

Transcendentalism in self-reliance by ralph waldo emerson and the idea of the div...

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Transcendentalism asserts the inherent goodness of man for “to the good, (and) to the perfect, he is born” (Divinity School Address 10). His origin is divine and so is his destiny. As he goes through life, he progresses the ladder of divinity. As man continues to make choices to remain virtuous, and beautiful, his nature tends toward transcendental divinity. This transcendentalist tenet goes contrary to Calvinistic doctrine, which posits man’s innate evil and proclivity to sin. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s work seeks to elevate man to the level of the divine by making spiritual connections with beauty and virtue.

Emerson reasons that since “God is the all-fair” (Nature: Beauty 54), beauty is godly and celestial and seeing that God created man, man also possess beautiful godliness. In the human perspective, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and Emerson states that “(t)he eye is the first circle” (Circle 65) – hence man’s powers to observe, to contemplate, and to discern are central to awakening his divine powers. Man is a beautiful creature and Emerson lauds not only man’s beauty but his ability to identify and replicate it. This beauty abiding in order and symmetry resides “together in the eye and brain of every man” (Fate 150). For centuries, aesthetics is studied by painters, sculptors, musicians etc., and it is the realization and interpretation of beauty that apotheosize man. Man’s ability to discern beauty derives from his intuition which is a God-given faculty which guides him to a higher level. Emerson asserts that “(b)eauty in nature is ... the herald of inward and eternal beauty” (Nature: Beauty 55). Nature has its own beauty in equilibrium and continuity as laws and principles ensure a cosmic order. Hence the lasting, timeless beauty inherent in Nature is only reflective of

man's inner beauty. Beauty only begets more beauty, and although diverse and incomprehensible, beauty must be accepted for what it is – divine. Beauty and virtue are inextricably linked as one reflects that “ beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue” (Nature: Beauty 60). Virtue can never be painted ugly but embodies the beautiful.

Virtue connects the human soul to God. “ If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God” (Divinity School Address 100). This short syllogism deduces that being just defines and deifies man. Gradually, man moves toward divinity by his own personal and social development. By expressing the attitude of optimism, and the philosophy of progress and utopianism, Emerson reaffirms the natural goodness of man and reinforces optimism where human beings and events are intrinsically good. God is the Omnipotent and Supreme Being, therefore by making these links between intrinsic virtue and man, Emerson qualifies man with the same powers. Just as vice contaminates the soul, virtue purifies and sublimates. “ When virtue is in presence, all subordinate powers sleep” (Experience 151). This kind of integrity is a universal principle which allows man to ascend to spiritual rungs. Transcendentalists believe that man can have a direct relationship with God in following his natural noble inclinations which proceed from pure intuition. By degrees, man approaches divinity until there is complete mystic union.

In sum, transcendentalism examines the divinity of humanity. In Emerson's eyes, virtue and beauty are both human and divine – for man can unearth these values within himself. The latinized epigraph of Self Reliance, “ Ne the

quaesiveris extra" (Self Reliance 125), which means " Do not seek outside yourself," is Emerson's call to independence and self-determination where man charts his own fate and taps into his own divinity. This concept of man's self-determination is known as homocentrism where man stands as the centre of his own universe.