

RALPH  
WALDO  
EMERSON



## BIOGRAPHY

- Born in 1803 in Boston
- Father died when he was 8, so financial difficulty
- Entered Harvard at 14
- Became a teacher and later a Unitarian minister
- Too radical even for Unitarianism, so left the ministry
- Became a well-known writer and lecturer; probably most famous intellectual in America in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century
- Inspiration for Transcendentalism

## EMERSON AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

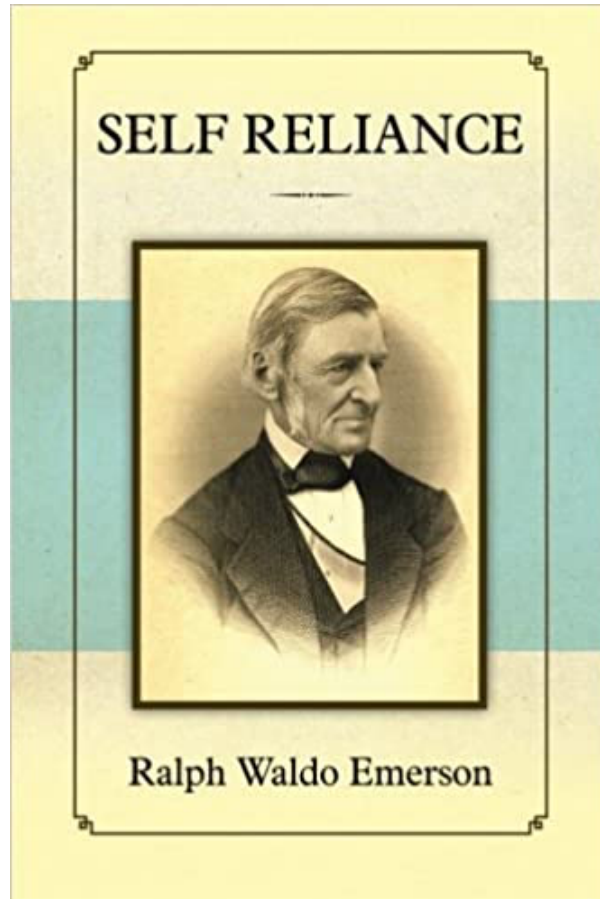


- From Latin, meaning “passing over” or a “climbing beyond”
- Literary movement in New England beginning with publication of Emerson’s *Nature* in 1836 and lasting until beginning of Civil War in 1860
- Sometimes called the “American Romantics”—what did they want to pass over or climb beyond?



## WHAT DID THEY BELIEVE?

- Divinity of human beings (everyone partook of the spark of the eternal divine)
- Unity of God (God seen everywhere immanent in the Creation, as the “Over-Soul”—Emerson’s term—that animated all of us)
- Humans commune directly with Divinity, can receive inspiration from God without the mediation of priests or printed texts of religion
- Signs of eternal truth everywhere present in nature. Reading these signs a way to receive divine inspiration
- Since so much left up to the individual, the individual is valued highly—much division of opinion, growth, and change in the philosophy. Consistency not important



## EMERSON'S WRITING

- Dense, can be difficult to read
- Each sentence carries the weight of a full paragraph
- Stick with it!



# TO THINK ABOUT AS YOU READ

- How does what Emerson says about the relationship between the individual and the public good compare to earlier thinkers (Socrates, Wollstonecraft)?
- What opinion of the basic human being does Emerson propose? Does he believe individuals, at birth, are basically good or basically bad? Why is this view important?

