

GÜNTER LEYPOLDT

The Transcendental Turn in Nineteenth-Century New England

I. Major Players

American Transcendentalism emerged in the 1830s with the literary, religious, philosophical and socio-political activities of loosely connected groups of New England intellectuals based in greater Boston.¹ By far the most important influential representative is the essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), whose extensive work is generally considered transcendentalism's thematic and stylistic center.

Emerson's shaping influence on New England literary culture begins with his treatise on *Nature* (1836) – a foundational formulation of the late-romantic nature religion emerging in the Transcendental Club – and two important Harvard speeches: the so-called “American Scholar” oration (1837) – which has become canonical as America's “intellectual declaration of independence”² – and the notorious “Divinity School Address” (1838), an implicit rejection of traditional Christianity that made Emerson a controversial figure among the New England elites. Emerson's two collections of essays (*Essays: First Series*, 1841; *Essays: Second Series*, 1844) further broaden and develop the transcendentalist vision: “Self-Reliance” can be said to be Emerson's most trenchant statement of his non-conformist concept of self-culture as a quest for spiritual presence; “The Poet” invokes the image of the artist as prophetic genius who, inspired by a transcendent presence beyond rational understanding, transforms the dazzling “poem” America into a national literature; “Experience” has a more meditative and skeptical voice that influenced the generation of Nietzsche and William James and continues to resonate with today's epistemological uncertainties.

¹ The documents referenced in this essay are collected in the “Transcendentalism” segment of *Key Concepts in American Cultural History* (2005). References to this anthology will be included parenthetically in the text (*KC* with document number and/or page number).

² In the opinion of Emerson's biographer Oliver Wendell Holmes. For a critique of the “nationalizing” of Emerson's oration, see Buell, 2003, 43-58.

Emerson's best essays are remarkable for their compositional complexity, turning the essayistic genre into a highly literary exercise in contrapuntal style whose evasion of clear moral stances or truth-claims contrasts sharply with much contemporary expository writing (Poirier, 1987). Among Emerson's later and less canonical books, three can be singled out as notable introductions to the range of transcendentalist thought: *Representative Men* (1850) is a meditation on the cultural centrality and historical "representativeness" of individual minds; *English Traits* (1856) combines Emerson's recollections of transatlantic travel with a critique of British culture and society; *The Conduct of Life* (1860) is a collection of his later essays whose best known piece ("Fate") deepens Emerson's self-reliance theme with regard to the social and natural constraints to individual freedom.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) has been portrayed as the nature buff of the Transcendental Club, an eccentric who – in contrast to Emerson's interests in high theory and speculative abstraction – likes to "saunter" through New England forests with an eye for the concreteness and real presence (rather than mere spiritual significance) of natural objects. This caricature is borne out by Thoreau's recent elevation to the status of a prescient pioneer in today's ecocritical campaign against anthropocentric nature concepts (see Buell, 1995).

Thoreau's most famous work, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), is a fictionalized account of his sojourn in a log cabin on a piece of Emerson's woodland, not far from Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau stayed there for about two years (between 1845 and 1847), in a state of imagined rather than real isolation (he entertained visitors, kept contact with his family, lectured in the Concord Lyceum, spent one night in jail for not paying his poll taxes, and interrupted his stay with a trip to the forests of Maine). His extensive journals indicate that the time spent at Walden combines periods of meditation, practical gardening and subsistence farming with regular literary pursuits, including the completion of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and the first version of *Walden*. Thoreau spent seven years revising this first draft, which indicates the extent to which *Walden* is a literary endeavor that embeds Thoreau's autobiographical recollections within a carefully constructed and highly symbolic pastoral space, based on the speculative and allegorical nature concepts characteristic of transcendentalist thought. Thoreau's detailed description of the Walden landscape turns the wilderness into a metaphor for moral harmony, serving him as a foil for a proto-Marxist critique of Western consumerism and materialism. As a remedy for the acute cultural alienation of modern civilization, the book suggests a program of

spiritual rejuvenation based on free-thinking individualism, active living (“to suck the marrow out of life,” *KC* doc 200), Spartan primitivism, economic agrarianism and, most importantly, empathetic immersion in wild nature.

Walden already develops the socioreligious leanings and countercultural attitude characteristic of the radical statements in Thoreau’s political writings. His passionate defense of John Brown’s abolitionist raid on Harper’s Ferry (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” [1859] refers to Brown as an “angel of light”), and his influential essay on “Civil Disobedience” (1849) are good examples. The latter speaks of the duty to resist the official government if its actions clash with our conscience; it was prompted by Thoreau’s disgust with Southern slavery and the War on Mexico, and became an important influence on twentieth-century ideas of peaceful resistance (e.g. Gandhi and Martin Luther King). In the 1850s, Thoreau became more interested in natural history, and an “amateur field biologist of considerable skill” (Buell 1995, 130), producing less allegorical (hence less Emersonian)³ nature writing that has only recently attracted critical interest. This lesser known side of Thoreau is represented in a variety of late essays (such as “Autumnal Tints” and “Wild Apples”), but also in his remarkable and substantial journals (sixteen of the twenty volumes of the 1906 edition of his works).⁴ Thoreau’s posthumous essay on “Walking” provides the most succinct formulation of his view of the untouched wilderness and the open road as important tonics for modern disorders.⁵

³ Allegorical or symbolic representations of nature mainly treat natural objects as symbols or signs for spiritual facts. The idea of a correspondence between natural phenomena and divine meanings goes back to the Christian Book-of-Nature topos, and underlies the work of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, which both Emerson and Thoreau knew well. Emerson is known as the great allegorizer of the natural landscape because he theorized this problem extensively (see his chapters on “language” in *Nature* and “Swedenborg” in *Representative Men*). But Thoreau’s *Walden* also bristles with moral interpretations of natural facts (see, for instance, Thoreau’s meditation on the thawing sandbanks, *KC* doc 200, p. 451). For the Swedenborgian idea of natural connection and symbolism, see Cranch’s “Correspondences” (*KC* doc 191) and Sampson Reed’s *Observations on the Growth of Mind* (*KC* doc 192).

⁴ For an excellent facsimile version of this edition in the public domain, see: <http://www.walden.org/Institute/thoreau/writings/Writings1906/Writings1906.htm>.

⁵ “Walking” also shows Thoreau’s complicity with the America-as-manifest-destiny reduction, as the excerpts in the *KC* section on expansionism show (doc 160). For Thoreau’s preoccupation with the wilderness, see one of the copious e-text versions of “Walking” (for instance, at Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1022>).

Emerson and Thoreau remain the most popular representatives of the transcendentalist movement – in fact the only mid-century intellectuals that twentieth-century critics deemed important enough to consider key members of the so-called “American Renaissance,”⁶ the nineteenth-century flowering of American literature associated with the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) and Herman Melville (1819-91) and the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-92). Emerson and Thoreau might well have been flattered by this honor, but they had comparatively little interest in narrative fiction (which in the mid-1800s was still considered of lower rank than poetry). They felt more closely connected to the vibrant network of now lesser known intellectuals and poets with whom they were in close collaboration, most of them emerging, like Emerson, from the New England Unitarian clergy. The most prominent among them were the socialist visionary and activist Orestes Brownson (1803-76), the educators Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) and Elizabeth Peabody (1804-94), the theologians and Unitarian ministers Theodore Parker (1810-60) and Frederic Henry Hedge (1805-90), the Fourierist reformers George (1802-80) and Sophia Ripley (1803-61), the politician-historian George Bancroft (1800-91), and the “minor” poets Jones Very (1813-80), Christopher Pearse Cranch (1813-92), and W.E. Channing (1818-1901). More important to Emerson was Margaret Fuller (1810-50), who collaborated with him on the transcendentalist journal *The Dial* (which she edited between 1840-2). Fuller contributed to the movement’s most influential aesthetic and social criticism. She was also considered an erudite conversationalist, and organized educational “conversation” classes for women on literary and philosophical topics. Today she is best known for her feminist treatise on *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845; KC doc 235) and a lyrical account of Midwest prairie life, *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (KC doc 201).

The movement reached its critical mass in the 1830s, when it centered around a number of discussion groups of shifting membership. In 1836, Emerson, Ripley, and Hedge founded the Transcendental Club, out of a frustration with what they considered the shallowness of the intellectual scene at Harvard. The club functioned as a forum for entertaining new ideas, in informal and open-ended discussion sessions that often revolved around a single topic.⁷ Between the mid-1830 to the 1840s, the

⁶ The title is derived from F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941).

⁷ For a glimpse of the driving interests behind the transcendentalist scene, see Richardson’s selection of topics for the club meetings: “On October 3, 1836, at Alcott’s in Boston the topic was ‘American Genius – the causes which hinder its growth, and give us no first rate productions.’ On October 18, 1836, at Brownson’s house in Boston

transcendentalists engaged in joint publication projects, translating and reprinting selections from contemporary literature and philosophy.⁸ They participated in the rich review culture hosted by Unitarian journals, beginning with *The Christian Examiner*, which had connections to the Harvard Divinity School and became, under the influence of Henry Hedge, a forum for liberal ideas and a mouthpiece for transcendentalist intellectuals. After the éclat over Emerson's "Divinity School Address" (1838) more or less closed the *Examiner* to transcendentalist thought, alternative publication organs were the Ohio-based *Western Messenger* (which took Emerson's side until it folded in 1841), and the *Boston Quarterly Review* (under Brownson's editorship until 1844). The short-lived *Dial* (edited by Fuller and Emerson 1840-4) lacked broad support in the New England scene, but published some of the most lasting transcendentalist writings.

By the 1850s, the Transcendental Club lost its cohesion and force, as its middle-aged members became settled in their ministries, or drifted towards different

it was 'Education of Humanity.' On May 29, 1836, at Ripley's in Boston it was 'What is the essence of Religion as distinct from morality?' In the summer of 1837 at Emerson's house it was 'Does the species advance beyond the individual?' On May 20, 1838, at Stetson's house in Medford it was 'Is Mysticism an element of Christianity?' In June of 1838 at Bartol's house in Boston it was 'On the character and genius of Goethe'; in December of 1838 at the same place it was 'Pantheism.' On May 13, 1840, at Emerson's it was on 'the Inspiration of the Prophet and Bard, the nature of Poetry, and the causes of sterility of poetic Inspiration in our Age and country.'" (Richardson 1995, 246). See also Joel Myerson's "Calendar of Transcendental Club Meetings" (1972).

⁸ For example, George Ripley's series *Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature* (1838-42) amounted to fourteen volumes of translated works from the French and German. The first two volumes reprinted Ripley's translations of "philosophical miscellanies" from the speculative philosophy and historiography of Victor Cousin, Benjamin Constant, and Theodore Simon Jouffroy. It was followed by translations of Schiller's and Goethe's poetry (vol. III, translated by John Sullivan Dwight with the assistance of Longfellow), Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* (vol. IV, translated by Margaret Fuller), Jouffroy's *Introduction to Ethics* (vols. V and VI, translated by William Ellery Channing), Wolfgang Menzel's 1836 treatise on *German Literature* (vols. VII-IX), Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette's 1828 theological romance *Theodore, or the Skeptic's Conversion* (vol. X and XI) and his treatise on *Human Life, Or Practical Ethics* (vols. XIII and XIV), and finally (vol. XIV) a selection of songs and ballads from German lyric poets (Uhland, Körner, Bürger, and others). Another important anthology was Hedge's *Prose Writers of Germany* (1848).

worlds and views.⁹ When Emerson published *Representative Men* (1850), he had acquired international standing and mingled with the Boston elite,¹⁰ becoming less interested in the countercultural attitude and religious debate of the 1830s. Meanwhile Thoreau was stacking his own library with the unsold four-fifths of his *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849).¹¹ His reputation as a central voice in the movement emerged only later in the century.

II. Locations, Periodizations

Strictly speaking, transcendentalists must be considered late romantics, although the generic categories of European literary history do not match well with American developments. Transcendentalists participated in the religious, political, and aesthetic discourse associated with European romanticism: Fuller translated Goethe, Emerson was fascinated by the poetry of Wordsworth and Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, and he developed a close relationship with Carlyle, whose own transcendentalism was influenced by Coleridge and the Jena romantics. The founding of the Transcendental Club was motivated by Henry Hedge's interest in Coleridge's philosophical sources (or more precisely, Hedge's exasperation with the lack of a similar interest at Harvard).

At the same time, the most productive phase of Emersonian transcendentalism (roughly between the 1830s and 1860s) covers the post-romantic period that cultural historians generally associate with the rise of positive science, biological evolutionism, and, in Europe, literary realism – Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* appeared in 1857, the same decade that saw the publication of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). For

⁹ Fuller emigrated to Italy but soon after drowned off the coast of New York; Ripley took over the regular book review department of Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*; Alcott became Superintendent of the Concord school system; Parker took an active part in the abolitionist movement; Bancroft was elected into political office; and Brownson converted to Catholicism and, renaming his journal *Brownson Quarterly Review*, became a religious and social activist.

¹⁰ In 1855 he became a member of the Saturday Club, an influential network that comprised Harvard professors and scientists and leading Boston publishers and intellectuals.

¹¹ As Thoreau put it with heroic stoicism, in a diary entry from October 28 1853: "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not well that the author should behold the fruits of his labor?" (*Works* XI: 459).

all of their fascination with European romantic idealism, New England intellectuals were open to the materialist, technological, and scientific obsessions of mid- to late-century Victorianism, and consequently combined their romantic models of culture as a *bildungsroman* of “spirit” with emerging theories on the social and material determinants of spiritual realities that revolved around notions of climatic influence, embodied sexuality and racial identity. Whitman, for example, liked to portray the body with electromagnetic metaphors and was a follower of the pseudo-science of phrenology, which assumed that mental propensities can be measured by feeling the shape of a person’s skull. Thoreau was fascinated by the idea that America’s spatial configuration would influence the future emergence of an American philosophy (big canyons, big ideas, as he implies in “Walking”). In the Saturday Club, Emerson conversed with a positivistic scientific community that theorized about the connections between dry climates and American “restiveness” and (like the Harvard geologist Louis Agassiz) speculated about the separate origin of black and white races. The lateness of the transcendentalist brand of romanticism can also be seen in the tendency towards what Leo Marx has called the rhetoric of the “technological sublime” (Marx 1964), the construction of American symbolic landscapes in terms that extend Wordsworthian visions of awe-inspiring natural sublimity to include the wonders of man-made technology.

Another factor complicating the periodization of American transcendentalism is the continued (if partial) cultural authority of pre-romantic discourse in mid-century Boston. Some of the most influential New England writers at the time, and especially the members of the so-called “genteel” generation of poets whom Emerson regularly met at the Saturday Club,¹² remained open to the neoclassical aesthetic sensibilities that preceded the European romantic generation, and the rhetorical views of literary production generic to the eighteenth-century textbooks that continued to be read and

¹² This circle includes the Fireside Poets Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), one of the best known nineteenth-century American writers, who had just retired from a Harvard professorship of modern languages; Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-94), poet, novelist and Harvard professor of anatomy; and James Russell Lowell (1819-91), poet, essayist, and critic, who in 1855 took over the Harvard professorship from which Longfellow had just retired, and in 1857 became founding editor of the important high-brow journal *Atlantic Monthly* (which published works by Emerson, and a number of Thoreau’s posthumous essays). The Fireside Poets (especially Longfellow) were perceived as America’s most representative intellectuals before they dropped out of the literary canon around 1900.

taught in American colleges. Also, given the cultural “lag” inherent in Boston’s distance from the more dynamic European centers of knowledge production, the US print market was defined by a simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. Mid-nineteenth-century transcendentalist writers accordingly faced a literary public that read two generations of European romantics (from Goethe to Keats) together with the great Victorians (from Carlyle to Dickens) and such neoclassical fixtures as Swift, Pope, and Dr. Johnson.

The transformations of authorship in the early Republic provided another source of inconsistency. Transcendentalist intellectuals felt the transatlantic effects of the late-eighteenth-century print market revolution – the widening of the readership, resulting from rising standards of education and literacy, and the accompanying extension of print capitalism as well as the commodification of the book – which led to a differentiation of literary culture that gradually enabled authors to support themselves in the field of *belles lettres*, and prompted an array of literary professions competing for status and recognition (journalists, magazine editors, religious or political pamphleteers, university professors, pedagogues, and commercial novelists). In New England, this process of differentiation proceeded in fits and starts, producing “sites” of heightened professionalism that co-existed with less dynamic areas dominated by older models of intellectual authority – such as the holistic concepts of the Jeffersonian “gentleman scholar” equally at home in the fields of politics, scientific inquiry, moral reasoning, aesthetic perception, and “polite” feeling. In its more vibrant locations, the New England intellectual field produced self-reliant “men of letters” (Emerson and Thoreau, and to a lesser extent, the younger Brownson and Bancroft), who considered themselves to be engaged in the serious business of visionary world-making and cultural healing, and like the so-called Victorian “sages” in England, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Matthew Arnold (1822-88), and John Ruskin (1819-1900), wanted to see their projects justified by peer recognition rather than economic success (cf. Leypoldt 2007). Like the modernist avant-garde, these men of letters defined themselves against what they considered the downside of modern publishing, the commercially more successful sensationalist, sentimental, and domestic works by popular novelists and intellectuals who (in Carlyle’s terminology) were engaged in mere “literature” as opposed to the prophetic powers of poetic “song.”

III. The Transcendental Turn

The Emersonian creed defies concise summary. Yet no single defining feature brings American transcendentalism as close to the previous generation of European romantics as its creative appropriation of the critical and speculative philosophies indicated in the movement's label. The late-eighteenth-century transcendental turn begins with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which can be summarized as the attempt to base the theories of knowledge (epistemology) and practical reason (morality and ethics) on principles internal to the human mind, severing them from their traditional foundations (in empirical reality, human sentiment, or utility). This implies that the most direct route to moral truth lies in the "pure" judgments of innate reason, purged of the fickle impulses of senses and feeling and the calculation of consequences.

Surely the romantic success story of Kantianism is overdetermined. But it is worth considering, for a moment, how the transcendentalist moves can be said to negotiate modern political and economic conditions – the social anxieties, for instance, that accompanied the displacement of hereditary governmental hierarchies by democratic change, as well as the economic instabilities of the growing capitalist markets. In earlier periods, culture and commerce were largely regarded as mutually reinforcing agents of progress – according to the French political theorist Montesquieu (1689-1755), commerce cures prejudices, produces human sympathy and brings Europeans closer together in a culture of gentle politeness.¹³ But with the economic acceleration towards the end of the century, "culture" was increasingly considered antithetical to commerce – it became a space of refuge *against* the economic cycles of consumption and commodity exhaustion. Hence the modern "reversal of the economic world"¹⁴ in the cultural domain, which assures that the highest prestige (the most symbolic capital) is conferred to cultural artifacts with the smallest commercial value (i.e. the avant-garde). It seems that as modern consumerism accelerates the commercial circulation of things, it also produces spaces of extraterritoriality where objects receive a sacred aura through being removed from the cycle of commodities and consumption.¹⁵ The reversal of the economic world turns cultural fields into sites of transcendence as

¹³ See *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), part 4, chap. 1. David Hume makes a similar point in "Of Refinement in the Arts" (1752).

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 114.

¹⁵ See Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006) chap. 3.

well as sites of social distinction. This makes the transcendentalist turn an effective (and highly influential) technology of cultural reauratization. Inasmuch as the Kantian notion of human moral autonomy describes human reason as a faculty *within* – inaccessible to sensual perception and conceptual knowledge – it makes moral deliberation extraterritorial to the market, withdrawing moral truths from the indignities of economic cycles of consumption.¹⁶

Within the context of eighteenth-century debates, the transcendental turn solved a number of conceptual problems that troubled the romantic reception of classic sensualist identity models. For empiricists like John Locke (1632-1704), personal identity had been hardly problematic: individuals were born as blank pages, then formed by experiential sense impressions. Personal identity simply emerged from whatever educational experience inscribed itself on an individual's mental receptors. But David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) shows how later empiricists complicated the sensualist paradigm. Hume famously described the individual as a "bundle" of "different perceptions" that "succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement." Hume implied, in other words, that we would all be schizophrenics (changing our identity with every new sense perception) if it were not for the faculty of memory helping us to impose the "fiction" of a coherent self. With another famous analogy, Hume compared the "soul" to the unstable conditions of democratic consensus: identity arises out of the uncoordinated circulation of sense impressions in the same way that "a republic or commonwealth" is tossed about in "incessant changes of its parts,"¹⁷ its people and laws determined by the vicissitudes of democratic process. To be tossed around by sensual influence is precisely how romantic intellectuals experienced the scandal of commodified culture, and the specters of political, economic and aesthetic mob rule. Kant participates in a discursive shift that addresses this scandal when he rejects the sensual model, arguing that the mind is not blank but hardwired with universal "categories" that assure a coherent sense of selfhood (by imposing a transcendental unity of apperception, in Kant's terminology, on the experiential data).

¹⁶ The same economy of the sacred holds for the concept of aesthetic autonomy, implied in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790): to define beauty as pure (non-conceptual) form is a way of reauratizing art by making it extraterritorial to moral or cognitive uses.

¹⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) 252, 261.

IV. Post-Kantian Intuitionism: Reason as an “Inner Light”

Kant’s transcendentalism provides new ways of solving the empiricist conundrum of personal identity, but it also leads the romantic vocabulary of inwardness to a distinctly unromantic punch line: it holds that because experience is based on mere appearances, the reality *behind* appearances (“the thing in itself”) cannot be known. We can investigate the mental filters (*a priori* categories) with which the human mind fashions the spatial, temporal, and causal parameters of experience and synthesizes them into ideas about coherent existence, such as “God,” “World,” or “Soul.” But we will have to surrender the hope that these ideas can ever be grounded in actual reality. One could simplify a complex reception history by saying that romantic thinkers admired Kant’s turn to interiority but resisted his radical skepticism. In the creative misreadings of romantic idealists, the concept of “pure reason” changes from a subjective mode of structuring experience to an innate organ for intuiting spiritual knowledge (analogous to the Quaker metaphor of an “inner light”). This change begins with the speculative idealism of the Schlegel brothers and Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, and it arrives in Boston with a distinctly religious spin through the mediation of (among others) James Marsh’s (1794-1842) 1829 edition of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* and two notable reviews in the *Christian Examiner*: Hedge’s explication of Coleridge’s philosophical sources (1833), and Brownson’s discussion of Victor Cousin’s Hegelian lectures on the history of philosophy (1836, doc 194). In the course of this conceptual reconfiguration, Kant’s dichotomy of pure reason vs. understanding (*Vernunft* vs. *Verstand*) was reinterpreted in terms of a neoplatonic natural theology that posited a mystical correspondence between material nature and the realm of spiritual existence.¹⁸ Transcendental Reason was considered an “organic” faculty through which sensitive artist types who immersed themselves in the primal beauties of natural environments could reach levels of introspection that revealed mystical (i.e. pre-conceptual) experiences of capital-N Nature (variously labeled “the Infinite,” “the Absolute,” “Oversoul,” “World Spirit,” etc.). The faculty of understanding was downgraded to the level of a “mechanical” perception and “cold” conceptual analysis of the world’s

¹⁸ See *KC* docs 188-92, 195-6, 199-201.

tangible surfaces, which made it the preferred mental faculty of dry dogmatists, empirical scientists, neoclassical poets, and aristocratic despots.¹⁹

V. Transcendentalist Models of Culture and Authenticity

The romantic revision of the Kantian *Critiques* provided intellectuals around 1800 with powerful rhetorical tools to cope with (or make sense of) the felt alienation caused by modern levels of social differentiation and literary commercialization. The post-Kantian vocabulary of transcendental intuition as an inner light cohered well with emerging historicist culture models based on what I like to call “dissociation of sensibility” narratives (following T.S. Eliot’s well-known phrase).²⁰ Such narratives conceptualize

¹⁹ Consider, for instance, Emerson’s own explanation of the transcendentalist turn, in a lecture of 1842: “It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Königsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man’s thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day *Transcendental*” (*Works* I: 339-40). Emerson’s account transforms Kant’s theory into an intuitionist model suited to romantic religiosity, while it transfers the epithet “skeptical” to Locke. Precisely because conservative New England Unitarians associated skeptical “infidelity” with Kant rather than Locke, the transcendentalists had an interest in presenting the transcendental turn in terms of a religious awakening. This intention seems even more obvious in Bancroft’s *History of the United States* (1837), whose second volume presents Kantian philosophy as a restatement of the Quaker doctrine of a divinely inspired “Inner Light.” By deriving “philosophy from the voice of the soul” (Boston: Little, 1841, 355), Bancroft argues, Kant resembles the Quaker leaders George Fox (1624-91), Robert Barclay (1648-90), and William Penn (1644-1718). Thus the term “transcendental” is adapted to the purposes of New England thinkers to legitimate their cultural work (in a similar way, perhaps, that today such epithets as “deconstructive” or “discursive” are often appropriated to theoretical uses only remotely connected to their Derridean and Foucauldian origins).

²⁰ In his essay on “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), Eliot diagnosed a “dissociation of sensibility” as a general tendency in Western culture after 1700 to think and feel in fits. His model draws from a long romantic tradition of presenting modernity as depriving cultures of their holistic middle.

the effects of social differentiation – the specialization and professionalism of social activities – in classic terms of alienation, imagined as the unhealthy dispersal of society’s experiential center into fragmented extremes of a sensualist hedonism, on the one hand, and a desiccated and detached rationalism, on the other. Modernist variants of the dissociation narratives express contemporary fears of social alienation at least partly in terms of economic critique – for instance, Van Wyck Brooks’ famous late-nineteenth-century claim that American culture has broken up into low-brow frontier capitalism and detached high-brow culture (or, in Santayana’s terminology, into the bland masculinity of the skyscraper versus the effeminate unreality of genteel poetry)²¹ resonates with a Marxist despair about the accelerated print market without which the division of culture into high and low domains would not be possible. Romantic narratives of dissociation, by contrast, tend to displace economic and social anxieties into specters of psychological deficiency, attributed, for instance, to a cultural lapse into the mechanical empiricism preceding the Kantian turn. In Schiller’s *Letters of Aesthetic Education* (1793), society has broken up into debilitated masses of cannibalistic sensuality (the “hordes” of the French Revolution) and a detached and despotic elite (absolute monarchs, dry rationalists). This dystopia corresponds with a dispersal of cultural energies into cold rationality (driven by the analytical understanding) and animalistic feeling (driven by the senses). In romantic theory, eighteenth-century concepts of psychological equilibrium are rephrased in terms of an early nineteenth-century psychology of interiority. While Schiller’s dissociation anxieties still tend to revolve around metaphors of lopsided bodily energies, the transcendentalist narratives understand the “mechanical” condition of alienation as the result of a disconnection from an interior presence.²²

The redefinition of alienation in these terms can be seen in the romantic preoccupation with the difference between “mechanical” and “organic” experience. According to A.W. Schlegel, form becomes mechanical if it follows from an “external force” [äußere Einwirkung] that suppresses an object’s “innate” quality. By contrast, “organic” form “unfolds itself from within” [bildet von innen heraus].²³ Another way

²¹ Van Wyck Brooks, “America’s Coming of Age” [1915], *Three Essays on America* (NY: Dutton, 1934) 13-112; 19.

²² On the romantic shift towards interiority – the emergence of a concept of the self as having inner depth – see Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) and Richard Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Theory* (NY: St. Martin’s, 2000).

²³ *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black (1815; London: Bohn, 1846) 340; *Vorlesungen über Dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, ed. G.V. Amoretti

of putting this point is to say that mechanical actions are accidental and arbitrary, while organic ones are “authentic,” since they follow from an inner necessity. New England transcendentalists adapt these terms by redescribing received tradition and canonical knowledge as arbitrary facts distracting individuals from the true learning that can only be acquired by tapping the rich resources deep within the individual’s mind. Emerson’s “American Scholar” oration phrases this transcendentalist chestnut in postcolonial terms: the “courtly Muses of Europe” may be beautiful enough, but they are “sepulchers of the past,” external to the lived experience of the New England present (*KC*, doc 198). Emerson also extends the exteriority/interiority distinction to political and philosophical systems, arguing that the “politics of monarchy” is related to the mechanical because “all hangs on the accidents of life and temper of a single person,” while in democracy “the power proceeds organically from the people and is responsible to them” (*Works* XII 303). If this view of the democratic process as an inward necessity (see also Bancroft, *KC* doc 202) seems almost to go without saying today, it is useful to recall that many leading nineteenth-century intellectuals in Europe arrived at the opposite conclusion. William Hazlitt and Carlyle, for instance, considered democratic rule as an arbitrary imposition of anarchy (the fickle opinions of mob rule) as opposed to the more authentic political action by a natural aristocracy of great men.²⁴

(Bonn: K. Schröder, 1923) II: 111-2. Schlegel makes this influential point in 1809, in his Vienna lectures, with reference to Shakespeare. His definition reappears almost verbatim in Coleridge’s influential lectures on Shakespeare of 1812-13 (1812, 495), which are published in 1836, in his *Literary Remains*. By that time this argument has become a commonplace of romantic criticism. It plays a prominent role in Carlyle’s 1829 *Edinburgh Review* essay on the “mechanic” state of modern society (*Works* [London: Chapman and Hall, 1899] XXVII: 56-82), which was well received by Boston transcendentalists.

²⁴ The “Great-Men Theory of History,” crucial to nineteenth-century culture models, first emerged when romantic idealists became fascinated by the idea that the “spirit of the age” or the “nation” may find its truest and most beautiful expression in the work or deeds of a few brilliant minds, who thus become “representative” of their age (common candidates were Napoleon and Shakespeare). Representationality plays a role in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* (1822-30), and, more relevant to the Transcendental Club, Victor Cousin’s *History of Modern Philosophy* (1828-9). The best known transcendentalist versions are Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840) and Emerson’s *Representative Men* (1850). After the demise of great-men theories, the idea of representationality survives in the guise of spatial metaphors of cultural depth. For instance, in 1853 – three years after Emerson’s *Representative Men* – Hippolyte Taine asserts that “the deeper [a poet] penetrates into his art, the more he has penetrated into

Emerson's rejection of British institutions does not amount to a rejection of English culture. The conceptualization of America as a distinct cultural whole (as a spatialized "other" to the culture of England) is a twentieth-century view that the founders of the American Studies movement after 1900 reprojected on Emerson's American Scholar oration.²⁵ Most of the time New England transcendentalists consider American history as part of the history of Anglo-Saxon civilization. They merely emplot this history in terms of a temporal dissociation narrative, marked by a cyclical swerve towards and away from authentic presence (understood as an "emanating" source of authenticity, which transcendentalists like to figure in tropes of depth and light).²⁶ The most influential transcendentalist cultural historiographies (for instance, Emerson's *English Traits*, or Bancroft's *History of the United States*) interpret the great cultural achievements of the Elizabethan Age as an age of authenticity, followed by a post-

the genius of his age and race" (*La Fontaine et ses fables*, Paris: L. Hachette, 1861, 343). A decade later, in his Paris lectures on the *Philosophy of Art* (1865-9), Taine offers a "spiritual geology" that locates representationality on an ascending scale of cultural penetration, where lesser authors represent mere fashions, better ones might capture the essence of a school or whole generation, and the greatest artists will embody a historical period or even the essence of a race (*Philosophie de l'Art* [Paris: Fayard, 1985]). To be sure, Taine uses a nineteenth-century concept of race that still includes both biological and cultural traits (hence he can speak of a contrast between the "French" and the "Anglo-Saxon" races).

²⁵ The emergence of the spatial concepts underlying today's cultural pluralism (or multiculturalism) is complex and open to critical debate (for a good introduction, see Hegeman, 1999). Most critics agree that nineteenth-century concepts of culture were used in the singular, and based on temporal frameworks that conceived the difference between modern and "primitive" cultures (such as the Greeks, or colonial natives) in terms of the difference between parents and children. The coexistence of different cultures (in the plural) is an invention of twentieth-century anthropological relativism (in America, the work of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict). What complicates this development, however, is the relatively early invention of spatial concepts of nationhood (for instance, in the work of Herder) that anticipate, to an extent, modern concepts of cultural plurality. At any rate, New England transcendentalism, despite the popularity of Herder's works, remained squarely within the temporal concepts of nationality that cohered with the open concepts of culture or civilization (in the singular) that characterized Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867) and Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871).

²⁶ "Emanation" is a term from Greek neoplatonism crucial to the transcendentalist nature religion, according to which a spiritual force radiates outward from a divine core within.

Elizabethan disconnection from spiritual presence that accounts for the shallowness (or darkness) of seventeenth and eighteenth-century rationalism, materialism, pragmatism, and empiricism. Transcendentalist intellectuals thus see themselves as participating in a contemporary effort to free the blocked spiritual channels of modern culture, reinstituting an organic holism that will not overcome but rejuvenate their Anglo-Saxon heritage, purging it of such “mechanical” symptoms as neoclassical verse, utilitarian thought, sensualist philosophy, and aristocratic politics. Emerson’s “American Scholar” oration diagnoses the division of US society into spiritually impoverished “practical men” and an inactive, detached and feminized clergy. His essay on “Art” (1836/41) bemoans a division of lived experience into impoverished sequences of work and play (“weary chores” alternating with “voluptuous reveries”) that a thoroughly transcendentalist culture should overcome (“Beauty must come back to the useful arts, and the distinction between the fine and the useful arts forgotten,” he says, *Works* II 367).²⁷ In 1836, Orestes Brownson phrases this demand in the socio-religious language of the early Transcendental Club, when he announces the millennial hope that soon America’s intellectual and practical social domains will be reunited, so that “our whole population will be philosophers, and all our philosophers will be practical men.”²⁸

VI. Transcendental Religiosity

The impact of neoplatonism and idealism on New England intellectuals must be viewed in the context of their deep religious preoccupations (most transcendentalists were, or had been at one point in their lives, practicing clergy). The gradual disintegration of Calvinism during the early Republic coincided with a shift towards liberalism, individualism, and inwardness in religious theory and practice. The so-called “Second Great Awakening” destabilized traditional church hierarchies with a burst of religious enthusiasm that “burned over” rural New England, while the theological centers in Yale, Harvard, and Princeton challenged the Calvinist dualism of an angry God and a fallen

²⁷ This appears to anticipate Matthew Arnold’s hugely influential thesis (in *Culture and Anarchy* of 1869) that the cultural deficits of English civilization – the division of social unity into lower class barbarism, middle class philistinism and upper class ignorance – result from a failure to balance the forces of Hebraism and Hellenism, the propensities for practical morality Arnold associated with Christianity, versus the tolerance of truth and free mental play he located in ancient Greece.

²⁸ Orestes Brownson, *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (1836), *The Transcendentalists*, ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1950) 122.

humanity. By the early 1800s, the Boston area was under the influence of the Unitarian belief in man's intrinsic divinity (his "Likeness to God"). Unitarianism was an upper-class creed whose proponents disapproved of the emotionalism of lower-class revivalisms and attempted to combine religion with the premises of eighteenth-century science. But it also had a Rousseauist impulse that encouraged its more liberal theologians (such as William Ellery Channing) to locate the divine in nature rather than in formal dogma, and spiritual revelation in imaginative insight rather than in theological speculation (*KC* doc 431). Most transcendentalist intellectuals of Emerson's generation began as liberal Unitarians attempting to convince their more conservative peers (*KC* doc 197) of Channing's teachings – until during the 1830s these attempts propelled them beyond Unitarianism altogether. The transcendentalists' dissent was mainly directed at the Unitarian belief in miracles and adherence to empiricist or sensualist science. They accused their teachers of being too half-hearted to dispense with Calvinist supernaturalism and too cold-hearted to appreciate the importance of intuitive religious feeling compared with intellectual rationalization. The transcendentalist positions mediate contemporary theology with the romantic vocabularies of inwardness, expressive individualism, and poetic inspiration. Emersonianism accords with Friedrich Schleiermacher's conceptualization of religion as a form of consciousness – being religious, Schleiermacher said in his treatise *On Religion* (1799), means to have a "sense and taste for the Infinite."²⁹

The transcendentalist argument with established religion draws from the fascination with which already an earlier generation of New England Unitarians had debated the "higher criticism" by eighteenth-century liberal theologians seeking to solve scriptural conundrums through a hermeneutics of Biblical authorship. Higher criticism begins to treat the Bible as a literary artifact whose divine referent is refracted by the perspectives of man-made historical sources. By the 1830s, even conservatives like the important Unitarian leader Andrews Norton (1786-1853), who is now mainly known as transcendentalism's raging opponent, accepted the thesis of historical authorship and the resulting importance of informed Biblical criticism to sort out "corrupt" and authentic passages. But they drew the line at questioning the authenticity of the recorded events. The impending theological rift became most apparent when Emerson argued, in his controversial Divinity School Address of 1838 (*KC* doc 446), that the historical Jesus

²⁹ "Wahre Religion ist Sinn und Geschmack für das Unendliche." *Über die Religion: Reden and die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (Berlin: Reimer, 1821) 66.

was a great poet-prophet who had seen the mysteries of soul (rather than the Son of God who had worked miracles). The implication was that Christ's teachings were to be understood, not as eternal truths, but as poetic renditions of divine Nature that should not be ossified into dogmatic beliefs and institutionalized rites but extended and injected with fresh visions by inspired poets of present-day America. The uproar over Emerson's address was fueled by his outspoken stand on an issue around which the theological difference between liberals and conservatives had crystallized: Two years earlier, Ripley had prompted the so-called "miracle controversy" by suggesting that regardless of whether accounts of Jesus' miraculous deeds are authentic or not, they cannot be regarded as proper touchstones of the dignity of the Christian faith.³⁰ Emerson went a step further when he dismissed Biblical accounts of miracles as false literalizations of spiritual symbolisms.

Emerson's argument can be related to Herder's *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782-3), which James Marsh translated in 1833. Herder proceeded from the eighteenth-century belief that primitive cultures conversed in a vivid metaphorical language, in contrast to the analytic forms of literal representation generic to modern ages. Thus Herder read the Old Testament as a remnant of an ancient Hebrew civilization that expressed its intuitive grasp of spiritual truths in poetic figures and mythical symbols, which cannot be mistaken for literal truths. Emerson makes a similar point when he portrays Jesus as a true prophet who "saw" the "mystery of the soul," but expressed what he saw in his own poetic terms: "He spoke of miracles" metaphorically because "he felt that man's life was a miracle." The Christian tradition has misread Jesus' living "idioms" and "figures" by viewing them through the mechanical faculty of the "understanding" rather than the poetic intuition of reason. As a result, "the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression" and becomes a "Monster."³¹

Emerson's assertion that "Christianity became a Mythus" (ibid) points toward the radical dismantling of Biblical truth-claims by David Friedrich Strauß, whose *Life of Jesus* of 1835 attributes most of the events narrated in the gospel to human myth. New England transcendentalists did not generally go quite that far (Theodore Parker's 1840 review of *Life of Jesus* for the *Christian Examiner* shows how difficult it was even for

³⁰ In a *Christian Examiner* review of the British Unitarian James Martineau in 1836.

³¹ *Works* I 129. The excerpt in KC doc 199 provides most of the argument. For the full text, see (for instance) <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>.

radical theologians to accept Strauß' conclusions). But the most influential statements of transcendentalist religiosity had less to do with the intricacies of these theological debates. What is now known as the Emersonian nature religion appeals to the sublime landscapes of the US as privileged sites for the gaining of personal self-reliance and national identity (*KC* doc 198, 201, 203).

Emerson's most famous (and perhaps most parodied) religious statement, in the first chapter of *Nature* (*KC* doc 196), shows well how transcendentalism combines the tropes of mystical experience with the rhetoric of the sublime. It describes how Emerson, as he crosses a "bare common" "at "twilight," is suddenly struck by a feeling of deep presence of nature that fills him with a mixture of terror and delight ("I am glad to the brink of fear")³² and a sense of merging with the divine ("the currents of the universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God"). The experiential flow of deep nature seems to tap directly into his transcendental intuitions, short-cutting his understanding in a way that makes him feel like, well, a "transparent eye-ball," a free-floating organ of vision through which pure perception circulates without filters of rational reflection. His identity seems to disappear ("all mean egotism vanishes"), along with his memories ("[t]he name of the nearest friends sounds then foreign or accidental"). This view of felt religiosity figures importantly in Emerson's dialectic concept of self-reliance: overcoming the received habits that sedimented tradition imposes from without is only a first step. It needs to be followed by a second step, when the "mean egotism" of personal identity is overcome through spiritual connection with a larger Self ("the currents of the universal being"), which can only be accessed by an inward turn. If this Emersonian creed has a nationalist inflection at all, it lies in the pastoralist assumption that America's stupendous natural resources provide the happiest setting for the act of spiritual connection ("In the woods we return to reason and faith," as Emerson puts it [*KC* 441]).

We can better understand the historical location of transcendentalist spirituality if we consider how it relates to the transformation of religious beliefs and practices that Charles Taylor has attributed to a modern process of subjectivization and individualization of religious experience that already begins with sixteenth-century

³² This quote is from the revised edition (*Works* I, 9). The simultaneity of terror and fear is a stock motif of mystic experience, and of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century concept of the sublime. See also Margaret Fuller's description of Niagara (*KC* doc 201).

varieties of denominationalism.³³ In contrast to earlier periods represented by medieval Catholicism, where church membership was largely “co-extensive with society,” Protestant forms of denominationalism connected worshippers “to a broader, more elusive ‘church’” in which membership was increasingly considered a matter of choice and authenticity, and characterized by a sense, in Taylor’s words, that the religion I join “must speak to me” (as opposed to older religious contexts in which people were more likely to “feel that they had to obey the command to abandon their own religious instincts, because these, being at variance with orthodoxy, must be heretical or at least inferior”).³⁴ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, New England Unitarians (and many of the new revivalist creeds originating in the Second Great Awakening)³⁵ were torn between the communitarian ideal of religious unity (however loosely defined) and an emergent belief that the core of religion has to do with “[d]eeply felt personal insight.” In the romantic view of religiosity around 1800, it was considered “more crucial” to explore the “powerful feeling of dependence on something greater” (the infinite, the absolute, the universal soul, etc.) than knowing the right theological “formula.”³⁶ Thus Emersonianism participates in a general romantic rejection of institutionalized forms of worship in favor of a more private search for technologies of introversion that enable the individual to succeed in a private quest for deep spiritual resources.

This romantic religious sensibility was an elite phenomenon, restricted mainly to well-educated groups of artists and intellectuals, while the larger part of the

³³ The term derives from latin “de nomina” (“of names”), which implies that doctrinal differences can be regarded as superficial to the core of Christian belief. Thus it is common to view Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches as denominations within a common Christian framework. In the United States, the policy of religious tolerance (guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution) led to a plurality of largely Protestant denominations (for instance, Baptists, Anabaptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Quakers, and many more).

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002) 93-4.

³⁵ See, for instance, Peter Williams’ *America’s Religions: Traditions and Cultures* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998) for an overview of the new religious movements (Mormonism, among many others) coming out of the culture of antebellum evangelicalism.

³⁶ Taylor, *Varieties* 93-4.

population followed traditional patterns of church attendance and affiliation (controversial as Emerson's Divinity School address was among the elites, it would have been incomprehensible to lower social circles). As Taylor points out, this changed in the twentieth century, when romantic identity models "penetrated in some general form deep into our culture," so that, after WW II, it became a mainstream assumption that "adhering to a spirituality that does not present itself as your path, the one that moves and inspires you," seems "absurd."³⁷ The present interest in Emersonian forms of spirituality thus accords with a post-1950s transition in Western religious sensibilities (especially in the US) that Robert Wuthnow has defined as a shift towards "a new spirituality of seeking," where relatively unaffiliated believers now search for "fleeting glimpses of the sacred" and "partial knowledge and practical wisdom," in marked contrast to a more traditional "spirituality of inhabiting sacred places" based on regular church membership and attendance, and a fairly coherent "metaphysic" of belief.³⁸ If therefore the transcendentalist rhetoric of the sublime seems so familiar today, it is partly because the Emersonian creed anticipates the radically privatized late twentieth-century forms of religiosity represented by the anti-clerical attitudes of "seeker churches" or the anti-establishment attitudes of popular forms of esotericism.³⁹ Moreover, the transcendentalist connection of spiritual self-reliance with a disciplined effort of introvertive self-culture inclines towards the utilitarian logic of the contemporary religious self-help manual, combining as it does questions of religious authenticity ("how do I best connect with my deep spiritual sources?") with pragmatic

³⁷ Taylor, *Varieties* 100. Taylor's analysis of the modern process of subjectivization is meant to suggest that the privatization of religiosity that seems natural today (though to a lesser extent except, perhaps, in countries such as Poland or Ireland) is not as self-evident as it seems. It has an intellectual, institutional, and economic history that is worth considering, especially in order to get a better understanding of the communitarian aspects of religious practice that run against the grain of today's liberal individualism (23-4). Whether or not one agrees with Taylor's view on religion, his historical analysis of the connection between romantic identity models and religious privatization is trenchant, and has been fleshed out, recently, in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2007).

³⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: Berkeley UP, 1998) 3.

³⁹ See Wade Clark Roof, and Nathalie Caron, "Shifting Boundaries: Religion and the United States: 1960s to the Present," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, ed. Christopher Bigley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 113-134.

queries about the uses of specific beliefs (“what can a religion do for me?”). Protestantism has always tended to link spiritual and material success in a symbolic relationship of mutual reinforcement (as in Max Weber’s reading of the Protestant work ethic).⁴⁰ But modern “seeker” religions have a way of foregrounding the use value of spiritual pursuits as technologies of self-perfection to the extent that the object of worship may become less important, as long as it works – in Peter Sloterdijk’s caricature, this entails a view of the divine as “an inner Texas” whose “deep energies” can be “mined” for “fuel” to power our “life-motors,” which means that religious practices are looked upon as tools to be tried out and discarded if they fail to produce suitable results.⁴¹ Emersonian transcendentalists would have rejected such a strong pragmatism,⁴² but Sloterdijk’s metaphor of the spiritual oil field captures well (even in parody) the transcendentalist conviction that spiritual connection and rejuvenation may effect both social progress and economic prosperity.

VII. Social Perfectionism, Transcendental Utopias

The idea that America might be a natural setting for social improvement and spiritual rejuvenation ties in with another important aspect of transcendentalist literary culture, its affinities to the “perfectionist” millennialism in contemporary American religious discourse. Based on the belief that the Second Coming of Christ (and hence the salvation of the world) would be preceded by a thousand-year period of earthly harmony and peace, millennialism stimulated American visions of a utopian Christian society in which religious inspiration encourages social and educational reform (*KC doc 205*) and

⁴⁰ Weber’s thesis is, roughly, that the Protestant work ethic is connected to the Calvinist belief that material success (the “fruits” of one’s labor) can be considered evidence of one’s personal salvation (a sign of “grace”).

⁴¹ My translation. Peter Sloterdijk, “Chancen im Ungeheuren: Notiz zum Gestaltwandel des Religiösen in der modernen Welt,” Vorwort zu William James, *Vielfalt religiöser Erfahrung* (Frankfurt 1997) 28ff.”

⁴² Both Sloterdijk’s and Taylor’s analyses of modern religion proceed from William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which exemplifies well how romantic spirituality is already half-way to twentieth-century pragmatism. As many commentators have pointed out, James seems to be undecided whether the religious impulse he analyses in such depth should be taken as evidence for a spiritual presence “out there” (which brings him close to Emerson’s romantic sublime) or whether religious insights are simply “good to believe,” regardless of whether or not they are true (which points towards postmodern notions of a religiosity without foundations).

economic and political advancement, as preconditions of the approaching rule of Christ on Earth.⁴³ Most transcendentalist intellectuals did not literally expect the Lord to return in person, but their conviction that spiritual regeneration requires a major reorganization of social structure carries a millennialist signature. This socioreligious approach to human perfectibility led them to propose communitarian visions of democratic progress (*KC doc 202*), and it may partly explain the openness with which the deeply religious transcendentalist visionaries treated, not only the Christian socialism of Henri de Saint-Simon, but also the radically secular utopias of European social materialists such as Frances Wright, Robert Owen (*KC doc 206*), and Charles Fourier. The influence of this tradition can be seen in Brownson's "The Laboring Classes" (*KC doc 204*), which proceeds from Carlyle's critique of British laissez faire capitalism to a proto-Marxist indictment of the property-holding American merchant class.

The more practical effects of social utopianism can be seen in the series of short-lived community experiments in the US modeled on Owenite and Fourierist examples. Owen was as notorious for his declared atheism as he was famous for the successful welfare programs with which his community project New Lanark in Great Britain had fought industrial pauperism (although his attempt to repeat his success in 1825 in New Harmony, Indiana, was a financial failure). Fourier developed an influential model of "phalanxes," autonomous communities in which precisely 1620 souls would live and work under natural conditions, independent of government interference, sustained by an economically self-sufficient arts-and-crafts agrarianism. Fourier's vision arrived in the US under the label "associationism," and its promise to overcome the alienating effects of industrial specialization inspired a number of Fourierist experiments, most of them of moderate scale and limited duration. The best known transcendentalist venture (and indeed apart from Alcott's "Fruitlands" debacle in 1844 virtually the only one) is the Brook Farm community founded by George Ripley in 1841, and continued by Albert Brisbane as a small-scale Fourierist phalanx until 1847 (*KC doc 207-9*). All leading transcendentalists were interested in the outcome of this project, but many doubted the use of communitarian attempts for spiritual regeneration. Thoreau's famous retreat at Walden Pond can be considered symbolic of the pervasive

⁴³ This literalistic approach to the Apocalyptic texts differs in kind from Augustine's reading of Christ's return as a spiritual development beyond history and the temporal realm.

belief among Emersonian intellectuals that the route to social utopia led through the solitary effort of individualist self-culture (*KC doc 200*).

VIII. Instructional Strategies and Classroom Issues

A. Key Concepts and Major Themes

1. Post-Romantic Identity (192, 194-6)

The idea of a self with inner depth; concept of authenticity as being true to one's inner self; discourse of individualism; transcendentalism as intuitionist "Inner Lightism;" rejection of eighteenth-century sensualism.

2. Nature Religion (188-92, 196, 199, 200-1)

Celebration of American Landscape as a site of spiritual presence; transformation of "book of nature" idea (natural objects as spiritual symbols).

3. Concept of the Genius (189-90, 198-9, 205)

Romantic concepts of inspiration (artist as medium for divinely inspired universal insights).

4. Cultural Alienation (194, 196, 198-9, 200-1, 204)

Anxieties of cultural dissociation, critiques of social differentiation and economic exploitation.

5. Democracy, Social Reform (200, 201-9, 273)

Defense of democracy at a time when it was still regarded as an unrealistic experiment; critique of capitalist division of labor; experiments with agrarian communes based on utopian ideals of social perfectionism and progress; abolitionist sympathies.

6. Romantic Spirituality (189-200)

Unitarian roots of the belief in the divinity of the individual; rejection of institutionalized religion and scriptural dogma; religion as a form of consciousness based on technologies of introversion that lead to mystic experiences of unity and presence.

7. American Sublime (188-9, 196, 200-1)

Terror and bliss of mystic experience; sublimity of the American wilderness.

8. America's Manifest Destiny (160, 198, 201-3)

America as a country of cultural youth (as against the ossified systems of Europe). The American "virgin land" as a site of future social utopia.

9. Ecocriticism (189, 200)

Early environmentalism; appreciation of nature on its own terms (not merely as a spiritual symbol).

10. Postcolonialism (196, 198, 201, 203, 273)

Anxieties of provinciality and belatedness; rejection of cultural dependence on European centers; ideal of America as a culture of apocalyptic novelty ("American Adam"); repression or displacement of transatlantic (transcultural) networks. Interior colonization (construction of native Americans as "savages").

11. Self-Reliance (198-9, 200, 203)

Rejection of religious and cultural traditions; disdain for ecclesiastic and governmental institutions; quest for ethico-political objectivity based on introspective discovery of a universal Self.

B. Comparison, Contrasts, Connections

We can begin exploring the cultural framework of American transcendentalism by looking at John Gast's famous allegory "American Progress" (*KC* doc 182). The painting figures US expansionism in providential terms that can be traced back to the *translatio imperii* idea and the Puritan and millennialist concepts collected in the sections "Early Conceptualizations of America" and "Providential Readings of American History." Gast's painting is an extended metaphor of America's role within the progress of civilization. The personification of American progress ("a beautiful and charming female [...] floating westward through the air," 410) represents imperial expansion as a process of cultural enlightenment. Gast plays upon the light and darkness imagery of Puritan tracts (see Michael Wrigglesworth, *KC* doc 65), but he omits generic Puritan references to a covenant with a monotheistic God and instead focuses on the idea of enlightenment as technical progress. The most significant symbols of technical progress are the locomotives moving from east to west and the telegraph cable that "American progress" carries along with her. In fact, Gast's painting appeared just after the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads had met at Utah, connecting the eastern and western coasts. As we can gather from Whitman's "Passage to India" of 1871 (*KC* doc 181), the US establishment of western communication and transport lines was considered symbolic of America's unifying role within an impending world brotherhood. Whitman's poem celebrates the completion of the "mighty railroad" as a part of a divine human "network" that brings nations closer together through the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) and the laying of the transatlantic cable (1866).⁴⁴ For Whitman, therefore, the westward movement offers a metaphorical "passage to India," towards a utopian spiritual democracy that is both a homecoming (India as the cradle of mankind) and historical progress (India as the endpoint of spiritual evolution). Earlier transcendentalist texts were rarely that explicit, but the providential framework looms large in George Bancroft's "On the Progress of Civilization" (1838, *KC* doc 202) and Emerson's "The Young American" (1844, *KC* doc 203). The latter text, a lecture held before the Mercantile Library Organization in Boston, shows how Emersonian nature religion locates itself within agrarian ideas about the providential role of America's

⁴⁴ For an earlier providential reading of telegraphic communication, see Emerson's poem "The Adirondacs," which recalls a hiking trip in 1858, where Emerson and some of his Boston acquaintances react with awe to newspaper reports about the completion of an earlier transatlantic cable (which did not work for long). Emerson describes the cable as "pulsating / With ductile fire" and views it as a "glad miracle" that will bring cultural improvement (*Works* 191).

massive territories that lend themselves well to expansionist ideologies. In Emerson's view, the virgin land is "the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture," so that "the gravity of nature" in America will "infuse itself into the code" of US "laws and institutions" (461).⁴⁵ The idea that American culture is a product of the sublime landscape, to be excavated by multitudes of small homesteaders, points towards the so-called Turner thesis (*KC docs 185-6*) about the democratizing influence of the frontier. It is visualized in Gast's image of farmers tilling the soil in a westward direction, while the Indian nomads are pushed into the dark plains along with wild beasts. Indeed nineteenth-century ethnography often deems the waning of "Indian civilization" as a natural consequence of the natives' "primitive" stage, which renders them incapable of bringing forth the land's intrinsic potential. Thus native Americans were allocated to the realm of the wilderness outside the pastoral "middle landscape" that, according to Leo Marx, defined the most influential nineteenth-century constructions of American place.⁴⁶ The ambivalence of this construction can be seen in Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1844, *KC doc 201*). On the one hand, like most romantic intellectuals, Fuller regrets the waning of Indian culture – which she deems a culture of beauty, authenticity, and dignity – in the face of ugly and destructive onslaught of a "Gothic" settler culture insensitive to the beauties of nature (454). On the other hand, Fuller also participates in the nineteenth-century concept of primitive culture as representing the night side of nature: in a famous passage, she recalls how the "wonder" of seeing Niagara inspired her with "an undefined dread" that made her constantly turn around expecting "naked savages stealing behind me with uplifted tomahawks." This experience made her comprehend, she said, the common primeval ground of Niagara's sublimity and the primeval savagery of the native cultures ("I realized the identity of the mood of nature in which these waters were poured down with such absorbing force, with that in which the Indian was shaped on the same soil" [453-4]).

⁴⁵ For similar views, see the e-text version of Thoreau's "Walking" (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1022>).

⁴⁶ Leo Marx, "Pastoralism in America," *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 36-69. The middle landscape is an imagined place equidistant from both corrupt cities and the inhospitable wilderness. It is perhaps most famously represented by Thoreau's description of Walden Pond.

C. Questions for Reading and Discussion

1. Read Emerson's "Two Rivers" (doc 190) and discuss how in his description natural phenomena become symbolic of spiritual presence (191). How does Emerson's poem relate to Cranch's "Correspondences"?
2. Compare Channing's "Likeness to God" (doc 193) with Emerson's "Divinity School Address" (doc 199) and Ripley's *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion* (doc 195). Discuss the shift from Unitarianism to the transcendentalist nature religion. Think about the function of the nature description at the beginning of the "Divinity School Address" (why begin a theological tract with a poetic invocation of natural beauty?).
3. Read Emerson's *Nature* (doc 196) and his "American Scholar" oration (doc 198) and discuss his view of modern social alienation (the "divided" state). What, according to Emerson, is America's function in overcoming alienation?
4. Compare Thoreau's individualist project of self-discovery in *Walden* (doc 200) with the communitarian aspects of social utopianism represented by the Brook Farm experiment (207-9).

D. Recommended Readings

1. Anthologies:

Perry Miller, ed. *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1950; Joel Myerson, ed. *Transcendentalism: A Reader*. NY: Oxford UP, 2000; Lawrence Buell, ed. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. NY: Modern Library, 2006. Miller's classic and wide ranging selection with exhaustive introductory headnotes is still very useful today. It reflects Miller's interest in theological issues. Myerson's anthology offers additional material; Buell's smaller and cheaper volume is an affordable compromise.

2. Biographies:

Lawrence Buell. *Emerson*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003. An up-to-date and very readable summary of Emerson's work and his significance, it contains a lucid overview of critical trends.

Robert D. Richardson. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire: a Biography*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995, and Richardson. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. Berkeley: U of

California P, 1988. Entertaining and accessible biographies that situate Emerson and Thoreau within the intellectual currents of their times.

3. Introductions:

Philip F. Gura. *American Transcendentalism: A History*. NY: Hill and Wang, 2007. Introductory history of the transcendentalist movement, which includes lesser known representatives.

Joel Myerson, ed. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. NY: Oxford UP, 2000; and William E. Cain, ed. *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*. NY: Oxford UP, 2000. Collections of concise introductory essays on Emerson's and Thoreau's lives and works intended for student audiences.

Joel Porte, and Sandra Morris, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, and Joel Myerson, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Collections of introductory essays for both students and scholars on the most important issues of Emerson's and Thoreau's lives and letters, with useful bibliographies for further study.

Lawrence Buell. *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989; and Dieter Schulz. *Amerikanischer Transzendentalismus: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller*. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1997. Concise and scholarly introductions to the movement's major figures and main stylistic traits.

4. Secondary Literature

Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. Foundational discussion of Thoreau's role in the romantic emergence of nature writing, and his significance to contemporary ecocriticism.

Leon Chai. *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987. Good introduction to the (French, German, and English) romantic ideas and writings that New England transcendentalists appropriated for their late romantic purposes.

Jan Stievermann. *Der Sündenfall der Nachahmung: Zum Problem der Mittelbarkeit im Werk Ralph Waldo Emersons*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007. Discusses Emerson's work

with regard to the romantic preoccupation with the idea of originality and mediation. Offers detailed analyses of the philosophical and theological contexts underlying Emerson's thought.

Michael Gilmore. *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985. Considers Emersonian transcendentalism with regard to the print market revolution.

Len Gougeon. *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Anti-Slavery, and Reform*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1990. Deals with the issue of transcendentalism's social engagement.

Patrick J. Keane. *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of All Our Day."* Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2005. A comparative study looking at the transatlantic emergence of Emersonian notions of inwardness and intuition.

Kris Fresonke. *West of Emerson: The Design of Manifest Destiny*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Discusses Emerson and Thoreau with regard to contemporary exploration narratives, situating New England transcendentalism within the rhetoric of manifest destiny.

IX. Works Cited

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- Wade Clark Roof, and Nathalie Caron, "Shifting Boundaries: Religion and the United States: 1960s to the Present," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, ed. Christopher Bigley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 113-134.
- Peter Sloterdijk, "Chancen im Ungeheuren: Notiz zum Gestaltwandel des Religiösen in der modernen Welt," Vorwort zu William James, *Vielfalt religiöser Erfahrung* (Frankfurt 1997).
- Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007).
- *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989).
- *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002).
- Peter Williams, *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998).
- Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: Berkeley UP, 1998).

Under these conditions, new in the history of man, races set apart for ã|ons of time have been suddenly thrust together, not always in fraternal embrace. The vast, unvisited interior of Africa has been not only explored but overrun by Europe. SUBSCRIBE TODAY!Â Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood By Stephanie L. Barczewski Oxford University Press, 2000. Read preview Overview. Literature and the Marketplace: Romantic Writers and Their Audiences in Great Britain and the United States By William G. Rowland Jr. The nineteenth century witnessed a shift away from small workshops run by independent and highly skilled craftsmen (artisans) and toward large mechanized factories employing increasing numbers of semi-skilled or unskilled laborers -- a process known as "deskilling." The Ford Motor Company, for example, was founded in 1903 with a few hundred employees.Â The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were periods of tremendous urban growth that radically changed the country. Between 1860 and 1910, the population of cities with 2,500 or more residents climbed from 6 million to 46 million.Â Prior waves of immigrants had come primarily from northern and western Europe â€“ England, Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia, etc. The New England Yankee has a distinct character, shaped in part by the history and geography of the region. New England was settled in the 1600s by Puritans from England. The Puritans were a religious group who objected to the rituals of the Church of England. The Puritans wanted to "purify" the religion, making it stricter and simpler. They were also very strict about the way people lived.Â Yankees were among the strongest supporters of independence. In the nineteenth century, many New Englanders said slavery did not fit with their beliefs and principles. New England Yankees led the movement to end slavery in America. "Ice Farming" in New England made Frederick Tudor a very rich man. Words. A religious, philosophical and literary movement, Transcendentalism arose in New England in the middle of the nineteenth century. Critics generally cite 1836 to 1846 as the years when the movement flourished, although its influence continued to be felt in later decades, with some works considered part of the movement not being published until the 1850s. Transcendentalism began as a religious concept rooted in the ideas of American democracy. When a group of Boston ministers, one...Â New England Transcendentalism The New England transcendentalists were an influential but decidedly heterogeneous group of young writers, critics, philosophers, theologians, and social reformers whose Read more. New England Transcendentalism [addendum]. NEW ENGLAND TRANSCENDENTALISM The New England transcendentalists were an influential but decidedly heterogeneous group of young writers, critics, philosophers, theologians, and social reformers whose activities centered in and around Concord, Massachusetts, from about 1836 to 1860. Source for information on New England Transcendentalism: Encyclopedia of Philosophy dictionary.Â The term transcendental was derived, Emerson claimed, from the use made of it by Kant, who had demonstrated that there was "a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions [sic] of the mind itself"; and that Kant had called them "Transcendental forms."

See what's new with book lending at the Internet Archive. England in the nineteenth century. Item Preview. [HTML/00000044-1.jpg](#). [HTML/00000051-1.jpg](#). [remove-circle](#). [Share or Embed This Item](#). [EMBED](#). No Cover Image. Transcendentalism in New England: A History. Octavius Brooks Frothingham. Introduction by Sydney E. Ahlstrom.Â The prophet of the new philosophy in England was Samuel Taylor Coleridge; in the early part of the present century, perhaps the most conspicuous figure in our literary world; the object of more admiration, the centre of more sympathy, the source of more intellectual life than any individual of his time; the criticism, the censure, the manifold animadversion he was made the mark. Turn of the century, in its broadest sense, refers to the transition from one century to another. The term is most often used to indicate a distinctive time period either before or after the beginning of a century or both before and after. Where no specific century is stated, the term usually refers to the most recent transition of centuries. In British English the phrase 'the turn of the nineteenth century' refers to the years immediately preceding and immediately following 1801, 'the turn of the