

# Introduction :

## Transcendentalism Revisited

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Scholarship on Transcendentalism has reached a degree of maturity and of complexity which is perfectly reflected and synthesized in the recent and monumental *Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism* (2010). While a single journal issue is necessarily more limited in its scope, we nonetheless believe that the essays gathered here will also give a sense of how diverse current approaches to American Transcendentalism are: how they have been simultaneously reinvigorated by historical research and nurtured by speculative probings of its vast corpus of texts, both canonical and less canonical.

One of the main recent developments in the study of Transcendentalism has been a significant broadening of the field, through the inclusion of a greater array of authors and figures. In the early 1980s, Lawrence Buell marveled at the vitality of “the Emerson industry,” but the focus of such critical energy was narrower than it has become today, and to the long-established figures of Emerson and Thoreau have been added other voices of considerable stature, primarily Margaret Fuller and Theodore Parker, but also a better sense of the complex intellectual interactions both within the “Transcendentalist movement” and between the latter and a range of intellectual traditions.

Through their essays in this issue, David Robinson and Bruce Ronda thus contribute to picturing a Transcendentalism that is far more “collective” and “interactive” than the popular clichés of the Transcendental loner have often suggested. While the origins of the Transcendentalist movement in the Transcendental Club have long been emphasized (*cf.* Gura, Packer), there

long was and there still is a lingering sense that Transcendentalist authors were fiercely individualistic figures—although, to be sure, this is in part justified by such attitudes as Emerson’s reluctance towards Fourierist communities, or Thoreau’s falling out with Emerson around 1849. That Transcendentalist thinkers were indomitable figures is not entirely a legend, but, even if such was the case, it would be a mistake to see them as a heterogeneous collection of discrete individuals keeping aloof from the society and concerns of their time. This is not so because they were fundamentally moved by a desire to emancipate their fellow citizens, however constrained this desire was by their historical situation or personal idiosyncrasies.

Bruce Ronda thus delineates the deeply nurturing “aesthetics of conversation” that was central to the movement, and shows how this did not contradict the well-known emphasis on the value and power of individual “intuition,” but actually complemented it. While the “conversations” led or recorded by Elizabeth Peabody, Bronson Alcott, and Margaret Fuller were “staged” rather than spontaneous events, they still aimed at eliciting the powers of insight, which, they believed, were constrained by inherited and ingrained limitations embedded in complex social practices. Ronda deftly articulates the paradoxical nature of the texts meant to reflect oral communication, in this process bringing to the fore writings that are occasionally mined for details and anecdotes, but rarely read in and for themselves, and as having a dynamics of their own. Drawing upon the work of theorists in communication studies, Ronda sheds light on texts that, although they are highly formalized and “mediated,” and perhaps even ritualized, constructs, are far less homogeneous than they might seem at first sight. Paying attention to “the breaking of the frame, the shift of code,” he shows how they create a unique setting for the different voices of the “pupils” (children or female adults), the “teacher,” and the recorder, in which access to, and release of, the power of intuition is itself framed within complex forms of authority: how can a teacher lead and “authorize” her or his pupils to think by themselves without imposing her or his own authority, thus evidencing and probing the paradoxes of transcendental pedagogy? How can “the democratic possibility of conversation” be simultaneously enacted and saved from the pitfalls of its own “authority”? Ronda points out that the empowerment enabled by the practice of conversation was at least as much inherent in its status as “an art form, a kind of performance art,” as in its “content,” in so far as its primary effectiveness derived from its constructing and achieving an experience of community or communality.

David Robinson’s essay takes the same “moment” and context for its starting-point, i.e. a sense of Transcendentalism as having a dynamics extending beyond individual expression to encompass or echo a broader (call for) social transformation. But he takes a different tack on this, by focusing on the internal intellectual dynamics of Transcendentalism rather

## INTRODUCTION

than on its communal outreach. Like Ronda, Robinson considers that Transcendentalism—*pace* Stanley Elkins<sup>1</sup>—had a fundamentally political thrust, in so far as it drew resolute practical lessons from its foundational emphasis on self-culture and critical thinking, which Emerson appropriated from William Ellery Channing and which Fuller reformulated to turn it into an argument for female emancipation and agency. Robinson then reassesses Emerson's and Fuller's editorship of the Transcendentalist journal, *The Dial*, usefully drawing our attention to some lesser-known texts, such as Emerson's preface to the first issue, in which he used language celebrating, and calling for, revolution in New England, pointing to the immanent political dimension of Transcendentalism: shaped and nurtured by a journal conceived as an embodiment and vehicle of shared intentions and aspirations, the democratic community of readers foreshadows the new society to come. Robinson finally considers the crucial role Margaret Fuller's editorship of *The Dial* played in her development as a writer, in so far as the journal provided her with a venue not only for a preliminary version of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* ("The Great Lawsuit"), but for innovative narratives that allowed her to explore complex visions of the transcendental self, one that here appears far less triumphant or "imperial" than historical scholarship on Transcendentalism was willing to acknowledge, while still pointing to the same indomitable energies. Robinson makes it clear that Fuller could never have published those narratives except in *The Dial*, thus bringing full circle his consideration of the central importance of this journal to Fuller and to the intellectual life of Antebellum America.

While Robinson emphasizes the connection between American Transcendentalism and Goethe, by reminding us usefully that Margaret Fuller was "one of the most knowledgeable Germanists in New England, and published a translation of *Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe* in 1839," Joseph Urbas chooses to reassess what he describes as the overlooked connection with French philosopher Victor Cousin. Although Cousin's link to American Transcendentalism has long been recognized, and was central to Perry Miller's understanding of the movement, it has never been analyzed at length, and it has also tended to be downplayed by recent scholarship, agreeing in this respect with the declining status of Cousin on the European philosophical scene. But Urbas here makes a more general point about the gap between a thinker's intrinsic caliber and their relevance to the history of ideas, the latter being also crucially shaped by so-called "minor figures" acting in diverse ways as *passseurs* or catalysts. Urbas then considers the decisive role Cousin's writings, perhaps even more than those of Coleridge, played in the "assault on Locke" that Barbara Packer described as a central component of the emergence of Transcendentalism in the 1830s, and in particular he sheds light on how the growing split between Unitarians and Transcendentalists coincided with their diverging relation to Locke's philosophy, the former sticking to it, while the

latter developed their idealistic brand of philosophy. He illuminatingly outlines “the structural resemblances between Cousin’s philosophy and Emerson’s,” which are more particularly grounded in their shared—albeit different—focus on “impersonality,” thus extending recent interest in American forms and modes of impersonality, in the wake of Sharon Cameron’s important essays on the Emersonian impersonal (cf. Cameron, Arsiç), but also shedding a welcome transnational light upon it, as well as providing a more historical slant. In the process, Urbas calls attention to a number of figures that, although less well-known, were very much part of the overall power and coherence of Transcendentalism as a movement. Such a take decidedly contributes to picturing Transcendentalism as a more broadly transatlantic phenomenon than is sometimes assumed or implied in surveys of the movement. In the end, however, Urbas’s purpose is not just to correct a point in intellectual history, but rather to redress a perceived imbalance in recent transcendentalist scholarship towards the empirical at the expense of the ontological, a distinctive feature of what has been identified as the “material turn.”

The next three essays are less historically inclined and approach Transcendentalism from a slightly decentered perspective, in the process demonstrating that it has lost none of its questioning force.

Dan Malachuk’s essay takes a provocative tack on Transcendentalism. Whereas Transcendentalism and the Gothic have traditionally been regarded as paradigmatic opposites—with Poe as the arch opponent or derider of transcendental fancy—Malachuk sees them as deeply connected rather than pitted against one another, and argues that this critical reorientation is inseparable from recovering the Transcendentalists’ “literary intentions,” over and against the formalist claims of New Criticism and its heirs. Drawing upon recent interpretations of Gothic literature in Antebellum America, Malachuk argues that Transcendentalist authors resorted to a number of literary strategies meant to distort and thus overturn common assumptions about “the Other,” so as to offer their own versions of abolitionist politics and the struggle for women’s rights: far from being political conservatives, *both* Gothic and Transcendentalist authors, Malachuk argues, were progressives. To illustrate his point, he emphasizes the various “Gothic tropes” used by such authors as Fuller, Emerson, and Thoreau, whether applied to individuals or to institutions. Perhaps not all readers will find such appeal to “intentions” to be sufficient to absolve Transcendentalist writers from charges of racism or patriarchalism, but such an approach usefully counterbalances presentist readings bent on pointing out their “complicity” with unwelcome ideologies. While Malachuk, in making a case for the continuity between Transcendentalism and the Gothic, brings grist to the mill of David Reynolds’s groundbreaking *Beneath the American Renaissance*, he also takes this stance one step further, by claiming that the Transcendentalists did not refrain from the more extreme aspects of Gothicism.

## INTRODUCTION

By carefully distinguishing literary techniques from literary intentions, Malachuk points out, we can avoid the pitfalls of a moral condemnation of textual features and strategies that were not meant to be endorsed but were used to combat the very limitations they only seem to make their own. Malachuk similarly sheds light on what he terms the Transcendentalists' "metaphysical dramaturgy," which stages versions of culturally repressed forms as haunting contemporary American culture. Although he approaches Transcendentalism from a different perspective than the first three authors, he thus also aims at contributing to a better understanding of it as an historically situated movement. Squarely framing his essay within an Anglo-American literary tradition, he also illustrates the transatlantic bent of recent work on Transcendentalism, which in this respect adheres to now widely-held assumptions about the prevalence and legitimacy of Transatlantic or Hemispheric studies.

Thomas LeCarner similarly undertakes to revise common assumptions about the Transcendentalists, through a reconsideration of their sense of giving. Common knowledge has it that they opposed philanthropy and any form of gift-giving. But LeCarner argues that they actually emphasized gift-giving, only redefining the latter by tipping the scales toward the immaterial: what truly matters for the Transcendentalists is not to give tangible goods or things, but to offer the most essential part of oneself. Whereas Transcendentalism has increasingly been affected by the so-called "material turn," LeCarner thus outlines at least one aspect in which Transcendentalists maintained their proverbial ethereal approach throughout, thus offering an important corrective to what is perhaps a new form of imbalance in their characterization. LeCarner's analysis also delineates a vision of Transcendentalism as deeply indebted to a sacrificial conception of the gift, whose model was Christ's redemptive giving of his own life. The Transcendentalists' understanding of true gift-giving, LeCarner argues, suggests a way out of the opposition between Marcel Mauss's notion of the gift as part of an endless play of economic exchange and social reciprocations, and Jacques Derrida's insistence that there is no gift but one that fully stands outside such circularities, thus making it an impossibility. Emerson's and Thoreau's proleptic response to Derrida's quandary is to redefine the very notion of the gift, as located not in tangible things but in the immaterial "superfluity" of being that constitutes the "promise of the gift." As LeCarner points out, both Thoreau and Emerson grounded their sense of the gift in the "unconscious" giving of oneself in excess of oneself, as it were, offering not individual property but the very dynamics of being. In so doing, the Transcendentalists reconfigured the notion of exchange as Mauss would come to understand it, and elevated it to the level of the immaterial and of Universal being (the Over-Soul), thus simultaneously, and by an uncanny form of philosophical anticipation, heeding Derrida's sense of the impossibility of the gift based on ownership. This allowed them to propound a seemingly

impossible combination of Mauss's circularity of exchange with Derrida's dismissal of any material gift as not a gift. This was exemplified, in the eyes of the Transcendentalists, by the very principle of conversation, providing the most abstract rationale for the historical practice analyzed in Robinson's and Ronda's essays.

Mathieu Duplay similarly chooses to approach Transcendentalism in the light of a dialogue between Emerson and Marx, which deliberately edges away from historical approaches the better to tease out overlooked elements in Emerson's thinking. To be sure, as Duplay makes clear, it is irrelevant to compare from a historical perspective a giant of political economics with a marginal one in this field. But, he warns us, reading Emerson in this way only neutralizes the revolutionary thrust of his thinking, a radical power which he is bent on recovering by engaging in a meticulous analysis of Emerson's and Marx's mining of a shared philosophical lexicon, where the concepts of "mind," "thought," and "action" are inherited from the Idealist tradition only to be reconfigured to address the demands of the present. Taking his cue from Emerson himself, Duplay emphasizes that relevance to the present should not be equated with novelty, but thought of as a remainder of the past that lives on, or returns. He then pursues in a meditative mode the "ambiguous dialogue" between Emerson's and Marx's thinking, sketching out their complex and partly conflicting understanding of the relation between the ideal and *praxis*, and between the material and subjectivity. Duplay thus echoes, but also displaces decisively, the connection established between Emerson and Marx by Cornel West, for whom both thinkers were committed to "some kind of inseparable link between thought and action, theory and practice" (West 10). At the end of Duplay's parallel examination, however, the most salient distinguishing feature proves to be Emerson's unwavering adherence to the transformative power of the aesthetic principle of *poïesis*, which suggests that, for Emerson, art, and more particularly literature, is to take precedence over philosophy as the agent of what "Experience" promises as the impending "transformation of genius into practical power" (Emerson 492). Bringing this special issue to a close, but in no way closing off the debates animating it, Duplay, from a different perspective than Malachuk, also links Transcendentalism and the Gothic, through an insightful disquisition on (Derridean) specters in Emerson and Marx, thus simultaneously furthering the reach and significance of Transcendentalist writings.

Each of the essays assembled here, in its own way, revisits, and sometimes contests, central tenets of Transcendentalist scholarship. In so doing, they prove true to the inaugural spirit of Transcendentalism as driven by a literally *paradoxical* energy that refuses to subject to what Emerson scornfully designated, in "Self-Reliance," as "communities of opinion" (264). Instead, they embrace the "aversion" to "conformity" that, for Stanley Cavell,

## INTRODUCTION :

characterizes Emerson's and Thoreau's thinking—even when they turn resolutely away from Cavell's reading of Emerson and Thoreau. Such critical impetus is both the theoretical foundation and the practical instrument of all six contributions, whereby they offer what we hope to be a fruitful confrontation of historical, philosophical, and literary approaches to the Transcendentalist corpus that also brings together American and French reading practices to bear upon a common object.

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**NOTES**

1. In his classic study of slavery in American intellectual life, Stanley Elkins famously claimed that "the thinkers of Concord [...] were men without connections. [...] They took next to no part in politics at all" (147).