved his rapport with the world, with nature in particular. The Transcendentalist view on nature finds its originality by considering nature the true

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counterpart of man. Nature is endowed with divine characteristics: God is not only in man, it is also in nature. God's immanent presence can be transcendentally felt in one's self, but equally in the natural elements. The retreat to nature is seen as the possibility offered to the human to evade from the artificiality that urbanization and industrialization bring about and turn man into an instrument, a slave of progress, making him depart from his original spiritual purpose of achieving the divinity in his self. Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854), advises a return to the forest urged by the belief that the essential facts of life can be experienced by a contemplative and solitary life. This retreat that Thoreau preaches is not to be considered antisocial; it is rather an anarchic evasionism caused by the unwillingness to blindly obey the state authority and the awareness that genuine life is provided by solitude and harmonious contemplation of nature.

This new importance given to nature brought about a unique vision of the land. We witness the emergence of an idealized notion of land ownership which implies spiritual emancipation. In direct connection with the individual's aspirations to self-fulfillment lies the originally religious desire to own and work the land. This impetus is doubled by the existence of a seemingly limitless area of free land, which became the means by which the self-reliant individual could improve his social condition.

Owing and working the land is therefore not just a means of getting rich; it is a moral, religious obligation of the individual to go as far as his God-given powers entitle him. This combines with the reality of the abundance of untamed land, which lies before the colonist's eyes in an embodiment of a religious heaven ready to be conquered.

Emerson currently employs Biblical terminology in his writings about America and the Americans. He sees America as the New Eden and the American as the original man: "Here's for the plain old Adam, the simple genuine self against the whole world" (quoted in Lewis 14). The religious morality, which is so influent in Transcendentalism, and its appeal to intuition rather than to logical operations, make this philosophical current closer to religion than to other philosophies. Harold Bloom identifies Emerson as the head of the American church: "Emerson remains the central figure in American culture, and informs our politics, as well as our unofficial religion, which I regard as more Emersonian than Christian, despite nearly all received opinions on this matter. Emerson's mind has become the mind of America" (quoted in Magness 5).

Emerson is the initiator of the cultural breakup with European tradition, preaching the necessity of the nation to accomplish its own destiny, given the uniqueness of the American experience: "Our age is retrospective", writes Emerson in the introduction to "Nature". "Why should we not enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? […] Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship" (21-22).

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Such theories gave the notion of the American dream the impetus it needed to grow into a nationally acknowledged myth. The break with the European cultural tradition was what the spirit of the country needed to assert its independence and sustainability on its own forces. The incessant optimism resulting from transcendentalist thinking relied on the awareness of the special destiny reserved to the American, to his adamic condition in the new land and on the availability of this new land, with the consequent infiniteness of possibilities that it offered.

Born out of the Puritan enterprise and endowed with a philosophical outlook by transcendentalist thinkers, which raised them to the status of provider of legitimacy, the principles of the American dream also gained an exceptionalist character. Such universally valid concepts demanded the creation of a new type of man to put them into practice, a man who assumes his superior status, who acknowledges and makes use of the infinite powers in him and turns form an attitude of passive contemplation to one of action. It is the attitude of a man which will make Walt Whitman, the poet of America, glorify its singular pioneering condition in lines such as: "There was never any more inception than there is now, / Not any more youth or age than there is now, / And there will never be more perfection than there is now, / Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now" (25).

The American as a modern Adam could now benefit from all the advantages of having a new world to conquer. His new attitude based on innovative theories was going to lead him in his endeavor. Whether he would turn the new world into the heaven or the hell that Whitman was preaching, it was a personal matter. The only thing that mattered was that the occasion was there: new land, infinite opportunities, and glorious prospects. The American dream was there to stay.

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