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**Dark Romanticism and Transcendentalism: different ways of approaching
self-knowledge**

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Since I have started reading fiction, I have loved reading romantic narratives – even when I did not know that they were romantic and what Romanticism was. When I discovered it, I was struck by a group filled with authors, poets, philosophers, and artists who dealt with the most profound, intense, beautiful, and horrific themes of this world. In university, I was able to dig a little deeper into English and American Romanticism, and I loved every class about them. I do not exaggerate (even though, as a late romantic myself, I love to do so) when I affirm that the Romantic writers saved my life, in many ways. But there are other people responsible for making my life so happy and beautiful, so, I would like to dedicate this study and to thank them for their involvement in my life, especially in regards to my life in college.

Thank you to:

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And finally, citing Poe, I dedicate this work to all “those who feel rather to those who think” (Poe, 1996, p. 1.259).

“A melancholy Bird? O idle thought!
In nature there is nothing melancholy.
—But some night-wandering Man, whose heart was pierc’d
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper or neglected love”.
(Wordsworth; Coleridge, 2013, p. 29)

ABSTRACT

Dark Romanticism and Transcendentalism are two subgenres of American Romanticism, a literary, social, and artistic movement that took place from the end of the eighteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century. Some of the most acknowledged authors from this period are Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Considering the diversity in which they approached and represented themes such as nature, human nature, and society's progression, among other topics, Poe and Melville were categorized as Dark Romantics, whilst Emerson and Thoreau became known as Transcendentalists. The objective of this study is to compare the authors with a specific attention to the theme of self-knowledge, given their obsession with matters of the self. To this end, this analysis focuses on three elements that are intertwined with the process of Romantic self-knowledge: nature, seclusion, and religion. In each of the sections, works from the chosen authors are examined to debate their contrasts and similarities, contributing to the understanding of their literary nuances.

Keywords: Dark Romanticism, Transcendentalism, self-knowledge, individuality, subjectivity.

RESUMO

O Romantismo Sombrio e o Transcendentalismo são dois subgêneros do Romantismo Americano, um movimento literário, artístico e social que tomou forma do final do século XVIII até a metade do século XIX. Alguns dos autores mais reconhecidos desse período são Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson e Henry David Thoreau. Considerando a pluralidade na forma em que eles abordavam e representavam temas como natureza, natureza humana, a progressão da sociedade, entre outros, Poe e Melville foram categorizados como Românticos Sombrios e Emerson e Thoreau como Transcendentalistas. O objetivo deste estudo é comparar os autores em relação ao autoconhecimento, tendo em vista suas obsessões em relação às questões do *eu*. Para isso, essa análise é centrada em três elementos que estão interligados ao processo do autoconhecimento romântico: natureza, seclusão e religião. Em cada seção, algumas obras dos autores selecionados são examinadas a fim de expor suas diferenças e semelhanças, contribuindo para o entendimento de suas nuances literárias.

Palavras-chave: Romantismo sombrio, Transcendentalismo, autoconhecimento, individualidade, subjetividade.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thinkers of different periods approach the idea of ‘knowing oneself’. For example, the Greeks, back in the 8th century B.C., already addressed the relevance of self-knowledge. People traveled long distances to encounter the Oracle of Delphi, also known as Pythia, who would inhale an “[intoxicating] vapor and enter an altered state of consciousness” (Green, 2018, p. 2). Pythia delivered prophetic messages from the Greek god Apollo; these were entrusted in an enigmatic manner, such as prophecies and riddles (Dunning, 2018). The purpose of visiting the oracle was to acquire wisdom, to gain perspective over situations, and to reflect about oneself. However, a distinct approach to self-knowledge was proposed by Socrates (c. 470 B.C. - 399 B.C), who famously professed “know thyself”, proposing self-examination as a process that sought to investigate “through debate and dialogue, the contours of concepts that seem necessary for living a good life: knowledge, justice, virtue, piety, and the like.” (Green, 2018, p. 15). These two approaches to self-knowledge (from the divine and from the human intellect) reverberate throughout History, re-emerging in the context of nineteenth-century American Literature, particularly in the works of authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. However, these authors had distinct ideas about identity and the problem of self-knowledge, and they are commonly divided into two groups which became known as the Dark Romantics and the Transcendentalists.

Transcendentalism was a social and literary movement born in the USA, which started at the beginning of the 1800s. Its underpinning philosophy concerns the relation between mankind and the natural world, and how this interaction should occur in order to live in the best way possible. To have a good life, this perspective urges people to leave society, which is filled with bureaucracy, inequalities, falsehood, prejudices, greed, eventually, escaping to nature, where we are free to be who we are without being constantly distracted by these corruptions.¹ Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau believed that following “the call of the wild”, could be the answer to developing a connection with nature – and everything that surrounds us –, to live happier lives, and to achieve self-knowledge.

¹ Historically, this idea can be traced back to Horatio’s sentence *fugere urbem*, meaning to escape the city, a principle reinforced by Jean Jacques Rousseau, who argued that humankind is born naturally good, and that civilization is responsible for corrupting the customs. The expression was also used as a motto in Brazilian *Arcadismo* to symbolize the literary poet who moves from hectic city life to bucolic rural areas.

Dark Romanticism, as well as Transcendentalism, can be considered a branch of Romanticism (Howard, 2015). Its philosophical basis and literary output focus more on themes related to loss, fear, grief, death as paths to self-knowledge, in the sense of enduring these powerful experiences as opportunities to grow in self-consciousness, fashioning a new identity. Although sorrow and angst can be tumultuous and disorienting, they also reflect our distinctly human capacity to adapt, as the relationships that we depend on change in form, nature, or function. Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville were masters of manipulating these tropes and emotions, provoking different reactions in their readers; most importantly, by doing this, they could shed light into human nature and self-awareness. This path to self-knowledge was achieved by displaying characters who faced gruesome events, and thus showing how extreme our existence can be, given certain situations.

When engaging with works by Dark Romantics and by Transcendentalists, it is noticeable how their literature, philosophical assumptions and worldview differ in many aspects, possibly leading to perceptions that they are the opposite of each other. However, that is not necessarily the case, and this research aims at demonstrating their differences and similarities by investigating how the theme of self-knowledge is presented and explored in both literary groups. Considering that Dark Romanticism and Transcendentalism encompass many writers and compositions, it would be unfruitful to trace their broad characteristics i.e. to generalize what these movements objectively searched for, and how this pursuit was assembled; therefore, I have opted to provide case studies of four prominent authors (Poe and Melville, Emerson and Thoreau), associating them with either Transcendentalism or Dark Romanticism, however, I understand that there might be other American writers, living in the same time period who do not necessarily comply with the ideas I will develop here.

For the purpose of this research, this study is divided into the following sections: 2. Transcendentalism: Where the Truth Lies and 3. Dark Romanticism: The Blackness Fascinates, in which there will be information regarding the movements' advent and their main themes and concerns; 2.1 Emerson and Thoreau: Spokesmen of Nature and the Self and 3.1 Poe and Melville: The Shadowy Side of Romanticism, which briefly presents the authors and their relevance to their respective subgenres; and 4. Self-Knowledge: An Issue for Romantics, where the reader will find a short overview of the concept of self-knowledge until the Romantics embraced it. This last section is branched into 4.1 Nature and Self-Knowledge, 4.2 Seclusion and Self-Knowledge, and 4.3 Religion and Self-Knowledge, in which I consider how the authors' representation of nature, seclusion, and religion relates to self-knowledge, thus analyzing and comparing their portrayal and ideas. For this enterprise,

essays, books, poems, and short stories by Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, and Melville were selected, based on their pertinence to the specific topics picked [nature, religion, and seclusion]. Finally, there are the references used in this work.

2. TRANSCENDENTALISM: WHERE THE TRUTH LIES

Transcendentalism was an American literary, philosophical, and social movement (Abrams, 1999). Inspired by English romantic writers William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, French philosophers Rousseau and Montaigne, and even Greek thinkers such as Socrates, American authors began to produce literature that problematized important matters in their own geographical and historical context, from religion to capitalism (MacDonald, 2008). At the beginning of the 1800s, people were starting to feel the effects of the increasing industrialization and the changes it caused in their way of living. Some of the repercussions that arose concerned consumerism, environmental destruction, detachment from nature, inequality (including slavery, the rights of women, and of the less economically privileged), and economic interests above human values.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, known as “the father” of Transcendentalism, joined other scholars who had similar political and ideological positions, such as Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Later on, in 1840, the three of them would become friends and even work partners in magazine *The Dial*, used as a vehicle to the publication of Transcendentalist essays, poems, and reviews (Abrams, 1999). Emerson and other Transcendentalists criticized government policies and people who blindly obeyed them, defending that a greater and fairer way of living is possible. Their beliefs were often seen as naive and/or utopic by critics at their own time. As MacDonald (2008) argues, the Transcendentalists did not subscribe to the Darwinist notion about mankind’s natural greed, for “their intuitions were not intended to be open to empirical investigation” (MacDonald, 2008, p. 92).

Regardless of whether their intentions were utopic or not, Transcendentalists did fight for their political stances and beliefs. Writers Amos Bronson Alcott and Theodore Parker were strong activists for many social issues, chiefly the abolition of slavery; Alcott was an educator and, for some time, he tested new methods to properly “socialize children”, however, his school was closed when most parents withdrew their kids from the institution due to his determination in admitting a Black child (MacDonald, 2008). Margaret Fuller, cited as an “early feminist”, was the first woman to publish a feminist work in the USA; as

Kappke (2020) asserts, Fuller's book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) inspired many women, including the American suffragettes Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady. Moreover, in his memoir *Walden* (1854), Thoreau tells his experience of living in seclusion in Walden Pond for two years, a work that influenced several young people in the USA and beyond to answer "the call of the wild" and go experience life in nature, as can be observed in Christopher McCandless' journey² (Krakauer, 1997).

2.1 EMERSON AND THOREAU: SPOKESMEN OF NATURE AND THE SELF

Ralph Waldo Emerson, born in Boston, Massachusetts, on May 25, 1803, was a poet, essayist, and philosopher who discussed matters such as the importance of self-reliance, the role and the concept of nature, ideas about new ways of visualizing faith, God, community, and beyond. In 1832, having resigned from his occupation as Unitarian minister, he traveled to Europe and met with writers who would deeply impact him, such as William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle (Emerson, 2008). These meetings were registered by Emerson in his book *English Traits*. Wordsworth and he talked about education, American society, and writing; when Emerson went back to the US, he was "in many respects a changed man" (Townsend, 2016), and started what would become an extensive production of essays and lectures.

"[Thoreau] was a wild man, and he would never submit to be a tame one" (Woolf, 1987, p. 137), this is what Virginia Woolf says about Henry David Thoreau, a writer and philosopher who was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817. Thoreau's most famous work is *Walden* (1854), a book in which he tells his experience living alone in Walden Pond for two years, in a hut that he built with his own hands. In this memoir, the author reveals a lot about his beliefs and morals, including his despise for materialism (in the sense of material possessions), the importance of building your own things, the benefits of solitude, and a perspective on how to achieve the "elevation of mankind" (Thoreau, 1985, p. 334).

² Christopher McCandless (1968-1992) was an adventurous young American that, inspired by authors such as Henry David Thoreau and Jack London, abandoned the "traditional way of living" to embrace a life of traveling and living in nature. He called himself "an extremist [. . .] an aesthetic voyager whose home is the road" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 116). Christopher's story was written by Jon Krakauer in the book *Into the Wild* and adapted into a movie by Sean Penn with a homonymous title.

Emerson and Thoreau met and became good friends in 1835, along with other writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, and Margaret Fuller (Gray, 2004). From 1836 to the next eight years, they held meetings “to discuss philosophy, theology and literature” (Gray, 2004, p. 131), shaping what became to be known as Transcendentalism.

3. DARK ROMANTICISM: THE BLACKNESS FASCINATES³

Dark Romanticism is a term often used to refer to a strand within American literature which mingles Romantic and Gothic elements (Howard, 2015), and there are three main authors who fit into the Dark Romantics category: Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne⁴. As Ted Billy asserts in the article *Descendentalism and the Dark Romantics: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and the Subversion of American Transcendentalism* (2013), Dark Romantics shared many “Transcendentalist affinities”, as can be seen especially concerning the use and the role of nature in their narratives and the importance given to the inner self in opposition to scientific or rational intellect. However, mentioning Allan Lloyd-Smith, he affirms that the Dark Romantics were more fond of “the country of the negative Sublime, the occulted landscape of despair of Poe’s Usher and ‘Ulalume,’ [. . .] Hawthorne’s forest of ‘Young Goodman Brown,’ Melville’s treacherous ocean in Moby-Dick” (Lloyd-Smith, 2004, p. 93 *apud* Billy, 2013, p.152).

Although it is possible to argue that the works by Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne are Gothic, in the introduction of *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism* (1974), Thompson manages to make a distinction between Dark Romantic and Gothic narratives. According to him, “when the word Gothic is applied to literature, it merely evokes images of ghosts, demons, trapdoors, castles” (p. 1), whilst “Dark” only qualifies “Romantic”; thus, if “Romantic” suggests “an ideal world [...] in which the single, separate self seeks unity with Nature” (p. 1), the adjective “Dark” effaces the optimistic perspective, in which now being alone is not desirable, but an indication of loneliness, nature is not idealized, but rather powerful in a dreadful and dangerous manner, and the diving into oneself mind might not result in feelings of comfort, but the recognition of troubled thoughts and actions.

³ Reference to a passage of *Hawthorne and His Mosses*, written by Herman Melville: “Now it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me” (Melville, 1984, p. 1159).

⁴ Here, I refer to the three authors that are most unanimous among the critics of American Dark Romanticism. However, some critics include other names, such as Washington Irving and Emily Dickinson.

The search for the recognition of the self in Dark Romantic narratives is not as explicit as in the Transcendentalist accounts, in the sense that the characters do not usually follow a certain path to achieve this knowledge, but rather things inevitably happen to them and consequently expose their consciousness-related issue through their responses. Luiz Carlos Rocha discusses this topic in his essay *The construction of the Self under the Light of the Other in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"* (2016), in which he addresses how Roderick Usher is, in a way, destined to become that doomed person – mainly by his predecessors and by the house he grew up and lived his whole life. The death of Lady Madeline, Roderick's sister, is one of the events that reveal his fate and his nature, which Rocha interprets as “romantic and unhealthy [...], sick and devoid of reasoning” (p. 265), but also “artistic and humanistic” (p. 265). This strategy (i.e. giving the reader perspective over troubled, mentally confused characters) is frequently used by Dark Romantics, and can be seen in Poe's *The Raven*, *Tell-Tale Heart*, and *Eleonora*, to mention a few.

3.1 POE AND MELVILLE: THE SHADOWY SIDE OF ROMANTICISM

Edgar Allan Poe, born in Massachusetts in 1809, was an American author, poet, and literary critic who revolutionized the concept of short narratives, detective stories, and Gothic-stories, influencing mystery and horror narratives to the present day. Although he strived to be known mainly as a poet, his most acclaimed works are short stories; Poe's tales are captivating for their structure, narrative style, and themes. Considering Stuart Hall's definition of representation (1997), in which it not only presents something in a different or new manner, but rather gives meaning to the element being represented, Poe gave meaning to a myriad of tropes, objects, and even animals. He had a repertoire of elements, including bleak tapestries, pendulums, black cats, ravens, opium dreams, among others, that are repeated and rearranged in many of his stories.

“Melville is an apocalyptic author. Twain is the day, Melville the night”, says the author Roberto Bolaño, in an interview in 2003 (Biblioklept, 2011). Herman Melville, born in New York in 1819, is one of the most recognized writers of American literature. *Moby-Dick*, his most ambitious story, although not well received by the critics when it was first published, in 1851, is nowadays considered one of the great American novels (Bergler, 1954). Beyond novels, he wrote poems, essays, and literary reviews. Melville had many work experiences, including teaching and the management of his family business, but it was his involvement with the sea, as a seaman in the US Navy and as a whaler, that influenced many of his

writings. In 1850, he met Nathaniel Hawthorne, who would impact him and his writings; in fact, Melville altered many things in *Moby-Dick* due to Hawthorne's influence, adding to the narrative a sense of "Shakespearean tragedy" (Yalcin, 2019, p. 265) that his friend fancied.

Poe and Melville are considered Dark Romantic authors, for they "recognized that nature (and human nature) also has a dark side, and can arouse feelings of terror as well as pleasure" (Canton *et al.*, 2016, p. 109). The majority of their works, just as in Emerson's and Thoreau's case, was published in the mid-nineteenth-century and carry typical Romantic features, such as the exploration of the individual emotions, solitary characters, and the contemplation of nature (along with the awareness of its impact upon humans). However, their narratives focus on the complexity of human nature, highlighting its penchant for gloominess. This can be noticed through the analysis of the settings and, perhaps even more, through their characters' thoughts, actions, and destinies, which will be explored in the following sections.

4. SELF-KNOWLEDGE: AN ISSUE FOR ROMANTICS

"But I, detached from [men] and from everything, what am I?" (Rousseau *apud* Storey, 2012, p.1) is one of the questions made by Rousseau in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. According to Storey (2012), many critics, including Lionel Trilling and Jean Starobinski, understand Rousseau's view on self-knowledge as a journey that must be pursued alone, away from society, as for the philosopher one is always influenced by others' consciousness, affecting one's own. In this sense, it is possible to compare Rousseau and Montaigne; in *Michel De Montaigne on the experience of Self-knowledge* (2021), Umidjon Kurbanov presents Montaigne's view on how it is not possible to count on others in the process of acquiring self-knowledge "because of its untrueness, and also because its adoption could lead to the loss of freedom and independence" (Kurbanov, 2021, p. 40).

The English Romantics had similar – but not equal – positions. Wordsworth, for instance, asserts in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth; Coleridge, 2013) how the poet should experience certain things and express them in a given manner – such as experiencing the power of nature in seclusion and then, do a tranquil recollection in order to "do the instance justice" (Khan, 2013, p. 248) – to write good poetry, and this poetry would have the capacity to lead the reader to self-knowledge.

As Richard Eldridge asserts in *Self-Understanding and Community in Wordsworth's Poetry* (1986), Wordsworth's poetry ideally conducts the readers to understand that their nature guides them, and "to know that our nature so leads us would be to possess self-knowledge of permanent interest" (Eldridge, 1986, p. 5). Notice that, although the poet must go through these processes, the others (the non-poets) can obtain that through the reading and experiencing of poetry – and that is where philosophers and poets often diverge, as some philosophers, including the ones cited here, uphold not being contaminated by others' experiences/ideas.

The belief that self-knowledge is not easily accessible or developed is, notwithstanding, shared among many scholars – authors *and* philosophers. The "late Nietzsche", according to Cardiello and Stellino, believed that to know thyself, or to have access to an "inner sense" is not easier than to acquire exterior knowledge, but actually the opposite, for "[t]he familiar is what we are used to, and what we are used to is the most difficult to 'know' – that is, to view as a problem, to see as strange, as distant, as 'outside us'" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 264 *apud* Cardiello; Stellino, 2019, p. 121). The complexity and magnitude of the subject is such that it has been explored "since at least Plato" (Hagberg, 2019, p. 1), and continued to be analyzed and praised by the Romantics.

To understand how the Romantics, including Transcendentalists and Dark Romantics, approach self-knowledge, it is important to go back to the Greeks, for their methods are somewhat similar, and certainly echoed in the Romantics' beliefs. In *Socrates and Self-Knowledge* (2015), Christopher Moore introduces the readers to the Socratic notion of self-knowledge, defending that it "sets self-knowledge at the origins of a history of philosophy concerned with living well, orientation toward the truth, and the public debate of reasons for action" (Moore, 2015, p. 4), this notion is still far from being outdated or surpassed for latter-day propositions. Some strong characteristics of the Socratic self-knowledge are: the active role of the individual, in the sense of not being submissive regarding potentials and limitations, but rather using this knowledge to improve oneself and become whom you want to be – which is referred in Moore's book as "self-constitution" (2015, p. 5); and a path in search of happiness, especially if considered that "neither science, politics, nor perhaps even religion will cure our unhappiness, [...] our salvation lies somewhere closer to ourselves" (Moore, 2015, p. IX).

Jeff Wieand, in his article *Emerson's Dialectic of Self-Knowledge* (2019), writes about Emerson's view on self-knowledge, which is incredibly analogous to Socrates' "self-constitution". At first, he determines what is the "self" for Emerson, which is

intrinsically interrelated to the concept of “Over-Soul” and with the process of “disindividualization” (Wieand, 2019, p. 105). For Emerson, there is a connection among all humans’ minds and the “authorities of the universe” (p. 109), or “God” – he uses both terms. This idea gets clearer when Wieand gives an example: Emerson affirms that “all persons know in their hearts that God exists” (Wieand, 2019, p. 101); he either knows this because “the Over-Soul told him” (Wieand, 2019, p. 101), so, he intuited it through his link with God and other minds, or because *God is us*. For humans to be successful in any aspect, it is necessary to “disindividualize”, and be guided by this greater mind, which is how Emerson explains works of art, for instance; “the inspiration of the Over-Soul is a question of degree, of the extent to which disindividualization is successful” (Wieand, 2019, p. 105). Although in this perspective mankind is – and must be – passive to the Over-Soul, Emerson also asserts that people should actively be aware of their potentials and limitations to follow and work in their vocations, resisting eventual problems in this journey, such as society’s pressure: “Talents and faculties are meant to be exercised; self-knowledge consists in acknowledging them.” (Wieand, 2019, p. 110). We must hear this call, follow our vocations, and then finally achieve self-knowledge.

4.1 NATURE AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Nature is one of the most important elements of Romanticism. After the Enlightenment, a period in which many scientific discoveries happened and rationality and scientific thinking were the most appraised, a major shift happened; people began to be unsettled with the reasonable explanations for events that they did not want reason, such as in religion. Isaiah Berlin writes about it in *The True Fathers of Romanticism* (2013), in which one of the examples he gives is when some people tried to argue that Christ turning water into wine is due to a chemical reaction “assisted by divine inspiration” (Berlin, 2013, p. 55) that they did not figure out; humans often yearn for more than this – something “deeper or darker” (Berlin, 2013, p. 55). So, Romanticism assembled with the premise of cherishing humans’ emotions and subjectivity, and valuing elements that nourish these emotions – this *humanity* –, and the Romantics agreed that the greatest source for that is nature.

The opposition between nature and urbanization increased with the Industrial Revolution; people were leaving rural life for cities, and this migration changed many things. As Ripu Sen asserts in *Exploration of Identical Ideas: Wordsworth and Emerson* (2016),

people's habits and priorities were different; in the city, "staying away from natural beauty, people begin to emphasize different kinds of materialistic desires" (Sen, 2016, p. 37), to live restless lives, and to be explored by the merchant class. Staying in nature, alternatively, brings peace and awareness of what truly matters, a "sense of the health and integrity of the life" (Day, 2011, p. 39).

But "to what end is nature?" (Emerson, 2008, p. 7). In his essay *Nature*, Emerson advocates for freedom of thinking, imagining, and believing; the power of breaking old traditions and starting new ones, if that is what one desires – a whole new relationship with the universe. One of the things he proposes for people to reflect on is nature; its end, effects, and mediations. Nature, beyond being a source of beauty, commodities, and discipline (as it is further explained in the later chapters of the essay), allows him to become "a transparent eye-ball" (Emerson, 2008, p. 10), a state in which he is nothing, but he sees all, he feels the "Universal Being" circulating through him, and he feels like he is a particle of God.

Matthew Taylor, in *The Nature of Fear: Edgar Allan Poe and Posthuman Ecology* (2012), addresses the portrayal of the Transcendentalists and of Poe on nature, contrasting their ideas to the point of an opposition: ecophilia and ecophobia. Taylor makes use of Emerson's and Thoreau's writings on the possibility of improving the self through a connection with nature to argue that they – and Transcendentalists in general, for that matter – subdue nature, either to the role of servant to humankind or to being merely part of our *selves*. He asserts that, according to them, "we should love the natural world because it is rightfully an extension of ourselves, a reservoir of personal and collective becoming" (Taylor, 2012, p. 357), instead of reverencing it for what it is and recognizing its protagonism. Another argument that Taylor uses to make this conjecture is that nature is not feared by the Transcendentalists, and this could suggest not only a lack of respect but also the thought that mankind can dominate nature. The Dark Romantics would be in the opposite direction.

In a defense of Poe's place in the canon of American writers who regard 'ecoconsciousness', Taylor presents how much the author offered to this subject. Poe, on the contrary of the Transcendentalists, represents the non-human agency as something that can bring fear, discomfort, and uncanniness. Similarly to Emerson, he "picture[s] a physically and spiritually interconnected universe inexorably returning to the singularity from which it began" (Taylor, 2012, p. 364) – in this assimilation, however, if someone was to dissipate, it would be the human (which is the case in many of Poe's stories). The conclusion that the Transcendentalists would feel somehow superior or in control of nature because of these different approaches, nonetheless, can be a far-fetched critical argument. Considering that

Emerson and Thoreau are deeply inspired by the English Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as Taylor himself puts it, nature is sacred and reverential, and it *is* recognized as a powerful entity that surpasses every empire, every human creation, just like in the poem *Tintern Abbey*⁵. Matthew Taylor presents good evidence that Poe should also be studied in the realms of the ecocritic, but his criticism concerning Transcendentalists ecophilia seems tendentious.

Herman Melville, similarly to Poe, often depicted nature as a dominant, sometimes dangerous force, which could not be overruled. However, to try to place him on one side of dichotomies such as ecophobia or ecophilia might be flawed; Melville, although classified as a Dark Romantic, read, admired, and even sympathized with many transcendental ideals. This ambivalence led to fascinating pieces of works, in which the characters and their journeys are not solely wicked or heavenly directed, but rather a complex mixture of both. Olgahan Baksi Yalcin, in her article *The Dichotomy of Melville's Moby Dick: American Transcendentalism and Anti-Transcendentalism* (2019), exposes how he does this with *Moby-Dick*. According to her, Ishmael, the narrator, can be interpreted as a Transcendentalist, due to his positive and unified perception of nature with mankind – which Yalcin compares to Emerson's Over-Soul –, besides presenting “transcendentalist principles of high thought, curiosity, and open-mindedness” (Yalcin, 2019, p. 267). Captain Ahab, in comparison, can be understood as a Dark Romantic because of his obsessive and cruel purpose of killing the sperm whale Moby Dick, seeking revenge under the belief that it attacked him in the past deliberately, and not because of its self-defense instinct.

Even Poe, who wrote tales such as *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Metzengerstein*, did not limit his portrayal of nature to merely obscure and deadly. In the short story *The Island of the Fay*, published in 1850, the narrator is an observer and admirer of a natural scene. The narrative concerns the details of an island, in which the narrator describes with great pleasure and reverence the sun, the grass, the mirroring lake, and later on the journey of a fay, who circles through the island until its death. One side of the island is described as bright, sweet-scented, and in all graceful, whilst the other side is dark, with naked trees, hills that remembered graves, and sharp-end grass. Nonetheless, everything, even the shadowy side, is perceived as beautiful, peaceful, and holy. Right at the beginning of the story, there is the assertion that “there is one pleasure still within the reach of fallen

⁵ See *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798*, by William Wordsworth.

mortality—and perhaps only one— [...] I mean the happiness experienced in the contemplation of natural scenery” (Poe, 1996, p. 933), which Emerson and Thoreau surely agreed.

To be inserted in nature – regardless if this nature is the arcadian Walden Pond or the threatening seas of Moby Dick – allows people to embark on voyages of discovery. This is related to one of Christopher McCandless’ dialogues in the movie *Into the Wild*: “I read somewhere how important it is in life not necessarily to be strong but to feel strong, to measure yourself at least once... to find yourself at least once in the most ancient of human conditions, facing blind, deaf stone alone, with nothing to help you but your own hands and your own head” (2007), because it is crucial to be aware of one’s own needs (physiological and psychological), strengths, weaknesses, desires, and this awareness comes mainly from the combination of nature and seclusion. Living two years in a hut built by himself, Thoreau discovered how strong he was, how little money and materials he needed to survive, what made him happy, and a multifold of reasons why that experience edified him as a person. Captain Ahab did not begin his expedition to learn about himself, nonetheless, it ultimately exposed his vengeful, frantic nature, despite his effort to rationalize the hate against Moby Dick.

Aside from the differences pointed out in this analysis, all four Romantic writers subscribe to nature as more than flora and fauna: it is a sacred, magical, and strong being, that concedes our birth, life, and death. The industrialization, advances in technologies, search for pleasure with material possessions, and full-time jobs created a system in which people live lives far too hectic and numb to have time for themselves – to take care, to know, to be themselves. Thus, Romanticism advocates for a return to simpler lives, to the awareness of how magnificent it is to co-live with mountains, strong and tranquil sea, sunshine and midnight sky, colorful and shadowy trees, as it is enough for a fulfilling life.

4.2 SECLUSION AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Individuality is a key characteristic of Romanticism. In recognizing the relevance of one’s internal state, the singular relationship of an individual with oneself, God, religion, and so on, is not only accepted but encouraged. The Puritans, who strongly influenced Romantic writers (especially the Transcendentalists), defended a personal interpretation of the Bible – and later on, in 1836, Emerson stimulated people to have “a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of [the foregoing generations]” (Emerson, 2008, p. 7). Romantic painters such

as Henry Fuseli often represented a person alone, accompanied only by their demons, dreams, and fears (e.g. ‘The Nightmare’) – such as many of Poe’s infamous first-person narrators. This process of individuality involves the seclusion of the person, since others may corrupt one’s nature, and distance from as many distractions as possible. As a result, it would be hard not to dive into oneself – for the better or the worse.

Something that might influence the perception of seclusion is connected to the agency, the freedom to choose – or not – this state. On the one hand, Thoreau, for instance, chose to isolate himself from society, to live alone in a hut in the forest. This resulted in, among other things, opportunities to think about the self, acquire self-knowledge; elevate oneself, and gain perspective. On the other hand, it is common to see Dark Romantic narratives in which this isolation was forced on the characters; Roderick Usher, from *The Fall of the House of Usher*, for example, was fated to be alone – fated by death, by sickness – and that is what happens, despite his attempts to prevent it (e.g. inviting a distant childhood friend to be with him). This type of seclusion can, too, provoke reflections about the self, but not as a nice, thriving discovery, rather as an obsessive, delusional consequence.

This can also be seen in other stories by Poe, such as *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*. In *The Black Cat*, the author seems to demonstrate the decaying of one’s morals; the narrator, who “was noted for the docility and humanity” (Poe, 1996, p. 597) and used to love animals, gradually starts to distance himself from everyone, to the point of getting annoyed even by the company of his dear cat – he ends up murdering his wife and the pet. The narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, however, was already alone when the narrative began, for unknown reasons. He repeatedly tries to convince the interlocutor that he is sane and that the obsession he feels towards his neighbor is rational, conveying the opposite conclusion to the readers, who know more about him than he does about himself. Being alone and driven by an acuteness of the senses (just as Roderick Usher), he turns out to be yet another Poe character with perverse impulses.

The Raven, Poe’s most acknowledged poem, is also an example of a narrative that explores the mind of a solitary person – perhaps an even better sample for the sake of this research, considering how self-conscious the character becomes throughout the story. The poem is about a person (the narrator) who loses his loved one, a woman named Lenore. At the beginning of the narrative, he is depicted as an intellectual person, surrounded by books in his study room and trying to maintain reason through this mournful period. But, disturbed by the entrance of a raven, the character transforms – or, rather, is finally truthful about his emotions. In a sort of “conversation” with the bird, he expresses his sorrows, fears, and

hopeless hopes, no longer able to hide this facet. In this sense, it is arguable that this seclusion (and the arrival of the bird) did not necessarily provoke anything bad, but has, in fact, triggered the character's mournful feelings (his personal state of being); as he is much more than an intellectual man.

Moving from the obscure to what seems a more affable scenery, Poe also advocates for solitude in the short story *The Island of the Fay*. The narrator, an observer of a natural landscape, voices his pleasure in being alone, for music, and many other things, are only "fully enjoyed in solitude" (Poe, 1996, p. 933). This character contrasts with the usual disturbed ones present in his well-known short stories, for he is only an admirer of a natural landscape, and does not express mischievous desires. Alone, he observes how magical nature is, not only in a symbolic manner due to its beauty but also *actually* magic because of the presence of a fay. The fay is described as a creature that circles around that place, passing through the brightest and the darkest sides and gradually fading (or, rather, feeding her shadow to the "dark" side) until her death. Nonetheless, even though this story presents fewer gothic features, it still ends with the possible interpretation that humans, just like the fay, walk in circles through the earth, only to slowly dissolve into darkness – alone.

In *Walden* (1985), Thoreau dedicates a whole chapter to talk about solitude. First, he manifests the pleasure that is living secluded in the woods: "I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself" (Thoreau, 1985, p. 426); it was a blessing not to have neighbors to profane that scenery. He did not feel oppressed by solitude, on the contrary, he states: "To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (Thoreau, 1985, p. 430). Some people wondered if Thoreau did not feel lonely, and he asked himself if those people also wondered about the sun, God, or even the Walden Pond, for all of them were also alone. In fact, in a comparison between God and the devil, it appears that the collective may inherently entail some evil, since "God is alone—but the devil, he is far from being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion" (Thoreau, 1985, p. 431).

In the book *Solitude and Society in the works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* (1999), Linda Costanzo Cahir regards how strongly the theme of solitude was dealt by nineteenth-century American authors, with the constant paradox of the importance of solitude "as a means of searching for self" (Cahir, 1999, p. XIII), but also the moral role that the individual has to the common weal. According to her, Herman Melville often comprises this subject, having parallels with Poe and Emerson. Melville considered that "man is essentially and fully alone" (Cahir, 1999, p. 3), even if he is inserted in a collective environment, which

is the case in *Moby-Dick*. Although there are many people on the Pequod, all of them are referred to as individual islands, inherently solitary beings: “They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, *Isolatoes* too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own” (Melville, 2003, p. 131). It seems that, if not physically, all mankind is at least spiritually secluded.

It is worth knowing that, as presented by Cahir, the seclusion idealized by the Romantics does not represent an absence of the individual contribution to the collective improvement. As mentioned in section 2. Transcendentalism, Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists fought for many social causes, such as abolitionism and women’s rights. The same Thoreau who isolated himself in Walden Pond wrote *Civil Disobedience*, in which he urges people to demand their rights, fighting however they can – his way of doing it was writing, refusing to pay taxes (which were financing a slave holding-state), and supporting the activists’ groups in various manners. Moreover, he believed that people should not wait for a large number of people, let alone the government, to do things that must be done, because individual changes have a greater impact than most imagine.

At last, it is noticeable that seclusion is a crucial matter in both Transcendentalist and Dark Romantic narratives, and that it leads to discoveries about the self (pleasing or not). Seclusion, here, encompasses both physical and spiritual solitude; physically when the individual moves to an isolated location (such as Thoreau in Walden Pond), and spiritually when, even surrounded by people, the individual feels or considers to be fundamentally alone (such as the tripulants of the Pequod). The seclusion that Transcendentalists advocate for is based on the importance of, at least temporarily, isolating oneself from society, because of its side effects to the inner self. The Dark Romantics, conversely, do not explicitly support seclusion in their fictional works but represent it as something inevitable and natural. Also, the self-knowledge acquired by the Transcendentalists, perhaps because of its deliberate purpose, is seen and recognized by the own people susceptible to these Romantic variables (such as seclusion), whilst the characters of Dark Romanticism lack self-aware and present themselves in a way that the reader knows them better.

4.3 RELIGION AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

In American Romanticism, authors often referred to faith as something individual and subjective, that is connected to a sense of spirituality rather than institutionalized religions.

Their theories concerning the creation of the universe, who or what is God, where can God be found, among others, are directly related to how their characters are developed, the inherent good or bad in human nature, and even the possibility (or not) of self-improvement – that is why it is such a crucial matter in this analysis. It is worth mentioning that nineteenth-century America was, in general, bursting with new religions, as Brian Yothers asserts in the article *Terrors of the Soul: Religious Pluralism, Epistemological Dread, and Cosmic Exaltation in Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville* (2006); there were, to mention a few, “pluralism among a wide range of Protestant denominations” (Yothers, 2006, p. 140), recognition of Asian religious traditions (such as Buddhism, Taoism, etc.), Catholicism, and indigenous religions. This openness to new possibilities and religious pluralism was sometimes seen as something positive, and sometimes not.

According to Yothers, the Dark Romantics “explore the anguish, fear, and uncertainty attendant on any effort to think seriously and systematically about religious difference” (Yothers, 2006, p. 136), whilst the Transcendentalists found it “profoundly liberating and exhilarating” (Yothers, 2006, p. 136). As can be seen throughout this study, it is common for Poe and Melville to express concern, doubt, and reproval concerning things that Emerson and Thoreau find exciting and possible. However, there is not exactly a clear-cut polarity between one group and another, and this is also true when comparing their religious views. In analyzing *Eureka*, Poe’s prose poem that discusses metaphysical theories, Yothers presents that, even though Poe directly mocks the Transcendentalists calling them “divers for crotchets” (Poe, 1996, p. 1.263), he proposes an attempt to integrate unity and plurality that bear a striking resemblance with Emerson’s Over-Soul concept.

To know thyself is to know that you are not alone: you are part of a Unity, the Over-Soul. Emerson introduces this idea in *Nature*, but further explains it in its own dedicated essay, *The Over-Soul*, published in 1841. “[B]ut one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea” (Emerson, 2008, p. 399), he asserts. All humans are connected, and each has this greater, Universal Soul, in them. Emerson argues that everybody knows it is there; people know when they feel the sublime (that the Transcendentalist translates as that which inflames mankind with awe and delight), that may come by the reception of a new truth – the thrilling moment that is fruit from “an influx of the Divine mind into our mind” (Emerson, 2008, p. 392). It is this thrill that urges people to take a stand, to be involved in something that makes sense for their spiritual fulfillment, such as “the *revival* of the Calvinistic churches[,] the *experiences* of the Methodists” (Emerson, 2008, p. 393), etc. But for one to know oneself, to improve oneself,

and to be self-reliant, it is necessary to put the individual self in the role of receptor and let it be guided by the Universal Soul.

For Poe too there is the possibility and the needfulness to mingle the individual with the universal – in his words, the individual identity with the general consciousness: “Think that the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness—that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah” (Poe, 1996, p. 1.358). In the same direction (i.e. the deification of a person), Emerson wrote “[T]he simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God” (2008, p. 398). This integration proposed by Poe, however, is centered on *Nothingness*, as considered by G. R. Thompson in *Unity, Death, and Nothingness—Poe’s “Romantic Skepticism”* (1970). Thompson warns that, if read through inattentive eyes, *Eureka* seems to go against every other piece of Poe’s writing, precisely due to this Unity and what seems a positive tone at the end of the narrative. The Dark Romantic is actually trying to make sense of a world whose destruction and annihilation are inevitable: “Only with some view of esthetic design in the Universe, Poe suggests, can we “comprehend the riddles of Divine Injustice.”” (Thompson, 1970, p. 298). The end of everything, just as the beginning, is nothing, a void; everyone will *sink* into it. The final perception is that it is not necessarily tragic, but a cycle – an inescapable cycle. Not by accident, numerous of his fiction stories are concluded by common death and destruction.

Melville, in his complexity and difficulty to fit in any particular category, was also unsettled in his religious beliefs; he wandered through different religious takes, but was never content. He chiefly based his stories on Christian ground – with Christian references and morals –, but did not spare criticisms. *Moby-Dick*, for one, can be interpreted as a story of defiance against nature and/or God. The plot of a maritime crew following an obsessive and vengeful captain towards the murderer of one specific sperm whale is embedded with religious symbolisms, from the name of the captain (Captain Ahab, as in the evil King Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 16) who influenced the whole nation to sin), to the end of the book, with the death of all the people in the ship, except the narrator – nature/God ruthlessly wins. *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, published after the commercial failure of *Moby-Dick*, is perhaps even more audacious in its criticism, with the construction of a character [Pierre] with a Christian background, youthful naivety, and transgressive ending. Melville makes use of Pierre’s naivety to satirize the fundamental benign of the Deity – “Would the god of sunlight decree gloom? It is a flawless, speckless, fleckless, beautiful world throughout; joy now, and

joy forever!” (Melville, 1984, p. 74) –, displays an “unusual” romantic relationship between Pierre and his supposed half-sister, and, ultimately, contends a suicidal closure *à la* Romeo and Juliet.

The transcendentalists, although not oblivious to the ambitious and wicked impulses that people have, believe that all humans are naturally inclined to be, to look for, and to do the best in this universe – and how could it not be, if the divine is within all and all are within the divine? Even if the highest moments of people’s lives are the minority, they still carry more truth and meaning; “our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences” (Emerson, 2008, p. 385). The answer to what is the best to be, to look for, and to do lies in letting the Supreme Being act through us. On a similar approach to Emerson’s Over-Soul, but perhaps in a less enthusiastic tone, Thoreau writes in the chapter Higher Laws, of *Walden*: “We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers [...] He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established” (Thoreau, 1985, p. 497-498). There is an agreement between the two Transcendentalists that humans are animals, susceptible to vices, but they have the Spirit of the Higher Law in them, and it must have a channel to manifest. When it does, they “become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty” (Emerson, 2008, p. 386). Thoreau, however, seems to condemn this “animal” nature of mankind more intensively.

Furthermore, it is perhaps clear, but imperative to be said, that for all these Romantics spirituality is intertwined with nature. For the Transcendentalists, nature is frequently depicted as a temple, serving as a mediator between mankind and the Supreme Being; thus, it is one of the reasons why Romanticism advocates for being in the natural world and why it is the ideal place for one to know oneself. Nature is also deific for the Dark Romantics, as can be seen through the representations of animals (such as a raven or a sperm whale) acting supernaturally and demonstrating nature’s godly power, and surely other natural elements such as a bleak, odorous tarn (in *The Fall of the House of Usher*), an island (in *The Island of the Fay*), and the sea and tempests (in *Moby-Dick*), to mention a few.

FINAL REMARKS

Romanticism was a major literary, artistic, and social movement, both in relation to the quantity of authors, philosophers, artists, and works produced, and to the influence it

exerts until the present day. As a consequence, Romanticism as a literary genre can be divided into subgenres, separating authors that have common basic Romantic features, but diverge in some specificities; this is the case of Dark Romanticism and Transcendentalism. Dark Romantic and Transcendentalist writers discussed nature, isolation, the creation of the universe, death, spirituality, social and political causes, and matters of the self, but the representations and sometimes the results of these discussions contrast. Making use of Gothic elements and interpreting the mechanics of life as something that is surrounded by darkness, Dark Romantic narratives seem, at first glance, the opposite of Transcendentalist ones, which is not true. Considering the relevance that self-knowledge bears in Romanticism, this topic was used to expose the differences as well as the similarities between the two subgenres.

Influenced by philosophers such as Socrates, Rousseau, Montaigne, and Nietzsche, and writers such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Romantics debated on the nature of the self and derivative preoccupations, including self-knowledge, self-improvement, and self-reliance. The ability to know oneself, desired and reflected upon at least back to the Greeks, is seen as a key achievement to accomplish happiness and answers not only regarding one's own nature, but universal nature – the search for the truth.

Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville were the authors chosen to illustrate Dark Romanticism, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to Transcendentalism. In examining their production (in which the first group encompasses chiefly fictional novels, short stories, and poems, and the latter mainly essays, lectures, and works within the life narratives spectrum), it was noted that some of the common components related to self-knowledge were the role of nature, seclusion, and religion. Thus, their writings were analyzed and compared in these categories, with a selection of works that mostly addressed the target themes.

The first element that was analyzed was nature. Nature is a crucial theme for Romanticism in general, and is strongly present in Dark Romantic and Transcendentalist works. For both groups, it surpasses the notion of flora and fauna and is represented as either a mediator between humans and God – a temple –, or God itself. Due to its intrinsic relation to divinity, there is also awareness of its power; however, the Dark Romantics portray this power in a threatening manner to humankind, possibly leading to ecophobia, while the Transcendentalists do not subscribe to fearful perception, only reverence and love, i.e., ecophilia. Furthermore, nature is an indispensable variable in the process of acquiring self-knowledge, for even a mere contemplation of a natural scenery causes amazement and reflections upon the self.

Seclusion, however, is the topic that presented the biggest discrepancy between the two literary strands. It was analyzed that, whilst for Transcendentalism seclusion is chosen, in Dark Romanticism it is not something desirable, but it inevitably happens anyhow – the characters are forced to be secluded, by sickness, death, or other circumstances of great force. This directly impacts the results of the seclusion; on the one hand, the Transcendentalists regard isolation as a crucial condition to turn into the inner self, and the discoveries made would help to thrive the self; on the other hand, in Dark Romantic narratives, it reveals to people the perverse impulses present in their selves.

Finally, in the section that concerns religion it is possible to see how much Poe and Melville are only on a different side of the same coin as Emerson and Thoreau. Although Poe does not spare criticisms to the Transcendentalists, he proposes an integration theory that strongly resembles Emerson's Over-Soul concept. The premise in both cases is that there is a connection among everything – all human beings, nature, and the Supreme Being: Unity. Nonetheless, for the Dark Romantic, this integration is centered on the idea of “nothingness”, in which people sink into the inevitable void that awaits them. The Over-Soul, conversely, considers integration as exceedingly positive, for it means that all individuals can work to let the Divine Being find its way through them, and this will result in nothing less than Beauty, Power, Virtue, and Wisdom. Moreover, all four Romantics contend religion with subjectivity and often make use of religious pluralism in mixing different beliefs to expose their own.

It is expected that through this analysis, Dark Romanticism and Transcendentalism can be perceived as groups that have equally a lot to offer to the studies of self-knowledge and other matters of the self, and that comparing their literary corpus grants the encounter of the authors' subtleties, complexities, and paradoxes.

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