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Coleridge and  
Transcendentalism

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## Coleridge and Transcendentalism

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ANTHONY JOHN HARDING

Transcendentalism delivered no tidy body of doctrine, no distinctive new aesthetic, and no unified, coherent programme for political action. The men and women who considered themselves part of the transcendentalist movement often disagreed profoundly about such questions as the future of religion, the attitude Americans should take towards British culture, and the respective claims of individualism and collectivism. Transcendentalism was also confined geographically to the relatively small area of the American continent known as New England, its main centres being in Massachusetts (Concord, Boston and Cambridge) with some sympathizers in Maine, Vermont and further afield. It is all the more striking that transcendentalism should have played such a large part in the creation of a distinctly American literary tradition, and that the energy and originality of this loose association of individuals should have prompted historians to adopt such terms as ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Flowering’ to characterize it.

To readers more familiar with European than American literature the word ‘transcendentalism’ may suggest a philosophical movement, one based more or less on the critical philosophy of Kant. Unfortunately this impression would be almost wholly misleading. Among the transcendentalists, as has often been pointed out, the very word ‘transcendental’ acquired a meaning quite different from that it bears in Kant’s works. Though the leading transcendentalists were acquainted with Kant, they were not philosophers, and it is doubtful whether they ever gained more than a very imperfect glimpse of what was meant by such key elements of the critical philosophy as the distinction between the Reason and the Understanding. The movement was mainly an association of those who were disgusted by the new commercialism, and impatient with the pale liberal Unitarianism of the Boston intelligentsia, but found the sterner Calvinism of rural New England ethically repugnant. It was, as Margaret Fuller (1810–50) admitted, a ‘small minority’ of New Englanders, composed of those