

# Vegetable Transcendentalism



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## VEGAN LITERARY STUDIES: AN AMERICAN TEXTUAL HISTORY, 1776-1900

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Coined in November 1944 by [Donald Watson](#), the term “vegan” originally was used to distinguish “non-dairy vegetarians.” [The Vegan Society](#) explains that in 1949 “vegan” was defined as “[t]he principle of the emancipation of animals from exploitation by man” (Leslie J Cross), and later as the effort “to seek an end to the use of animals by man for food, commodities, work, hunting, vivisection, and by all other uses involving exploitation of animal



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We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.

(Emerson, “The Over-Soul” 269)

A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world.

(Emerson, *Nature* 43)

Whilst the world is thus dual, so is every one of its parts. The entire system of things gets represented in every particle. There is somewhat that resembles the ebb and flow of the sea, day and night, man and woman, in a single needle of the pine, in a kernel of corn, in each individual of every animal tribe.

(Emerson, “Compensation” 97)

The transmigration of souls is no fable. I would it were; but men and women are only half human.

(Emerson, "History" 32)

through [the human] all descend by degradation of his essence into their corresponding organizations—animal, plant, mineral, material atoms. Life descends and reascends in manifold metamorphoses. Taking its rise in spirit, thence plunging instinctively into matter and reascending, lifting this into its ascending types as it rises to its source. Abreast the source and topmost is man, below him are the animals, and still lower and lowest in the descending series the plant and mineral kingdom. And the lower man himself descends, the more he resembles the brutes; the higher the brute, the more he assumes the human likeness.

(Alcott "Philosophemes" 10).

*phutikē noesis* = growth-thought  
*aisthētikē noesis* = sense-thought  
*psuchikē noesis* = soul-thought

(Marder, *The Phoenix Complex* 90)

*phusis* = nature  
*phuein* = to grow  
*phuton* = plant

(Marder, *The Phoenix Complex* xiv)

the plant is not just a thing in nature, but the miniature mirror of *phusis*, a synecdochic instantiation of universal growth and its refinement in the faculty of the vegetal soul, the ‘lowest’ and at the same time the most encompassing potentiality of all living beings.

(Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 120-121)

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled.

(Thoreau, *Walden* 219)

Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established.

(Thoreau, *Walden* 219-220)

I fear that we are such gods or demigods only as fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the *creatures of appetite*, and that, to some extent, *our very life is our disgrace*. [...] In the student *sensuality is a sluggish habit of mind*.

(Thoreau, *Walden* 220).

Wood and water god both, man loves to traverse the forests, wade the streams, and confess his kindred **alliance with primeval things**. [...] Something of the forester stirs within him when occasion provokes, **as if men were trees transformed**, and delighted to claim their affinities with their **sylvan ancestry**.

Man never tires of Nature's scene,  
Himself the liveliest evergreen.

(Alcott, *Concord Days* 11)

I think [Thoreau] had the profoundest passion for [nature] of any one of his time; and had the **human sentiment** been **as tender and pervading**, would have given us **pastorals** of which Virgil and Theocritus **might have envied him** the authorship had they chanced to be his contemporaries. [...] Living in **close companionship with nature**, his muse breathed the spirit and voice of poetry. For when the heart is once divorced from the senses and all **sympathy with common things**, then **poetry has fled** and the love that sings.

(Alcott, *Concord Days* 12)

I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.

(Thoreau, *Walden* 111-112)