



## *Transcendentalism* in Ednah Dow Cheney (1824–1904)

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Ednah Dow Cheney said of Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, that he was “the strongest, most spiritual, and most intellectual influence” on her life. Yet it was Margaret Fuller who offered her a “rhetorical enactment and transformation” within Transcendentalism that Cheney lived in her study of art, her humanitarian activities, her enthusiasm for science. Cheney’s Transcendentalist philosophy, embraced lying “still in the spiritual sunshine” and valuing “beauty” but also pluralism and action. Pluralism embraced “consciousness” of the “self” and of the “manifold,” and so encouraged reform but not fanaticism in religion or philosophy. In her pluralist Transcendentalism East meets West, ideal meets real, intuition, reason, and poetry, science. In her writings and lectures at the Concord School of Philosophy, Cheney explained aesthetics: art subordinates matter to spirit, gives full life to the soul, has unity by integrating dualism of thought and feeling, and embodying art and science, God and man, the masculine and feminine. Her Transcendentalist philosophy accepted the moral duality of humankind, and the sexual duality as essentially spirit, eternally feminine and masculine, the mystery in sex is in its being neither identity nor unlikeness. For Cheney Emerson’s Transcendentalism examined Nature preparing for but not giving itself fully enough to its science.

The essence of Cheney’s Transcendentalism is the “immediate conscious relation of the soul of man to the living principle of the universe.” One should “go forth [...] and stand under the stars at night, or by the side of old ocean, or in the deep primeval woods, to hear the voice of nature, and to let the soul within expand to its utmost limits.” Yet, to open the spiritual door “to the infinite and eternal,” must also be through efforts to free and educate African Americans, to make women full citizens, and to provide education and charity for all.

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