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**EXPLORING TRANSCENDENTALISM IN AMERICAN AND INDIAN
POETRY : A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS OF
RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND PAWAR PRAMOD
AMBADASRAO'S *UBIQUITY***



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ABSTRACT

Transcendentalism is a 19th century literary movement in the realm of American literature. Although it is a purely American literary concept which was informed by Romanticism from Europe, its tenets can be applied to other literatures across the world. This study seeks to explore transcendentalism in American and Indian poetry with emphasis on some selected poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Pawar Pramod Ambadasrao. Nature, religion and independence are the key transcendentalist's tenets examined in this study.

KEYWORDS

Transcendentalism, Nature, Religion and Independence

RESEARCH PAPER

1.1 INTRODUCTION

When Romanticism started blossoming in Europe in the 19th Century, little did some of its proponents like Wordsworth, Blake nor did Balzac know that it will be embraced beyond the frontiers of Europe. Romanticism ushered a new source of knowledge that seemed to debunk the emphasis on reason, science and logic that characterized the Age of Enlightenment. When this current of romanticism reached the United States of America, it was however whole heartedly embraced and even radicalized. What therefore started timidly in Europe in the form of Romanticism was now received and practiced in America in the form of Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism was a literary and philosophical movement that emphasized transcendence, or “going beyond.” Proponents of the movement believed in going beyond the ordinary limits of thought and experience in several issues namely: transcending society by living a life of independence and contemplative self-reliance, often out in nature, transcending the physical world to make contact with spiritual or metaphysical realities; transcending traditional religion by blazing one’s own spiritual trait, and transcending reason to embrace intuition.

Being a purely American literary movement that started in the first half of the 19th century, the transcendentalists led the celebration of the American experiment as one of individualism and self-reliance. They had the mission to take a progressive stance on women’s rights, abolition, reform and education. They propagated an American spirit in which imagination was better than reason, creativity was better than theory and action better than contemplation. They criticized government, organized religion, laws, social institutions and creeping industrialization. Transcendentalists had faith that all would be well because humans could transcend limits and reach astonishing heights.

The link between Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poetry and that of Pawar Pramod has been established as will be seen in this article. The life of Emerson especially his passion for transcendentalism cannot be over emphasized. Being the first major intellectual movement in the realm of American literary studies, Emerson is credited to have championed this movement not just by being the spokesperson of transcendentalists in America in its early days, but because of the great reflection of transcendentalist’s tenets in his essays and poems. Born in 1803 in Boston Massachusetts, Emerson began formal schooling at the Boston Latin

School in 1812. His father, William Emerson was a Unitarian Minister. After Emerson's studies at Harvard University and the Harvard School of Divinity, he was licensed as a minister in 1826 and ordained to the Unitarian Church in 1829.

It is with mentioning that he got married to Ellen Tucker in 1829, but she died of tuberculosis in 1831. Her Sudden death left Emerson devastated and added to his own crisis of faith which caused him to resign from the clergy. From Unitarianism, he started figuring something different. This inspired him to develop the new philosophy called transcendentalism; which is our focus in this paper. This new philosophy was greatly influenced by Romanticism through his meeting in Europe in 1832 with Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Apart from his poetry that will be examined in this study, his essays for instance *Self Reliance*, *The American Scholar*, *Nature* etc greatly portray the tenets of transcendentalism.

On the path of Pawar Pramod, he is a literary scholar born in 1976 in Gunjoti, Tq. Omerga in the region of Osmanabad in India. He holds a Ph. D. in English from the University of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad – India. He is an Assistant Professor and Head of the English Department of Sant Dnyaneshwar Mahavidyalaya, Soegaon; in the District of Aurangabad. He has authored several books and articles and is also the editor-in-chief of *Epitome : International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*. He practices Hinduism, studied Sanskrit and has published several works in English and Marathi. Some of his published works include: *Marm*, *Sparshanter*, *Drink Love's OASIS*, *Movements for the Still Heart* etc. Pawar Pramod Ambadasrao's work that has been chosen for this study is *Ubiquity* published in Yaounde-Cameroon in 2017.

The choice of Pawar's *Ubiquity* for this paper alongside some selected poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson is due to their elaborate depiction of transcendentalism in their poetry. Both seem to find solace in the confines of nature, religion and love in a world where in feelings have been drained and dried as a result of materialism, unfair competition and the untrammelled quest for success. A detail analysis of their poems will go a long way to savour and understand the beauty and convergence of American and Indian Poetry. Their poetry will be analysed in this paper in the light of the following transcendentalist features: nature, religion, independence, and the quest for redemption.

1.2 NATURE

According to Toni Powell in his essay entitled “Transcendentalism: the Importance of Nature,” he opines that “Transcendentalists believed in individuality, self-reliance, idealism, confidence, intuition, simplicity, civil disobedience and the importance of nature” (<http://prezi.com>). Transcendentalists see in nature the artistic sublimity of the creator and a safe escapist passage from the bitter realities of human life to an encounter or the rediscovery of self and his/her creator. Nature serves as a source of solace to the battered soul that finds no recourse in the world where in man is remote-controlled by powerful but callous forces that persistently work against his aspirations. Man’s helplessness and weakness in the face of these forces prompts him to seek refuge if not consolation in the confines of nature. Transcendentalists believe that nature is capable of freeing the mind so that one can connect with his/her inner spirit. Emerson in his masterpiece titled *Nature* argues that “in the woods, we return to reason and faith.” This alone justifies Transcendentalists’ inseparable link or attachment to nature in which close contact is achieved to it in the woods (forest).

To begin with, Emerson’s admiration of nature cuts across his major works. In his poem “The Snow Storm,” the poet-speaker is deeply immersed in his admiration and love for the beauty that snow creates for the rest of creation to savour. He likens the snow-storm to a builder because of the beauty that is created when snow covers the environment. The speaker in the poem can not afford to conceal his feelings at the sight of the scenery recreated by snow. The speaker exclaims thus:

*Come see the north wind’s masonry
Out of an unseen quarry evermore
Furnished with tile, the fierce artificer
Curves his white bastions with projected roof
Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.
 (“The Snow-Storm” line 10-15)*

As seen in the excerpt above, the metaphoric expression “north wind’s masonry” underscores the architectural and masonic attribute of the snow-storm which transforms the natural greenery to a whitish or snowy landscape. Although, it brings cold and wetness, it also adorns the environment with something new and beautiful. By comparing the wind to a builder goes a long way to portray the masonic attribute of nature that Emerson celebrates in this poem.

Another form of beauty which is somehow magical is witnessed when the sun appears. The speaker again concludes on yet another celebrative note when the sun appears in the following words:

*And when his hours are numbered, and the world
Is all his own, retiring, as he were not
Leaves, when the sun appears, astonished Art
To mimic in show structures, stone by stone,
Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow.*

(Lines 24-29)

The personification of the snow storm in line 24 above “his hours” is again representative of the artistic attribute of nature represented by a particle of nature in the poem which is snow. The use of the personal pronoun “his” reinforces the architectural attribute of the snow-storm. The slow but steady disappearance of the snow at the appearance of the sun unveils again the natural beauty that the environment is adorned with even in the absence of snow. The expressions: “astonished Art, Mad wind night’s work, frolic architecture of the snow” in the excerpt above again emphasizes the masonic or architectural attribute of the snow storm. Not only does this reinforce the transcendentalist undertone of the poem, it also qualifies Ralph Waldo Emerson as a leading transcendentalist in the realm of the American literary imagination.

Emerson continues his grandiose celebration of nature in his poem “Each and all.” What draws our attention to this poem is the speaker’s admiration of other natural features. He celebrates the beauty of the sky as seen in the following lines:

*Over me soared the eternal sky
Full of light and of deity;
Again I saw, again I heard
The rolling river, the morning bird;
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole*

(Line 46-51)

The speaker in the poem above metaphorically refers to the sky as “soaring” and “full of light and deity” (46-47). The element of light is a positive attribute to the sky from where the sun to brighten the day and the moon/stars to brighten the night emerge. He further equates the

sky to “deity” perhaps because of the awesome role it plays in making life easy for humans and the rest of creation. The transcendentalist philosophy of the oversoul is greatly portrayed in this poem as perceived in the last line of the poem. By dint of the fact that the poet speaker states that, “I yielded myself to the perfect whole,” already echoes the oversoul which embodies every particle of the universe. Transcendentalists hold the opinion that everything in all creation has a divine attribute. They insist on the divinity of man and argue that the difference between man and God is only at the level or degree of divinity. According to them everything both animate and inanimate constitute part of the over soul.

The unity of creation and the link that each has with the other makes all creation a “perfect whole” (line 51) as concluded in the last line of Emerson’s poem “Each and all.” The wholeness of creation is yet another source of celebration as the speaker continues to admire “the rolling river, ground-pine, oaks, firs and the morning bird.”

Pramod Pawar in his *Ubiquity* expresses his admiration and frustration about nature. The theme of nature runs across *Ubiquity*. Pramod’s transcendentalism is glaring when he hints on the unity and inseparable link that binds people and other creatures. The philosophy of the oversoul can be deduced from the following lines extracted from Part III of *Ubiquity*:

Who is I in me?

All that I can see

Can you see I in you?

Can you see I in you?

(Ubiquity 34)

The rhetorical questions in the excerpt above can be interpreted as the speaker’s concern about the feeling of oneness that is normally expected to exist amongst people. Through this poem, Pramod Pawar can be seen as a moral voice appealing to his audience for the need to be united so that meaning and love can be experienced in human experiences. Being part of the oversoul, it is incumbent for all and sundry to strive for unity in order to fulfill the divine purpose for which we have been created.

Still on the subject of nature as one of the tenets of transcendentalism, one acknowledges that in *Ubiquity*, Pramod Pawar expounds on the aspect of time and beauty. These are elements of nature that profoundly influence or impact life. In his usual controversial but philosophical way of juxtaposing words, he muses about life thus:

Truth is time

Time is external

I mean the truth
I mean the truth ...
Time heals wound when you are born
Time begets new life when you die
Time is permanent, beauty not
Time defeats beauty, all, all a lie
Beauty enslaves time, all, all a lie.
Beauty enslaves time, all, all a lie.
Beauty is physique, but time external
(22-23)

Pramod Pawar in the except above philosophizes on the aspect of time and beauty. By stating that “truth is time” shows how time alone plays diverse roles. As the adage goes, “no matter how long you keep a lie, someday the truth will come out.” Time alone according to Pramod reveals any lie or evil that is hidden from men. The passage of time itself is an eternal teacher that brings to the lime-light what has been stashed from the sight or knowledge of men. The passage of time itself is an external teacher that brings to the lime-light what has been stashed from the sight or knowledge of men. The repetitive use of the phrase “I mean the truth, I mean the truth” (22) is suggestive of the poet’s strong conviction of the ability of time to expose the truth even in a world in which falsehood is the order of the day.

In the next stanza, the speaker evokes the curative attribute of time. “Time heals wounds...” In this case, Pramod evokes this perennial adage about time to reinforce the ability of time to heal wounds. One strongly shares this view about the ability of time to heal wounds. Wounds that are inflicted on our minds like death of a loved one, betrayal, disappointment in love, loss of a job etc. may only be healed by the passage time which might only help us to forget or get to endure such an emotional hurt. The beauty of nature is again seen in this case as “time” being an indispensable element of nature is portrayed in this poem as a healer of wounds.

Still on the aspect of time, the speaker in the poem intimates that “time is permanent, beauty not...” (23). In this case the speaker adds that “Time defeats beauty” (23). By comparing time and beauty, Pramod Pawar seeks to persuade his audience about the importance and indispensability of time as opposed to beauty which is but ephemeral. This again can be seen as another dimension of transcendentalism which is that of the excessive celebration of nature as depicted in Pramod’s *Ubiquity*.

II. RELIGION

Religion is a peculiar feature of the transcendentalist school of thought. Emerson being the father of transcendentalism is deeply rooted in Christianity. Not only did he hail from Unitarian home with his father being a Unitarian minister, he himself (Ralph Waldo Emerson) became a Unitarian clergy. It was only after the sudden death of his wife Ellen Tucker in 1831 (just two years after marriage) that he resigned as a Unitarian Clergy. Not only did he have matters of faith to come to terms with as far as Unitarianism is concerned, he rather embraced transcendentalism as a religious or philosophical choice.

While Unitarianism stresses on the innate goodness of man as opposed to puritanism which capitalizes on the innate sinfulness of man, transcendentalism stresses not only on man's inherent goodness but also on the divinity of man. According to transcendentalists, in as much as God is divine, man is also divine and are all part and parcel of the oversoul. Religion is therefore an indispensable aspect of Emerson's philosophical school of thought and the many biblical allusions in his poetry justify this opinion. In his poem entitled "Good-Bye", the poet speaker raises many concerns about the frustrations and pain that plague human life. He seems to find redemption and peace only by escaping from the world. Death to the speaker is the appropriate way to bid good-bye to the throes of this life. The following excerpt from his poem "Good-Bye" validates this assertion:

*Good-bye, proud world! I am going home:
Thou art not my friend and I'm not thine....
Long I have been tossed like the drive foam:
But now, proud world! I'm going home.
Good-bye to Flattery's fawning face;....
I am going to my own hearth-stone,
Bosomed in yon green hills alone
A secret work in a pleasant land...
And vulgar feet have never trod
A spot that is scared to thought and God.*

When the speaker refers to the world as "proud world" and emphatically tells it that "thou art not my friend, and I am not thine..."; shows the bitterness in him due to the harsh treatment given him by the world. It should also be noted that this expression by the poet-speaker in the

poem “Goodbye” has religious undertones. Emerson being a Christian who was at one moment in his life a Unitarian clergyman was well schooled on the biblical teaching of hating or running away from the world. The world in Christian circles is considered as evil and the dwelling place of Satan. Everything that comes from the world is considered devilish and for anyone to be saved, he/she must abandon the world and follow Jesus Christ. As seen in the excerpt above, the poet-speaker is happy to bid good-bye to the world because he is sure of happiness, peace and fulfillment in the world beyond.

In the 3rd and 4th stanza of the poem, the biblical reference to paradise is echoed. Christians strongly believe in a place of rest, peace and joy for those who faithfully walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. They believe in the filthiness and the ephemeral nature of the world but strongly hope for a blissful life in the hereafter where they shall dwell with God forever. The speaker in the above poem states that:

I am going to my own hearth-stone

Bosomed in yon green hills alone

A secret nook in a pleasant land...

“Yon green hills” and “pleasant land...” are extended metaphors for the place of refuge and happiness that Christians aspire to inherit when they leave this “proud world.” It is as a result of the hope of a blissful life after death that urges Christians like the poet-speaker in the poem to live a virtuous life. This religious evidence from the poem “Good-Bye” by Ralph Waldo Emerson goes a long way to validate the argument that religion is one of the tenets of American transcendentalism.

On the side of Pawar Pramod Ambadasrao, one equally senses this convergence of religious thoughts like what we find in Emerson’s poetry. While Emerson views redemption from the lens of Christianity, Pawar’s religious belief in Hinduism prompts him to see redemption as the ultimate source of hope that man can achieve after living a life of toil and pain. Apart from transcendentalist elements that are recurrent in Pawar’s *Ubiquity*, his poetry equally ushers readers into the world of Indian poetry. Through this poetry, the reader is made to uncover the religious activities that animate the Indian religious space. The link between Hinduism and American Transcendentalism is established as seen in the aspect of intuition and the power of meditation as a means of relating to God.

Religion therefore plays a pivotal role in Indian poetry in general and Pawar’s poetry in particular. In his *Ubiquity*, Pawar takes his readers deep into Hindi metaphysical thoughts and

beliefs. Reference is made to the Karmas which is a very important pillar in Hinduism. The poet-speaker laments in the following lines.

Who am I?

Who am I?

Just do your karmas

Just do your karmas

According to *Wikipedia*, Karma is a concept in Hinduism which explains casualty through a system where beneficial effects are derived from past beneficial actions and harmful actions creating a system of actions and reactions through a soul's reincarnated lives forming a cycle of rebirth. Karmas to the poet-speaker is what he thinks he must do or follow in order to benefit from every good thing that is derived from beneficial actions. Due to unhappiness, pain and frustration, the speaker embraces religion as his ultimate source of hope and consolation in a world where in happiness in but an occasional episode in the entire drama of pain. The speaker continues by referring to another aspect of Hinduism which if attained will give him the comfort or satisfaction he badly needs. He declares again:

Every life is a hope, it's a sin...

Every life I beg for redemption.

I long for stillness and exception

Samadhi I attain now

Samadhi I attain now...

I am for redemption

I've been for redemption

I yearn for redemption

I yearn for redemption ...

(Pawar 41)

In the first line above, a pointer is made to the fact that every life is a sin. The aspect of sin is that which cuts across many religions and to be vindicated from sin, one needs to be redeemed by God. It is not clear whether he attains Samadhi but it is his ultimate hope to attain it so as to have a sense of fulfillment in his religious quest for redemption. According to *Wikipedia*, Samadhi in eastern religions e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism etc refers to a state of meditative consciousness. It is a meditative absorption or trance, attained by the practice of dhyana. In Samadhi the mind becomes still. It is a state of being totally aware of

the present moment, a one-pointedness of mind. Samadhi is an exalted state of consciousness achievable only by advanced practitioners of meditation.

In the except from the poem above, the poet-speaker puts it thus, “I long for stillness and exception.” This stillness is indeed the Samadhi that he presumes to have attained in the next line; “Samadhi I attain now.” Pawar Pramod like Emerson are convinced that rest, freedom and redemption can be achieved through religion. While the former is Hindi, the latter is a Christian but the common ground they share is the fact that redemption is achievable by the kind of positive actions they take in this present life. Redemption according to Pawar Pramod is the final door that he hopes to pass through after death. Redemption is his ultimate goal and he believes that it is achievable if he keeps a good relationship with God and man. The repetitive use of the phrase “yearn for redemption” and the grossly repeated reference to “redemption” in his *Ubiquity* reinforces the poet’s determination to be redeemed at all cost. He points out that human life is the only life from which the redemption is possible.

From the above analysis about the place of religion in the poetry of Emerson and Pawar Pramod, one is again convinced that the transcendentalist orientation of the poetry of both authors with respect to religion gives another dimension of grandeur to their artistic productions. Intuition is a peculiar feature of eastern religions including Hinduism which is reflected in *Ubiquity*. This aspect of intuition is greatly embraced by Emerson in his transcendentalist school of thought as one of the manifestation of man’s divine attributes. Religion therefore can be seen as one of the major tenets of American transcendentalist which is clearly portrayed in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s and Pawar Pramod Ambadasrao’s poems under study.

III INDEPENDENCE

The quest for independence or freedom is the last aspect of American transcendentalism that will be discussed in this paper as depicted in the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Pramod Pawar Ambadasrao. Transcendentalists had a burning passion for independence. In Emerson’s famous essay entitled *Self-Reliance*, he underscores the need for Americans to strive to be self-reliant in all that they do. According to him, the individual should first be driven by his thoughts and not necessary controlled by others. The quest for political, religious and intellectual independence is one of the leading motives behind the emergence of the transcendentalist movement which had Emerson as one of its leading proponents.

To begin with, Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Concord Hymn" depicts the spirit of independence that animates the consciousness of transcendentalists. The above poem ("Concord Hymn") is the song sung at the completion of the Battle Monument on July 4th 1837. It is worth-noting that fifty years after the Americans achieved their independence from their colonial master, Britain, they decided to inaugurate the Battle Monument in honour of the valiant soldiers who fell on the battle ground during the American war of independence. Coincidentally, the Indians had a similar experience under the same colonial master- Britain. Since freedom is not given on a platter of gold; they too had to fight for it, sacrificing their blood in order to achieve their independence.

In the first stanza of Emerson's "Concord Hymn," he recounts the exploit of brave farmers (Americans) who braved the war-era by picking up arms to fight against their colonizers. The poet-speaker declares:

*By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.*

The excerpt above brings to mind the determination of the Americans who were suffering under the yoke of their colonizers. The symbol of the flag that waved "to April's breeze" again reinforces the joy that their independence brought to them. "... the short head round the world" is an extended metaphor of their hard earned victory in the American War of Independence that was not only saluted by the rest of the world, but the American nation (USA) was recognized not as a colony but as an independent nation.

The speaker continues by emphasizing the symbolism of the battle monument on the 54th anniversary of American independence in July 4, 1837. He makes it very clear about this memorial event in the following words:

*We set today a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When like our sites, our sons are gone
Spirit, that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee.*

The architects of American Independence as seen in the extract above gave everything including their blood for the freedom of their people. The speaker refers to them as “heroes” who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of their children. Those living to commemorate their exploits like Emerson equally feel honoured and proud to have had freedom fighters that selflessly fought for the liberation of the American nation so that their children and unborn children will live in freedom, liberty and prosperity. It is indeed such an independent spirit that animated the thoughts of American transcendentalists with Ralph Waldo Emerson as their leading proponent.

In the realm of Indian poetry, the spirit of freedom is also expressed. Although Pramod Pawar’s *Ubiquity* does not make reference to the quest for political freedom like the case of Emerson in his poem above, the idea of freedom of thought and action runs across his poetry. Pawar Pramod Ambadasrao in his *Ubiquity* buttresses his idea of independence by stressing the need for his readers to treasure the freedom of thoughts. The individual according to him must be in full control of his/her actions. This is how the poet-speaker in *Ubiquity* puts it:

All begin and end into me

All begin and end into me

I am the power..... (39)

In the excerpt above, Pawar Pramod stresses the fact that he is the beginning and the end of his actions and the power to do everything that pleases him and not necessarily being controlled by others. It is this very quest for Independence that committed the consciousness of the Indians to valiantly fight for their independence after years of colonialization under the British. Like the Americans who were also under the bondage of British Imperialist, the Indians also found themselves perpetually being exploited, tortured and discriminated against by their colonial master. The rise of Mahatma Gandhi in India just like the rise George Washington in America precipitated the independence of today’s modern India.

The transcendentalism of Pramod Pawar as manifested in his quest for independence or freedom is often revealed when he passionately seeks for a safe refuge for his soul. The evocation of the symbolism of the “final door” (47) is again another pointer to the quest of freedom, happiness and fulfillment in the life of the speaker. Redemption to him is the final door which he must enter and probably behold his creator face to face and blissfully dwell with him forever. Although Mahatma Gandhi’s religious affiliation is somehow controversial, one however acknowledges that like Pawar Pramod, he is Hindi. In as much as Gandhi’s quest for freedom is more politically than religiously inclined, the quest for political,

intellectual and artistic freedom equally animates Pawar's consciousness. The uniqueness of his poetic style in terms of the structure of *Ubiquity* is revealing of the freedom of mind of the poet to craft his own style of writing. This again is an element of independence which is a peculiar feature of transcendentalism as portrayed in Pramod Ambadasrao's *Ubiquity*.

CONCLUSION

Having explored transcendentalist trends in the poetry of Emerson and Pramod Pawar, it is evident that there is indeed a meeting point in the realm of American and Indian poetry. Although transcendentalism is a purely 19th century American literary movement, its tenets are very glaring in the 21st century publication by an Indian poet (Pramod Pawar) in his poetry entitled *Ubiquity*. Published in Africa by Nyaa Publishers further portrays the universality of transcendentalism as a literary movement and also the relevance of *Ubiquity* in the African literary and sociological context. The celebration of nature, the central place of religion in the transcendentalists' thought, and the unflinching passion for independence are the tenets of transcendentalism that have been examined in the poems of both authors under study. It is the hope of this researcher that this paper will not only prompt more research on the works of an emerging Indian writer in the person of Pramod Pawar Ambadasrao, but will also draw the attention of literary critics across the world to the beauty of Indian and American Poetry.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS :

TRANSCENDENTALISM

AMERICAN POETRY



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INDIAN POETRY



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