

Influence of German Ideology on American Transcendentalists

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ABSTRACT: Transcendentalism began as a protest against sterile orthodoxy and influenced by many theologies and philosophies. The New England writers and thinkers attracted towards transcendentalism because it provided an intangible exoneration for the ideal of individual freedom. Every individual has the capacity for direct spiritual insight. If an individual can grab the truth by direct intuition, then there is no need of any institutional authority. Transcendentalism was influenced by German Ideology and the term 'Transcendentalism' was first coined by Immanuel Kant. Later Americans in New England, mainly Unitarians that were dissidents against their religious organization formed transcendental club and expanded Kant's beliefs into a solid philosophy.

Key Words: German ideology, American Transcendentalists, individual freedom, intuition etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

The philosophy asserts that man is the spiritual centre of the universe and he can find the truth through nature. The structure of the universe replicates the structure of the individual self, and all that knowledge therefore begins with self knowledge. One's happiness and virtue completely depends upon the self-realization. Emerson has asserted that every act of the individual springs from his inner nature as a unique embodiment of humanity, and hence no occupation is inherently despicable.

The transcendentalists asserted on the faith of the individual and his liberation to follow his own conscience. Their faith was laid on the principle of self-reliance. They rejected everything which supported to organize and institutionalize human spirit. Transcendentalism mainly focused on the idea of spirituality. The main idea behind this philosophy is finding the truths through reason and

rejecting the tenets of terrestrial and corrupted organization, Providing a sense of self to every individual.

Influence of German ideology

Higher criticism was the American scholar's area of interest. It was coincided with German philosophy. Through Anee - Louise - Germaine Necker they got the information from widely circulated 'Germany'(1810) in French language. In 1813 which was available in English translation. Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were the chief representatives of German Ideology. Transcendentalism was influenced by German Ideology and the term 'Transcendentalism' was first coined by Immanuel Kant. Later Americans in New England, mainly Unitarians that were dissidents against their religious organization formed transcendental club and expanded Kant's beliefs into a solid philosophy.

The origin of consciousness was the altercation between the empiricism and transcendentalism. According to empiricists sense of perception was the source of consciousness but for the transcendentalists, consciousness was a priori as stated by Kant. Thus German Idealism found its zenith in Kant and Hegel. The American transcendental movement mainly rejected an intellectual access to life and given a spiritual direction to human thinking and living. It scraped the concept, that the life is bounded to the five senses. Transcendentalists wanted to transcend the senses (beyond sense of perception) to reach the depths of human potential

Ideology of German Philosophers

Kant explained, genuine knowledge as universal and necessary knowledge. We must have sensations to perceive color, taste, sound, touch etc. But mere sensation would not be knowledge, it would be a modification of consciousness. Sensations must be referred to space and time. The

soul not only receives sensations, but by virtue of its faculty of intuition perceives them.

Space and time are not realities or things existing for themselves, nor are they qualities or relations belonging to things as such. If there were no beings in the world endowed with the intuition or perception of space and time, the world would cease to be spatial and temporal.

We cannot think things without space; we can think space without things; hence space is the necessary precondition of our ideas of things, or of the phenomenal world. This is an example of Kant's transcendental or metaphysical method. In the 'Critique of Pure Reason' Kant rejects all the old arguments for the freedom of the will, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul. In the Critique of Practical Reason he bases all these notions on the moral law.

According to Kant:

1. Morality demands holiness, perfection, an absolutely good will.
2. Man, however, cannot completely realize this ideal. Only God is perfect and holy; man has strong desires, hence a propensity to sin. All he can do is to respect the law, to attain to a dutiful disposition.
3. The highest good can be realized only in the life to come.
4. A character that is perfectly accord with the moral law, a perfectly moral man, has infinite worth and deserves all possible happiness.
5. But the moral law does not promise happiness; we must do the right because it is the right, whether we are happy or not.
6. Our reason, however, tells us that moral man is worthy of happiness. Hence, it is reasonable to suppose that there is a being who will apportion happiness to the good according to their deserts. A world in which such apportionment is made is the kingdom of God.
7. But happiness can never be the motive of moral conduct. We must do right, not for the sake of eternal happiness, but for the right's sake.

Fichte stated that earthly goal cannot be our highest goal; the realization of a spiritual kingdom gives a meaning to the substantial order. The voice of conscience is God's voice in us; through conscience we can reach the spiritual world. The mediator between spiritual and us is God. He stated

I do not understand my complete vocation; what I ought to be and what I shall be transcends all my thinking. I know for certain at every moment of my life what I ought to do in it: I ought to develop my intelligence and acquire knowledge in order to extend the sphere of my duty. I ought to regard myself, body and soul, merely as a means to

the end of duty. All I can care for is the promotion of reason and morality in the kingdom of rational beings, for progress for its own sake. I regard myself as an instrument of the rational purpose and respect and love myself only as such. All the events of the world I measure by this purpose alone. My entire personality is absorbed in the contemplation of goal. I am in the world of the highest wisdom and goodness, which penetrates its plan and excites it without error, and in this conviction I rest and am blessed. 1

Hegel's philosophy was the prevailing philosophy from 1820 to 1840 in Germany. The logical method of Hegel, seemed to avoid both rationalism and mysticism. It demanded to absolute certainty, and showed success in overcoming difficulties and solving problems in almost every area of human study. According to Hegel "Philosophy too has no other object than God and is, therefore, essentially rational theology, as well as an enduring worship of God in the service of truth."

Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge brought Kant's and Hegel's theories to England. It gradually spread to New England by the mid 1830s. Many of these transcendental ideas were discussed by the former students of Harvard college in 1836 at Harvard college celebrations in Cambridge. They also decided to meet again whenever there was an opportunity to discuss. Among the members Ralph Waldo Emerson, Rev. Frederick Henry Hedge, Rev. George Ripley, Rev. Orestes Brownson, Rev. Jones Very, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Bronson Alcott, Rev. Theodore Parker, Christopher Pearce, Rev. John Sullivan Dwight, Henry David Thoreau, Convers Francis, Caleb Stetson and Thomas T. Stone.

Though the American writers and thinkers associated with German ideology, few moved completely and few remained as Unitarians. Not only men found their way toward Transcendentalism but most of the women also followed the same path namely- Elizabeth Peabody, George Ripley's wife Sophia, Margaret Fuller who was a writer and women's right advocate, Anna Ward, Caroline Healey Dall, Caroline and Ellen Sturgis. Influenced by the ideas of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau much attracted toward the Transcendentalism.

Before 1830 there was no specific movement, simply the people who were the similar philosophical thoughts gathered and addressed their discontent. Transcendentalism defined as a path of recognizing the world, based on the individual consciousness rather than on external fact. Very beginning of 1830s, these moments of intensed

self-awareness made few scholars identified common interests and concerns and came to use the term Transcendentalism. Upto 1840, people were confused about the term and its meaning. In the beginning and in movement heightened and came into limelight. Most of the members who believed Transcendental philosophy were from New England, especially they were graduates from Harvard college and connected with Unitarianism. They rejected the rules of Calvinism, Locke's empiricism and attracted towards Transcendentalism.

Through 'The Dial' the movement reached to the maximum level and came into sharp focus. People started knowing more about it. In 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered a lecture in Boston on the 'The Transcendentalists' in a series called 'Signs of the Times' and it was also published in 'The Dial.' Charles Mayo Ellis brought 'Essay on Transcendentalism' to give a clear idea on Transcendentalism.

Emerson's lecture on the clarification of the new views focused on Transcendentalism's social implications. Transcendentalism affected many people especially young people, advocating them to re-check their inherited beliefs. They introduced transcendental ideas through Fuller's conversations, Brownson's preachings, The Dial (periodical) and Emerson's lectures.

In 1812, after the war Americans visited Europe and started studying at German Universities. Among them the eminent persons were George Ticnor, Edvard Everett, George Bancroft, and Frederic Henry Hedge. Edvard Everett was the first American who received doctorate from a German University. Later he continued his teachings in Harvard and influenced number of students to learn German Ideology. Among the students the most prominent figure was Emerson. By the end of the 1830, the study of German was heightened

At the time Emerson was the pastorate of the Unitarian church. He was struggling with the principles of Unitarianism. After his Wife's death in 1830s he resigned his pastorate in Unitarian church and started giving lectures to inspire young people toward Higher Criticism. In 1836, in his book 'Nature' he addressed the graduating students of Harvard's Divinity School.

In 1836, at Harvard university's bicentennial celebrations large number of alumni, under-graduate students of Harvard and some other guests gathered for celebrations. Frederic Henry Hedge, who was the frequent contributor to the "The Christian Examiner" had invited the

gathering . He along with Emerson already discussed about this gathering.

Emerson's house in Concord decided as their meeting place .These meetings got the attention of public & News Paper they called them 'Transcendentalists'. These meetings coincided with the Hedge's visits, so they called the Hedge Club. Thoreau did not join the Hedge club until 1831. But thereafter he was a regular attendant to the meetings.

Emerson's 'Nature' was the expression of the Transcendental philosophy. It was published in 1836. According to Emerson, "There was 'a new consciousness', for the new generation had 'with knives in their brain', a tendency to introversion, self -dissection, and anatomizing motives." Emerson's works focused mainly on his philosophical and mystic ideas. His philosophy was intuitive not logical. He believed that man is the representative of spirituality and he should listen his inner voice and that voice is of God. Emerson was draw towards mysticism under the influence of Neo-Platonists, Platonists & German Idealists. He felt that one should be truthful to oneself because introspection leads man to know absolute truth.

As significant as 'Nature' subsequently proved to American literary and cultural history, as Transcendentalism developed in the mid 1830s Emerson continued to play only a secondary intellectual role, trying to make a success in his new career as a lecturer. Without pulpit or regular platform, author of a single idiosyncratic tract, he was in the wings as people like Brownson, Ripley, and Alcott played centre stage. It would be two more years before he became a lightning rod for the new Transcendentalist cohort. 2

Among the younger Unitarians who attended the Transcendental meeting was Orestes Brownson. He was more remarkable. Though he never went to college, his intellect was just as electrifying. He read Latin, French and German. He had lot of command on religion & philosophical works. His works issued in the name of Brownson's Quaterly Review.

Another side Ripley's views ran extending equally to Brownson's. he too also interested in Higher Criticism. They became friends very soon. Ripley's father encouraged him to join Harvard college where he reacquainted with his cousin Ralph Waldo Emerson. Another prominent member was turning in this direction was Bronson Alcott. He learned German Idealist philosophy & Coleridge's 'Aids to Reflection and Marsh's preliminary Essay.' After his marriage he moved to Boston to work in school. He received an

invitation to the second meeting of the Transcendental club.

Alcott influenced by Emerson's ideas. Emerson graduated from Harvard and he worked as a pastorate Unitarian church. He had satisfied with Unitarian doctrine. After his wife's death he resigned his postorate and went a trip to Europe, where he met Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Carlyle. After his return he started his career as a lecturer. Emerson often joined with George Ripley, Bronson, Bronson Alcott and Hedge in their criticism of Unitarianism. He accepted Coleridge's 'Aids to Reflection'.

Emerson was less influenced by German philosophy in addition he was much influenced by Plato and Neo platonism and Goethe. He also focused of Schleiermacher, Herder and De Wette from the pages of 'The Christian Examiner'. Emerson contributed to transcendental philosophy through his lectures and writings. He also explained the uses of Nature, 'it gives food, clothing and shelter. Nature has beauty, harmony and unity. Nature is a language, it provides the signs to describe its inner thoughts. Nature offers discipline it teaches what is true, and good. Finally Nature makes man to aware of his relation to the Oversoul'.

In 1841, George Ripley planned to start the community on the Ellis farm in West Roxbury, beginning it had been used for farming. Later it was called as Brook Farm. Gradually visitors like Elizabeth Peabody, Margaret Fuller and Parker started attending the community. Peabody had taken the responsibility to spread the goals of community in the form of publications. Social and cultural life went well at Brook Farm. Slowly there was a downfall in the Brook Farm.

In 1840, Transcendentalism heightened remarkably and it influenced many great individuals through Fuller's conversations, Bronson's preachings, visiting Ripley's Brook Farm, reading periodicals of 'The Dial' and listening Emerson lectures. It greatly influenced young people, encouraging them to review their inherited beliefs.

William Batchelder Greene though he was brought up in the orthodox calvanism with the encouragement of Bronson, visiting Brook Farm, reading the translations of Kant, he influenced toward Transcendentalism. He was introduced to William Ellery Channing through Elizabeth Peabody. He met Emerson and had contributed publications to 'The Dial'. He was encouraged to attend various meetings and discussions which are helpful in the development of Transcendentalism.

His publications showed how the young men were affected by this movement.

After Emerson, Thoreau was much influenced toward Transcendentalism. He was the strongest and uncompromising Transcendentalist. Though lot of members associated with Transcendentalism, through 1840s he was only an aspirant in the movement. He contributed number volumes to The Dial. He expressed his individualism in a total rejection of organized society. Thoreau's Walden remarkably with Transcendental aspects, for him God intermits in the present moment of each person's life and transforms all aspects of that life into acts of divinity. Influenced by Emerson's philosophy, he described the results by showing his life, at Walden Pond. According to Walter Harding

And in long run he held more closely to its fundamental principles than did any of the others. He was a true Transcendentalist to the end of his life. Whether he was experimenting in life at Walden Pond, going to jail for refusing to pay his poll tax, or defending John Brown's action at Harpers Ferry, he was operating from a base of Transcendentalist principles. 3

Thoreau's essay 'Civil Disobedience' is most influential political essay. Its fundamental principle is the Transcendentalist one that there is a higher law than civil law- the law of conscience- and that when the laws are in conflict, it is the citizen's duty to obey the voice of God within rather than that of civil authority without.

In mid- 1840s Transcendentalism was a pulsing, magnetic current drawing many different people into it and freeing them to work in various innovative ways. When the country plunged into war with Mexico and people were more and more subjected to slavery, Transcendentalists brought many reforms slavery. Transcendentalism's rich intellectual garden began to bear a different fruit.

The agitation over the American slavery onto newly acquired western territories was increased and social turmoil in Europe, social reform was the discussion everywhere. A group of come-outers believed that everyone had a right to choose their religious views. They showed interest in diet, health, prison reform and anti slavery. They invited Emerson in 1844, to give a lecture on 'New England reformer

Emerson was powerfully presented this belief in his 'Essays' and 'Second Series' at the heart of his Transcendentalism. In his second volume of 'New England Reformers' he strongly restated his fervent democratic view that 'the net amount of man and woman does not vary. Through his public lectures by strongly expressing the ethic

of self-reliance he influenced like minded young aspirants like William Ellery Channing, Henry David Thoreau etc towards Transcendentalism.

Through 1840s Emerson directed his side of the Transcendentalist barricade, initiating Alcott; Fuller, Jones Very and young seekers like Thoreau, Ellery Channing, Charles King Newcomb, and Caroline Healey in a program self culture that moved more and more around literature than social reform. If Emerson held this intellectual point of view, the other colleagues were not ready to discard their views of an American democracy based in social harmony. To these people, self work for humanitarian reform was at the heart of Transcendentalism's promise.

Among these people Theodore Parker was one whose emphasis was different from Emerson's. Peabody started a journal called Aesthetic Papers. According to her 'Self and Society' symbolized by Emerson and Parker. Through her journal she wished to bring together.

Over the next many years Emerson's vantage point was slavery and he had given lectures on anti slavery. He too like Thoreau was out raged by the Mexican war. Another Transcendentalist who supported Emerson in this combat was Theodore Parker. Emerson pushed into this anti slavery combat by 'The Fugitive Slave Law.' Parker actively involved in reform activities particularly to the Mexican war and slavery. Emerson's efforts for abolition took a severe blow when Parker and Thoreau died. All that was remaining final flames, Emerson, Brownson, Ripley, Peabody and other Transcendentalists associates survived.

Among the members of transcendentalism - Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Walt Whitman were contributed more. The choice of subject and literary form was different from one another. Psychological and allegorical analysis of certain types of human personalities were the focus of Hawthorne and Melville . Relation of man to Nature was the main focus of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

The other members of the Transcendentalism slowly dismissed. They wrote poetry or criticism inspired by the movement but lacked vitality of its leading spokesmen, because of the Transcendentalists' encounter with the slavery, their vision for cultural and social reform became more nationalistic and less toward humanitarianism. After the war the industrial

capitalism increased its power on the nation. Only a few second generation continued to dream of a new kind social harmony.

By the mid-1840s transcendentalism was a pulsing magnetic current, drawing many different people in to it and preparing them to work in various innovative ways. After 1850, New England's radicals whether supporters of self-culture or advocates of broad social reform, were alone with America. Transcendentalism rich intellectual garden began to bear new fruit.

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