

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770-1831)

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Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770-1831), a philosophical predecessor of the Transcendentalists, was born in Stuttgart and educated at the University of Tübingen. After stints as a private tutor, he accepted a teaching position at Jena, where he worked with his former schoolmate Schelling. His first major work, *Phenomenology of Mind*, was published in 1807. He moved to professorships at Heidelberg (1816-18) and at the University of Berlin (1818-31). Other major works published during his lifetime include *Science of Logic* (1812-16), *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1817), and *Philosophy of Right* (1821). After his death, his collected works, including lectures and class notes taken by students, was published in 18 volumes.

Hegel's most important contributions are to be found in his method, his thoughts on the mind, and his work on history. His dialectical method, with its emphasis on contradiction, is the basis of his philosophical system. The triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis preserves truth while creating new meaning. Only Mind, or Spirit (*Geist*), is real; it is completely free and self-conscious. All individuals participate in the Mind, but only in a partial way. Mind strives, through its self-exercise, to become absolute. History is the story of the dialectical progression of Mind becoming absolute.

Hegel's influence on American Transcendentalism is seen in his adherents in the United States and through Goethe. Goethe's writings, informed by Hegel's thoughts on modern culture and individuality, were read by most of the Transcendentalists. Emerson first read Goethe in 1832, but did not start reading the philosopher until 1855. He found such systematic thought inaccessible and not particularly useful in its original

form. Instead, like most of the American Transcendentalists, he preferred Hegel's philosophy as filtered through German literature.

Henry Conrad Brokmeyer (1826-1906) and William Torrey Harris were prominent figures in the St. Louis Hegelian school. Harris may be seen as a liminal figure, connected to both the systematic philosophy of Hegel and the looser confines of the primarily literary Transcendentalist movement. Along with F. B. Sanborn, he published *A. Bronson Alcott: His Life and Philosophy*, the first biography of Alcott. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, which Harris edited, published many American Transcendentalist essays. Alcott and Emerson were closely associated with this journal in the 1860s and 1870s. Emerson was an avid subscriber, going so far as to promote articles for publication.

Alcott bristled at the logical demands of philosophy, and although Emerson was a bit more precise in his thought, he nevertheless did not fully embrace Hegelianism (or any other philosophical “system”). However, his view of history as the progression of the Over-Soul toward the integration of mind and nature through human culture owes much to Hegel's thoughts on history, or the process of Absolute Mind becoming itself. The one-to-one correspondence that Emerson looked for between the “contents of the human soul and everything that exists in the world” would be achieved through a dialectical process and would result in what Hegel would term the end of the process of history.

Harris's essays on Emerson's thought are among the most insightful published in the nineteenth century. In “The Dialectic Unity of Emerson's Prose,” he argues that Emerson's composition process is based on the Hegelian dialectic method. He also carried on a long correspondence with Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and published a study on Frederic Henry Hedge.

The earliest collection of Hegel's works, *Werke: Vollständige Ausgabe*, was published after his death and republished in Stuttgart (1927-1940). A new collected works is still in progress. The most succinct

distillation of his thought that is accessible to literary scholars can be found in H.B. Acton's entry on him in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967).

Myerson points to the major secondary sources on Hegel's influence on Transcendentalism. The most impressive are Pochmann and Pochmann's *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism*. Henry A. Brann's "Hegel and His New England Echo" (*Catholic World* 41, April 1885) is also crucial. Stanley Cavell's "Thinking of Emerson" (*New Literary History* 11, Autumn 1979) and Virginia Moran's "Circle and Dialectic: A Study of Emerson's Interest in Hegel" (*Nassau Review* 1.5, Spring 1969) may overstate Emerson's reliance on the philosopher, but they are still necessary works. Gustaaf Van Cromphout's *Emerson's Modernity and the Example of Goethe* charts Hegel's influence (through Goethe) on Emerson.