The Metaphysical Correspondence between Nature and Spirit in the Visions of the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau

Vesselina Runkwitz
The Metaphysical Correspondence between Nature and Spirit in the Visions of the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau

Vesselina Runkwitz

Introduction

1 Man’s attempt to solve the riddle of his existence – of the surrounding world and his inner states by means of his mental activity – is rooted in his very nature and has been a strong desire for centuries. With the awakening of the conscious mind, this endeavour led him into the spheres of philosophy and religion. Each person creates his own philosophy and belief to match his own character and personal experiences. Thus it is the individual’s inner response that determines his way of living and thinking.

Historical background and origin of the concept ‘transcendentalism’

2 American transcendentalism in all of its literary expressions was the response of a group of intellectuals in the 1830s to the spiritual and social state of their time. They were primarily unified by their protest against theoretical dogmatism and by their philosophical-religious visions. Nevertheless, their personal views differed, just as their theoretical beliefs differed and even contradicted one another. Hence, transcendentalism was not a monolithic movement. Its representatives did not hold to any formal philosophical idea or religious doctrine. It was rather a composite of different spiritual
streams and liberal ideas of the Enlightenment, which revolutionized and provided new
impetus to the spirit and thought of the time.

This essay will explore the visions of the main representatives of transcendentalism,
Ralph Waldo Emerson and his companion Henry David Thoreau. In order to understand
which fundamental ideas underlie their theory, it will first be first necessary to gain an
insight into the specific historical context of the movement and into the origins of the
term “transcendental”. The essay will further discuss Emerson’s “intuitional philosophy”,
which is based on the belief that spiritual truth may be conceived intuitively and directly
from God. Subsequently, Emerson's mystical spiritual experience of nature will be
considered and his concept of the “Over Soul” will be discussed with reference to the
idealistic view of the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as illustrated by one of
the latter’s poems. Finally, this work will examine how Thoreau saw man's relation to
nature and what his transcendental vision of the correspondence between spirit and
nature was.

The religious-historical background of American Transcendentalism

When Goddard described the 18th century as an ‘age of prose and reason’, he was
primarily referring to the rigid Calvinistic dogmatism and its anti-emotional attitude,
which dominated the spirit of North America at the time. Although New England had won
political freedom with the Declaration of Independence in 1776, America was still
strongly bound to the intellectual, cultural and religious convictions of her mother
colony 50 years later.

Calvinism emerged in the late 16th century as a rejection of the prevailing lax moral
standards, the lavishness and extravagance of the Church, and the infinite starvation of
the epoch. The reformatory religious doctrine established by the clergymen Johannes
Calvin was later adopted by the Puritans, who rejected the authority of the Church and
sought to overcome the social demoralization of their time. The Puritans derived their
name from the translation of the Greek term ‘catharus’, meaning ‘pure’. They argued in
favour of a purification of the Church from sin and immorality. The main thesis of
Calvinism centred on the assumption of an absolute predestination of the human being to
eternal life or eternal death according to God’s will. Furthermore, it held to the
conviction that man’s nature was sinful and depraved since the fall from grace. They
therefore saw the human being as incapable of finding redemption by means of his own
will and effort. He was required to undertake a moral regeneration through rigorous self-
discipline and devoutness. Since the human being was supposed to be spiritually blinded,
he could recognize the will of God only by a strenuous study of the Holy Scripture. The
Calvinists called for an emotionless, rational interpretation of the Bible by authorized
clergymen. Believers were compelled to adhere to particular analytic requirements and
were therefore not able to attain dialectic knowledge of diverse biblical readings. At the
end of the 18th century, a ‘spiritual deadness’ prevailed in North America, due to the
objectified, sceptical perspective, which condemned all enthusiasm.

When, as a result of the French revolution, egalitarian ideas and humanitarian
endeavours reached New England, it lead to major divisions in religious and intellectual
beliefs. A group of liberal Christians, who were intensely influenced by those ideas,
sought to unify reason and enthusiasm in an ethical system that allowed for self-
contained and enlightened judgement. In this system ‘moral sense’ formed the central
element. The most significant representative of this religious insight was the Unitarian\(^{5}\) William Ellery Channing (1780 – 1840), who is also regarded as the forerunner of transcendentalism. In 1818 he wrote in his journal, 'Unitarian Christianity', that the belief in predestination tended to “pervert the moral faculty”.\(^{6}\) Instead, he preached salvation through active exertion and through striving for spiritual evolution or unfolding, which he called “self-culture”.\(^{7}\) The Unitarians rejected the idea of the depravity of man, and claimed that the human being was good by nature. They propagated a critical confrontation with theological questions in order to console the religious crisis of their time. Believing that a scientifically based view could give firm evidence of biblical revelation, they attached themselves to the Empiricist doctrine of John Locke\(^{8}\). According to Locke, human intuitive knowledge is restricted to the confines of deductive logic, which means that all assertion can only be deduced through information gained by our sensory perception. As a consequence, he considered human cognitive competence as very constrained, as it is only based on empirical knowledge. He viewed the miracles of the Old and New Testament as historical evidence of Divine Revelation. Consequently, this view rejected the assumption that Divine Truth may be received directly by the human soul without any exertion of the faculty of judgement\(^{9}\).

Since the Unitarians substituted religious experience for the process of rational judgement, and assigned Divine Revelation to the historical figure of Jesus, they separated Faith from its metaphysical element. Their emphasized principle of reasoning helped overcome the bigotry of the Puritans, but on the other hand, it suggested that religious practice in New England was doomed to freeze into dogmatism and social materialism.\(^{10}\) The desire for spiritual liberation was already seeded into the minds of Americans by the French revolution. European Enlightenment and the democratic concept of liberty was revived on a spiritual level by the emergence of transcendentalism. Its members criticized the stubborn adherence of the Unitarians to the Bible as the only and direct relation to God, since they regarded it as an historical document of a less enlightened time. They believed in the proclamation of Jesus’ doctrine, but they looked for spiritual guidance which could match the needs of an enlightened individual. Averting themselves from historically based dogmatism, they turned towards the inner life of the individual and towards the intuitive font of Truth. They believed in the vocation of man to recognize Divine Revelation within himself, beyond empirical experience.\(^{11}\) Nevertheless, they accepted the critically logical method of the Unitarians and filled it with emotional content in order to transform it into a method of spiritual intuition.\(^{12}\) As a result they approached the evangelical statement of faith from a new philosophical perspective. The following statement by the transcendentalist George Ripley could well summarize the religious standpoint of the group: “it is to the heart or inward nature of man, in a state of purity or freedom from subjection to the lower passions, that the presence of God is manifested”.\(^{13}\)

**Emerson’s formation of vision and the philosophical origin of the concept of ‘transcendentalism’**

Descending from a puritan family in which his forefathers were clergymen for generations, Emerson studied to become a clerk and took up the ministry in 1829.\(^{14}\) But even during his studies at Harvard Divinity School he showed little interest in Unitarian instructional material, as Richardson remarks.\(^{15}\) A special role in Emerson’s sceptical
attitude towards traditional dogmatism came from his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, who took charge of the intellectual education of young Emerson after the loss of his father at the age of 14. As a very well-read woman and a strong, impulsive and vivid character, she incited Emerson to think critically and to maintain a liberal religious attitude. In 1832 he resigned from the ministry, explaining that he could not uphold the Unitarian view with conviction any longer. He rejected the ritual of the Lord’s Supper, claiming that it had become reduced to “worship in the dead forms of our forefathers”. He considered it a formality without any truthful spiritual significance. Thus he moved from conventional theology and paved the way for the new spirit of the time.

His inner decision to break with tradition and to take on a new religious orientation was to a great extent triggered by a personal tragedy. This was the death of his wife, Ellen Louisa Tucker, only two years after their marriage. As a result of this tragic experience, the young Emerson fell into a deep emotional crisis, which he strived to overcome by his search for the existence of God, as his famous biographer Richardson describes.

A crucial part of the formation of Emerson’s new belief was his one-year trip to Europe during which he made personal acquaintance with the British romantics Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle. In their writings he finally found confirmation and reinforcement of his vision of an intuitive philosophy and of his personal desire for an unrestricted relationship with God. Recognizing that their ideas were grounded in the revolutionary a priori doctrine of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Emerson built his religious theory upon the adaptation of Kant’s ideas. Kant gave an especially clear account of what he meant by the concept ‘transcendental’ in his work, The Critique of Pure Reason (1781). According to his definition, the word transcendental means not something that lies outside of all experience, but indeed that which precedes experience (a priori), even though it is destined to nothing more than to make cognition of experience possible.

A priori knowledge, then, emerges in Kantian theory as a function of the subconscious that initiates cognitive processes. The transcendental question turns towards the subject, assuming that the subject in the process of cognition constitutes the object in his consciousness. Accordingly, cognition is not to be understood as a passive acceptance of a given fact, but as an active accomplishment of the subject. Thus, Kant deduces that we are able to recognize certain general regularities and phenomena of reality, because they already exist a priori in our cognitive faculty and are projected into objects. Kant also confronted a priori and empiric cognition, and divided the human mental faculty into ‘Reason’ and ‘Understanding’. He saw reason as a higher spiritual faculty, where ideas in their significance - according to Plato - as unique, true and original images dwell. ‘Understanding’, on the other hand, is the capacity to recognize categories or concepts, which refer only to objects which we deduce from experience, and are thus a posteriori by nature. This implies our capacity for logical thinking or the ability to understand the creation of ‘apperceptive’ connections. Adhering to Coleridge’s and Carlyle’s acceptance of Kantian ideas, Emerson adopted these concepts into his romantic vision. As Buell remarks, “Higher Reason became the heart of what came to be called transcendental and was used by the New England transcendentalists as synonymous for the concepts Spirit, Mind, Soul.”
Nature and Spirit in the transcendental visions of Emerson and Thoreau

Emerson’s mystic relationship with nature

New England Transcendentalism flourished especially in 1836, when Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Nature* was published. This essay contains the author’s general transcendental ideas in an accomplished form, and is therefore considered as “the philosophical constitution of transcendentalism”. The opening sentences of the essay have a spontaneous and self-reliant character in their denial of all tradition. “Our Age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of our fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism.”

At the same time, they express the strong desire for self-definition and spiritual liberation of a generation which suffers from the rationally marked age. Emerson calls for breaking with conformity, and insists on becoming more self-reliant. When declaring “The sun shines today also”, he metaphorically invokes the return to one’s own creativity. But, at the same time, he wants to shake people’s awareness of the concretely perceptible wonders of Creation, like the sun; the lawful order of principles and compensation; the numerous lineages between different species. As manifestations of Divine Creation, they are all accessible to the human mind. Considering the human being also as a creation of God, Emerson calls for an inner and direct relation to the Universe when opening one’s spirit to the mystical force of nature. “The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face. We, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe.”

In nature, the individual leaves behind all preoccupying activities as well as social necessities. Gazing at the stars, he becomes aware of his own separateness from the material world. The stars allow him to perceive the ‘perpetual presence of the sublime’. Visible every night, they demonstrate that God is ever-present. Emerson saw a special bond between the object of observation and the observer, especially in the human capacity to rejoice in something. He conceived that the human’s sense of delight and the particular property of the object that evokes this feeling in the eye of the beholder are the proof of their common origin.

“The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable.”

Emerson identifies nature and spirit as components of the universe. When retreating oneself in nature, the individual can experience them as parallel creations of the same omnipresent Spirit. He discloses that the human being is endowed with a particular property which enables him to recognize the identity of man and nature. Thus, the image of the subject and object sharing one particular property is similar to the Kantian *a priori* idea: “The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise and yet is not unknown.”

This occult experience demands the openness, ingenuity and curiosity of a child’s mind, and is therefore only accessible for those who have retained the spirit of infancy. Thus, Emerson asserts: “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and into the heart of the child.” In nature, the individual casts off his earthly existence...
and experiences the divine universal spirit as a force which flows through man and nature. Due to this energy which dwells also in man, the individual is able to experience a moment of confidence and delight in the eternal universal energy:

In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period so ever of life is always a child. In the woods there is a perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. 24

The visionary man may immerse himself in the universe, losing his I-consciousness. He may become a receptive “transparent eyeball” through which the “Universal Being” transmits itself into his consciousness, and makes him sense his oneness with God:

I am standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into the 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 and particle of God. 25

The enthusiastic tone and poetic illustration reveal not only Emerson’s personal spiritual experience of immersion into the spheres of the eternal when surrounded by nature, but also shows his strong desire to reach and inspire his addressees in the hope that his realized vision might jump inside them like a spark and ignite. In the contemplative removal of all ontological restrictions between subjectivity and the absolute being by abolishment of all egotistic aspirations, the individual experiences a sameness among nature, God and himself. The assumption that there is one universal Spirit that dwells in all living creations forms a central element in Emerson’s religious vision, and is the basis for the direct relation between the individual’s soul and God. In the moment of immersion with the Universal Soul, the individual encounters the greatest form of blessedness.

Emerson’s religious vision stands in contrast to the Christian doctrine of revelation, according to which the soul experiences salvation from the outside. To experience awe in the presence of nature, means to approach it with a balance between our inner and outer senses. Therefore, it is the particular harmony between man’s inner processes and the outer world that enables the soul to elevate itself. Thus, Emerson shifts religious significance towards the moral responsibility of the individual. He makes clear that only he, who pays attention to his conscience, may live in harmony with his own self and the surrounding world:

He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted […] If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being. 26

Emerson saw nature’s principles of compensation incarnated in human nature as well. Thus, he discerns that every decision, every action has its equilibrating counterpart in the universe of causality. In this self-regulating system each action is followed by its consequence and falls back on the actor himself. Reward and punishment are not issued by an external divine power, but are the result of a continuously balancing universe: “Every act rewards itself, or in other words integrates itself. […] The causal retribution is in the thing and is seen by the soul”. 27

To follow the inner moral sentiment therefore meant to fulfil the Divine within himself: the becoming one with God.

There is no other separate, ultimate resource, for God is within him, God about him, he is a part of God himself. […] Hence, the first ground of moral obligation is this; that the Being who ordained [obedience] is the Source, the Support and Principle of
our existence, and it would be a kind of denying our Nature to reject that which is agreeable to him.38

'Conscience' was not a natural scientific construct, but was conceived as the voice of God within the soul. “There is no other way for you to arrive at the voice of God but by patient listening to your own conscience”39. In order to be perpetually open to its sound, the soul must be free from material attachments and egotistic interests. The individual should be self-sufficient, self-reliant and should be able to rest within his own self.

Emerson's affinity to Goethe's approach to nature

The German poet and writer Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) contrasted the conceptualization of empiricism as a rational, objective, and dispassionate investigation of nature with that of the intuitively guided and emotionally dominated artistic genius. In the poem 'Were the eye not like the sun', we can identify a parallel to Emerson's natural attitude. Here the idea of a divine spirit dwelling in the individual is manifested:

| Wär' nicht das Auge sonnenhaft, | Were the eye not like the sun, |
| Die Sonne könnt' es nie erblicken; | How could my eye then see it? |
| Lebt' nicht in uns des Gottes eigene Kraft, | Were we not endowed with God's own power, |
| Wie könnt uns Göttliches entzücken? | How could the divine delight us? |

The poem implies the Kantian idea that we only come to know objects in the world because their forms are present in us a priori. At the same time, it carries the idea forward, representing the subject not only as the originator, but grounding the relationship pertaining to cognition in the shared essence between man and nature. It therefore accentuates the identity between man, nature and God.

As Harry Merkle remarks, Goethe assigns a particular significance to the phenomenon of light. Describing it as the 'Urphänomen der Reinheit' (original phenomenon of purity), he sees it as a visible, divine and simultaneously mystic phenomenon. Goethe’s religious worship of light also ennobles the eye as the loftiest human sense. It is important to note that Goethe combines platonic elements with the idea of Plotinus’ emanation doctrine in this verse. As maintained by this theory, the genesis of the world is a repercussion of the emanation of the Highest Being. This emanation occurred gradually, wherein lower forms emerged from higher stages of existence. In line with this system, the individual is part of the world soul, which implies, vice versa, that the world soul is inherent in each individual soul.42 Furthermore, Goethe’s poem follows Plato’s theory of perception, according to which rays are emitted by both the perceived object and the perceiving eye, and are both related to the fire of daily light.43 By means of the influx of divine light into the empty receiving vessel, the mind is illuminated and the soul rejoices in partaking in the sublime. This mystical experience requires the identity of the individual soul with the world soul.44 Aside from Goethe’s theory, Emerson relies on Plotinus’ central ideas in the formation of his philosophy: "Like must know like"- or "the same can only be known by the same"45, he states in his Journal. Furthermore, he identifies the human soul as an emanation of the universally existent sublime spirit: "God without can only be known by God within"46.
Emerson found a like-minded companion in Goethe, mainly in his revolt against the unilateral rationally based sciences. Nevertheless, he did not accept him entirely, because Goethe had not committed himself to the moral instance of the individual. Emerson writes: "Goethe had not a moral perception proportionate to his other powers". 

Thoreau’s transcendental attitude to nature

Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862) is considered as one of Emerson’s closest companions and transcendental adherers. It is important to notice that Thoreau was so impressed by Emerson’s ideas that he was eager to try living in the woods apart from civilization. In 1845 he withdrew from society for more than two years and, building a simple cabin at Walden Pond, sought a deep and true relation to life. His account of this experience was recorded in Walden; or, Life in the Woods (1854):

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.

Thoreau studied the natural world as well as the effects it has upon the human’s state of mind. He discovered that simplicity in the physical aspects of life brings depth to our mind, carries our soul to its fullest potential, and causes our imagination to be uplifted in such a way as to change our lives. Like Emerson, he recognized that, in nature, mean egotism vanishes and primitive needs do not arise. In his chapter on economics he reveals the first premise of his philosophy: that economic life has to be reduced to its bare essentials. He saw in the simplicity of life a major condition of the achievement of a natural relation between man and nature:

I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest man thinks he must attend to in a day; how singular an affair he thinks he must omit. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots are.

Thoreau claimed that when man aligned his life with material possession, he wasted his time with unnecessary activities which would impede him from maintaining a deep relation to nature. Like Emerson, therefore, he saw in nature a mystical as well as indispensable significance for the individual’s life. Hence, he propagated a close observation of the natural world and, in particular, of the various interrelations between animals, plants and birds. Thoreau himself filled numerous pages with the most detailed observation of the natural phenomena and processes which were displayed in front of his eyes during his stay in the woods. He illustrates the cyclical course of the seasons, giving each observation his personal note of impression. The most abundant and delightful portrayal is devoted to the spring. Here his rejoicing in the majesty of nature as well as in the harmony of renewal is most evident:

At length the sun’s rays have attained the right angle, and warm winds blow up mist and rain and melt the snowbanks, and the sun, dispersing the mist, smiles on a checkered landscape of russet and white smoking with incense, through which the traveller picks his way from islet to islet, cheered by the music of a thousand tinkling rills and rivulets whose veins are filled with the blood of winter which they are bearing off.
For Thoreau, being wholly involved in nature, perceiving it with all his senses is a state of generous interchange which can only be experienced through intuition. In order to partake in nature this way we must let go of our thoughts because they tend to separate us from nature: “With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. [...]. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the drift-wood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it.” To establish an intimate relation to nature, the human needs to detach himself from his observant position and surrender himself to the respect due to the very source of his being. In this state of mind the individual is able to achieve a balanced and thoughtful happiness.

In spite of various correspondences in their visions, such as the worship of nature and the assumption of the supremacy of the mind, Emerson and Thoreau strongly diverged from one another. While Emerson dwelt somewhere between metaphor and metaphysics, Thoreau had little taste for metaphysics. Although his initial works in the 1840’s were primarily marked by the idealistic influence of Emerson, Thoreau’s apprehension of reality in the early 1850’s underwent a radical shift in emphasis. He was increasingly concerned with affirming the visible, intending to depict nature in its concrete appearance. It is thus conspicuous that through his immersion in nature he experienced a heightened awareness of the world of matter. This however did not confine itself to the surface of things. Rather, by aiming at man’s concrete relationship to wild, primeval nature, he postulated the answer to his personal quest for the ultimate grounds of reality: Think of our life in nature, - daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, - rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! the actual earth! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?

Advocating an active contact with the natural world, Thoreau did not attribute to nature a symbolic meaning for spiritual truth as Emerson did. Instead, he developed a realistic perspective on the natural world. Hence he apprehended nature rather as the truth itself, the soil of man and his concrete activity.

Men nowhere east or west, live yet a natural life, round which the vine clings, and which the elm willingly shadows. Man would desecrate it by his touch, and so the beauty of the world remains veiled to him. He needs not only be spiritualized, but naturalized, on the soil of earth.

Thoreau’s uncompromising realistic view induced him to take a firm position against the grievances caused in the course of industrialization in the nineteenth century. Observing the continuous destruction of the natural environment by the construction of the railroad as well as other forms of economic exploitation of nature, Thoreau expressed his rage and his disapproval of this development as well as his grievances. Knowing the value Thoreau placed on the relation of man to nature, it is understandable that he came to the conclusion that this alienation from nature entailed the alienation of man from himself.

Conclusion

Considering the religious-philosophical attitude which determined spiritual life in New England in the early nineteenth century, we can understand the revolutionary quality of the transcendentalist movement. The more Calvinism and Empiricism sought to deprive the individual of his self-reliance and of his belief in his own spirituality, the stronger and the more compelling were the assertions of the transcendentalists in their acknowledgement of the mind’s sublimity. This implied the capacity to perceive spiritual
truth by intuition. It is therefore evident that Emerson had not rid himself of his puritan heritage. Rather, he freed the original and virtuous puritan ideals from the restrictions which impeded a direct relation to God. Using them as a basis for his moral concept of self-reliance, he managed to restore their original strength and purity. His significance for the development of American individualism is thus immeasurable. Although the concept of self-reliance was later easily converted into egotistical individualism which served to justify ruthless capitalism, Emerson and Thoreau re-established the belief in the moral dignity of the individual in a great many of their adherers, not least by their own self-realization. In this concept, nature plays a crucial role, since it is the font which satisfies the soul’s desire for true and pure delight. Whether it inspires the individual to experience its oneness with the universal soul by an occult transcendence of the material world – as stated by Emerson - or it leads the individual to the very centre of his being through a direct perceptual contact – as displayed by Thoreau - the human’s correspondence to nature remains a mysterious experience which raises the spirit to self-sufficiency and moral commitment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

3. Ibid. P. 31-33.
10. The tolerant religious view of the Unitarians was much favoured among Americans at the beginning of industrialization, mainly due to their positive attitude toward material prosperity, which contrasted with the puritan discarding of economic wealth. Because of an immense increase of adherents from wealthy social circles and fewer from the indigent, the commercial side began to dominate the intellectual one (Bercovitch, p. 335, 337-338).
12. Goddard, p. 31-33.
15. Instead he dedicated himself to the study of classical, modern, scientific and philosophical writings. His leisure time he spent with long promenades in nature and by writing extensive
letters dealing with theological and philosophical topics to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson. Ibid. p.11.

16. As Emerson states: “His early reading was Milton, Young, Akenside, Samuel Clarke, Jonathan Edwards and always the Bible. Later Plato, Plotinus, Marcus Antonius, Stewart, Coleridge, Cousin, Herder, Locke, Mme de Stael, Channing, Mackintosh, Byron” (quotation according to Goddard, 1960,p. 63).

17. Ibid. p.13.


19. Richardson, p.110.

20. The following excerpt from Emerson’s Essay “The Transcendentalist” shows how Emerson constituted his concept of intuitive thought on the basis of Kantian philosophy: “It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant of Königsberg, who replied to the sceptical philosophy of Locke […] The extraordinary profundness and precision of that man’s thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day Trancendental.” (“The Transcendentalist” In: The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ed. Edward W. Emerson, New York: Wm. H. Wise&Co.1929, p.104, in the following abbreviated as CW.).


23. Plato designated ‘ideas’ the non-perishable archetypical images of an invisible world according to which our sensuously perceptible world is subordinated. The ideas do not stand for a materialistically abstract imagination of being but for spiritual existence. Plato differentiated between collective terms which can be abstracted from the directly experienced world, spiritually ideal concepts which cannot be deduced from the materialistically imagined because they are immaterial by nature. (Störig, H. Joachim. 2002. Kleine Weltgeschichte der Philosophie. Stuttgart: Fischer Verlag, p. 181).


30. Ibid. p.2.

31. Ibid. p.3.

32. Ibid. p.3.

33. Ibid. p.2.

34. Ibid. p.2.

35. Ibid. p.2.

36. „An Address” in CW, p. 39.

37. Ibid. p. 156.
41. Plotinus, 3rd century B.C. is considered the founder of Neo-Platonism, building upon the basis of his teacher Ammonius Sakkas of Alexandria. His 54 writings were published by his scholar Porphyrios in the *Enneaden*. The subjects of his works were primarily God, Soul, Spirit and ethics (Störig. p. 227-228).
42. Ibid, p. 229
45. *JMN* III, p. 186
46. *JMN* III, p. 186
47. “Thoughts on modern Literature” in *CW*, p. 1348.
48. Walden Pond is a lake located in Concord, Massachusetts which at that time was owned by Emerson.
50. Ibid, p. 89.
Thoreau’s rejoicing in the rebirth and growth of nature evokes feelings of humbleness and respect: “At the approach of spring the red squirrels got under my house, two at a time, directly under my feet as I sat reading or writing, and kept up the queerest chuckling and chirruping and vocal pirouetting and gurgling sounds that ever were heard; and when I stamped they only chirruped the louder, as if past all fear and respect in their mad pranks, defying humanity to stop them. No, you don’t — chickaree — chickaree. They were wholly deaf to my arguments, or failed to perceive their force, and fell into a strain of invective that was irresistible” (*Walden*, p. 308).
54. Thoreau saw the individual’s capacity to estimate nature as a sign of the mind’s sublimity: “The ultimate expression of fruit or any creating thing is a fine effluence which only the most ingenious worshiper perceives at a reverent distance from its surface even” (*Walden*, p. 328).
56. “Ah those youthful days! Are they never to return? When the walker does not too curiously observe particulars, but sees, hears, scents, tastes, and feels only himself, - the phenomena that show themselves in him, - his expanding body, his intellect and heart. No worm or insect, quadruped or bird, confined his view, but the unbounded universe was his.” (Thoreau, Henry David. 1961. *The heart of Thoreau’s Journals*, Edit. Odell Shepard. Dover Publications. New York. p.110).
57. *Waldo*, p. 79.
58. Gayet, 67-68.
60. “… for at the same time that we exclude mankind from gathering berries in our field, we exclude them from gathering health and happiness and inspiration and a hundred other far finer
and nobler fruits than berries, which yet we should not gather ourselves there, nor even carry to market. We strike only one more blow at simple and wholesome relation to nature." (Journals, p. 164).

**ABSTRACTS**

Man’s attempt to solve the riddle of his existence – of the surrounding world and his inner states by means of his mental activity – is rooted in his very nature and has been a strong desire for centuries. With the awakening of the conscious mind, this endeavour led him into the spheres of philosophy and religion. Each person creates his own philosophy and belief to match his own character and personal experiences. From this point of view, we will consider the writings of Emerson, Thoreau and Goethe, focussing on their mystical attitude towards nature.