

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

A TRANSCENDENTALIST'S PROFESSION OF FAITH
(1853)

This pugnacious passage shows that even in the 1850s, as Emerson had reached the height of his fame and as activism by Transcendentalist sympathizers was making a significant impact within the antislavery movement, to be classified as a "Transcendentalist" was still far from being mainstream. Even Henry David Thoreau was prepared to talk tougher to his *Journal* than to the scientific community. He dutifully filled out the form that the American Association for Advancement of Science sent, listing as his particular branch of interest in science "The Manners and Customs of the Indians of the Algonquin Group previous to contact with the civilized man." He remained a member of the Association, which memorialized him after his death with a short obituary in its official journal.

SOURCE: *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis Allen. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1906, volume 5, slightly corrected. For the sake of readability, I use this text as a basis rather than the more minutely accurate Princeton University scholarly edition (*Journal 5: 1852-53*, pp. 469-70), for the language is identical except for two word endings that I have restored here, and Thoreau's dash-ridden manuscript punctuation (reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's manuscript poems and letters) is herky-jerky and often also confusing. Only in two instances, also corrected here, does Thoreau's punctuation seem essential to the sense.

The secretary of the Association for the Advancement of Science requested me, as he probably has thousands of others, by a printed circular letter from Washington the other day, to fill in the blanks against certain questions, among which the most important one was what branch of science I was especially interested in, using the term science in the most comprehensive sense possible. Now, though I could state to a select few that department of human inquiry which engages me, and should be rejoiced at an opportunity to do so, I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science to which especially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic—a transcendentalist—and a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think of it, I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations.

How absurd that, though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most, yet a true account of my relation to nature itself should excite their ridicule only. If it had been the secretary of an association of which Plato or Aristotle was the president, I should not have hesitated to describe my studies at once and particularly.

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