

EMERSON, THOREAU, AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

Walter Harding

Once again as one surveys the year's scholarship on Emerson, Thoreau, and Transcendentalism the most obvious fact is its quality. It is veritably a full time job to keep up with the flood of books, articles, and dissertations in this one comparatively narrow field. I would that all of it were good, but sadly--and perhaps inevitably--it is not. So much of it is obviously the result of the publish-or-perish syndrome; so much of it is simply a re-hash of what has already been said and often been said better. When there is so much that needs to be done in the field one can but lament the unstinted flow of trivia. When is someone going to produce a good solid history of the American Transcendentalist movement? The only book-length approach to the subject is Frothingham's volume that is now a century old and unsatisfactory even when it was first written. When are we going to have an authoritative account of Brook Farm? As it is now, pertinent information remains ungathered in a hundred places. When is someone going to update Arthur Christy's, pioneer study of Oriental influence on the Transcendentalists? When are we going to have a biography of Frank Sanborn who although a "minor" figure nonetheless had a significant contribution to make to Transcendentalism? When are we going to have an up-to-date biography of John Sullivan Dwight delineating, among other things, his massive contributions to American music? When are we going to have a definitive edition of the writings of Margaret Fuller which

have never been properly edited? Or of Jones Very? When is there going to be a comprehensive study of the impact of the Transcendentalists on American education? All these and so many other significant studies need to be made and yet we find so much time and space wasted on trivia.

But pardon the blast. Perhaps I should not have been so dyspeptic. All is by no means bad. There has been some decidedly good work done in the year 1973 and now that I have vented my spleen, I shall turn to some of that.

i. Books

The major book of the year, it seems to me, is Lawrence Buell's Literary Transcendentalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), perhaps the most significant volume in the field since Matthiessen's monumental American Renaissance of more than thirty years ago. Buell's is a solid book based obviously on a tremendously wide reading in and about the field, but it is much more than a rehash of things already said. It is a breath of fresh air in the scholarship of the period, a book that does not hesitate to demolish accepted theories and evaluations and propose new ones. Not all of Buell's ideas may win acceptance, but they should result in a much-needed re-thinking about the achievements of the Transcendentalists.

Another sturdy volume is Stanley Cavell's The Senses of Walden (New York: Viking, 1972). It is not a book for the simple-minded. It was only on the third reading that I began to appreciate what he had to say. But he asks the pertinent (and impertinent, as Thoreau would say) questions that get at the heart of Thoreau's masterpiece. In comparison, I must confess I find James McIntosh's Thoreau as

Romantic Naturalist (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) disappointing. It is described as "an attempt to read certain of Thoreau's writings by calling attention to his divided attitudes toward nature."

Robert Hudspeth in Ellery Channing (New York: Twayne) wisely makes no attempt to duplicate McGill's 1967 biography of Channing, but rather supplements it by concentrating on evaluating his works and discussing his relationships with his more famous friends. Channing is best described as a "transcendental brat," but Hudspeth, through his insights, makes us at least begin to understand what Emerson and Alcott saw of value in him.

There are two new volumes on Emerson's thought. Jeffrey L. Duncan, in The Power and Form of Emerson's Thought (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia) challenges Stephen Whicher's well-known thesis that Emerson in his later years turned his back on much of his earlier thinking. Duncan argues that Emerson's concept of polarity has led many to think him inconsistent when he is not. Although the book is a well-organized synthesis of Emerson's ideas (and valuable as such), I still find Whicher more convincing. Warren Staebler's Ralph Waldo Emerson in "The Great American Thinkers" series (New York: Twayne) is "an introduction to the character and thought" of Emerson. Unfortunately the book is so filled with errors of fact--confusing William Ellery Channing with William Henry Channing and identifying Samuel Sewall as the minister of the Second Unitarian Church of Boston, for example--that I cannot recommend it.

From the textual standpoint, the two most important books of the year are the new Emerson and Thoreau volumes in the CEAA series. Volume X of The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo

Emerson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) is edited by Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and covers 1847-1848. It has been produced with all the care and scrupulousness of the earlier volumes in the series. A large part of this volume is devoted to financial and engagement records and will be of little interest to a general reader, but will be enlightening to the biographer. Although I have admired the scholarship of this whole series as it has appeared volume after volume over the years, I must admit to a growing question in my mind--Is their meticulous endeavor to reproduce in type all the minute details of the manuscript really worth the effort and the cost? The researcher who needs this type of information is still going to insist upon going back to the manuscript itself to make certain and the general scholar and general reader is often annoyed or even turned off by the two pages of symbols he must memorize if he is going to comprehend what is going on. A clear text edition with all the apparatus and explanations of scholarly minutia relegated to the appendices--or even better to a separate microfiche printing[^] seems not only more practical from the standpoint of cost to both the publisher and the reader, but also far more appealing to all but the extreme specialist.

The Thoreau volume, Reform Papers, edited by Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press) gives us for the first time accurate texts of many of Thoreau's political essays and as an added bonus the first printing of "Reform and the Reformers," an essay he left in rough draft. The clear text with all apparatus confined to the appendices serves to enforce my caveats against the Emerson edition, though even with it I wish the more pedantic appendices were relegated to a microfiche printing. The P. J.

Conkright typography and design make this edition the only one in the CEA series that is an aesthetic triumph. But here too I have a caveat. I seriously question the choice of copy text in at least two cases: "Herald of Freedom" and "Resistance to Civil Government." I know I am not alone in believing that there are better copy-texts available for each of these than the one used, though I do not have the space to present the arguments here. (In fairness to Mr. Glick I must point out that he very honestly summarizes my arguments against his choice.)

Coleridge's American Disciples: The Selected Correspondence of James Marsh, edited by John J. Duffy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press) fills an important gap in the early history of Transcendentalism for it for the first time makes available to us primary material on the man who through his editing of Coleridge's Aids to Reflection became an intellectual catalyst for Emerson and his friends. It includes correspondence with Coleridge himself, George Ripley, and Charles Follen among others. Brian M. Barbour, in American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press) provides a helpful volume in gathering together seventeen pertinent essays on the movement by critics as varied as Perry Miller, H. C. Goddard, Yvor Winters and Tony Tanner. Kenneth Walter Cameron, in Transcendental Log (Hartford: Transcendental Books), offers another of his invaluable omnibuses of facsimiles of forgotten newspaper and magazine articles of the nineteenth century on the Transcendentalists, a goldmine of research material for the advanced scholar.

Two bibliographical items should be noted. Richard Ludwig, in Literary History of the United States: Bibliography: Supplement II

(New York: Macmillan, 1972) updates his earlier bibliographies on Transcendentalism and the major figures. L. D. Geller, in Between Concord and Plymouth: The Transcendentalists and the Watsons (Concord: Thoreau Lyceum) catalogs the little known Transcendentalist manuscript treasures of the Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Chapters that pertain to our subject in several books should be mentioned. In the early portions of The Man of Letters in New England and the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), Lewis P. Simpson discusses some of the early phases in the development of Transcendentalism, a work which I hope he will eventually expand to a full book in itself. So rare is it to find a scholarly book that is beautifully written that I must particularly commend Mr. Simpson on this point. In The Subversive Vision (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press), Michael J. Hoffman in part discusses Emerson's Nature and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" as documents subversive to the "official faith" of the establishment, and has some pertinent things to say. Todd M. Lieber, in Endless Experiments (Columbus: Ohio State University Press) devotes chapters to discussing dualism in the works of Emerson and Thoreau, but I find little new there. Charles Anderson, in "Thoreau and The Dial: The Apprentice Years" in James L. Woodress, Essays Mostly on Periodical Publishing in America: A Collection in Honor of Clarence Gohdes (Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 92-120), extends his study of Thoreau as a literary artist to these early works. Raymond Gozzi's 1957 New York University doctoral dissertation, Tropes and Figures: A Psychological Study of David Henry Thoreau has had a significant influence on recent biographical studies of Thoreau, but it has not been widely read because it has been available only on microfilm.

Now his two most important chapters, "Some Aspects of Thoreau's Personality" and "Mother-Nature" are made available in Walter Harding's Henry David Thoreau: A Profile (New York: Hill & Wang, pp. 150-172, 172-187) as is James Armstrong's perceptive new study "Thoreau as Philosopher of Love" (pp. 222-243).

ii. Periodicals

A preliminary MLA checklist of periodical articles published in the field runs to more than fifty items and yet is by no means complete. It is obviously impossible to discuss each one of them. I have made a concerted effort to read each (though four or five proved too elusive for me to obtain) and have tried to select the more significant ones to comment on.

So far as Emerson is concerned, Sheldon Liebman, in "The Origins of Emerson's Early Poetics" (AL 45: 23-33), emphasizes the influence the Scottish "Common Sense Critics" had on Emerson's poetic theory before he turned to the writings of Coleridge. Despite its title, Leonard Neufeldt's "Emerson and the Civil War" (JEGP 71, 1972, 502-13) deals much more broadly with the question of Emerson's attitudes towards slavery and abolition as well as towards the war itself, tracing his changing attitudes over the years. One should also note Mario D'Avanzo's "Seeing and Hearing in 'Each and All,'" (ESQ 19: 231-35). Charles W. Mignon, in "Emerson to Chapman: Four Letters About Publishing" (ESQ 19: 224-30), gives us the text of four hitherto unpublished letters concerned with the English publication of his Essays: Second Series and Poems. William Gavin, in comparing "Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev and Emerson" (RusR 32: 119-30), asserts that both the

Russian and the American, who were contemporaries, were "mystic pragmatists" who influenced their respective countrymen to take new stances "on the relationship of man to the cosmos." Leonard J. Deutsch, in "Ralph Waldo Ellison and Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Shared Moral Vision" (CLAJ 16: 159-178, 1972), points out that despite an early aversion towards the man he was named for, Ellison in Invisible Man evinces a deep philosophical indebtedness to him.

The entire issue of ESQ 19, #3, is devoted to a "Thoreau Symposium" edited by Joseph R. McElrath, which contains seven articles chiefly by well-known scholars in the field. Among the most interesting are Lewis Leary's "'Now I adventured': 1851 as a Watershed Year in Thoreau's Career" (pp. 141-48); Wendell Glick's "Go Tell It on the Mountain: Thoreau's Vocation as a Writer" (pp. 161-69); Robert C. Albrecht's "Conflict and Resolution: 'Slavery in Massachusetts'" (pp. 179-88), a thoughtful analysis of one of Thoreau's most neglected essays; and Paul O. Williams' "Thoreau's Growth as a Transcendental Poet" (pp. 189-98). Michael West's erudite "Charles Kraitsir's Influence upon Thoreau's Theory of Language" in the following issue of ESQ (19: 262-74) documents a little-known impact on Thoreau by one of Elizabeth Peabody's proteges.

Despite its title, Richard Hocks' "Thoreau, Coleridge, and Barfield" (CR 17: 175-98) is primarily an analysis of the structure of Walden--and a very good one at that. I found Gordon E. Bigelow's "Thoreau's Melting Sandbank: Birth of a Symbol" (IJSym 2:iii, 1971, 7-13) the most detailed analysis yet of the symbolism in Thoreau's much-discussed sandbank passage in Walden. Gordon Boudreau, in "H. D. Thoreau, William Gilpin, and the Metaphysical Ground of the

Picturesque" (AL 45: 357-69), expands somewhat on the well-known Templeman article on the subject of some forty years ago. James Devlin contrasts "Henry Thoreau and Gilbert White: Concord and Selborne" (Xavier Univ. Stud. 2: 1972, 6-15) and concludes that White was perhaps the more scientific naturalist of the two. William Nichols (Individualism and Autobiographical Art: Frederick Douglass and Henry Thoreau, CLAJ 16: 1972, 145-158), in comparing Douglass's My Bondage (1855) and Thoreau's Walden (1854), asserts that the two volumes shed a good deal of light and understanding on each other because of the varying backgrounds and differing viewpoints of the authors. After examining Heinz Eulau's oft-quoted condemnation of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" Robert Saalback, in "Thoreau and Civil Disobedience" (BSUF 13: iv, 18-24) concludes that Thoreau's theories are still valid and proved useful in the protests against the war in Vietnam.

Thoreau scholars should at least be aware of the publication of three different journals, the Concord Saunterer, the Thoreau Journal Quarterly, and the Thoreau Society Bulletin, published respectively by the Thoreau Lyceum, the Thoreau Fellowship, and the Thoreau Society, even though a great deal of their material is aimed at the enthusiast rather than a scholar. The Bulletin publishes regularly an "Additions to the Thoreau Bibliography" which not only lists all new material, both primary and secondary, as it appears, but also fills in gaps in earlier bibliographies. Both it and the Saunterer frequently publish significant primary and documentary material. The Quarterly is generally devoted to poetry and appreciative essays on Thoreau. In the Quarterlies for 1973, attention should be particularly called to Joel Myerson's

"Thoreau and the Dial" (January, pp. 4-7) which cites a number of forgotten newspaper comments on Thoreau's early writings; Sidney Poger's "Yeats as Azad: A Possible Source in Thoreau" (July, pp. 13-15); Laraine Ferguson's "Was Thoreau Re-reading Wordsworth in 1851?" (July, pp. 20-23); Bette S. Weidman's "Thoreau and Indians" (October, pp. 4-10); Elliott S. Allison's "Thoreau of Monadnock" (October, pp. 1521); and Edward C. Peple, Jr.'s "Thoreau and Donatello" (October, pp. 22-25) on Hawthorne's character. In the Saunterer, note in particular Thomas Blanding's "Daniel Ricketson's Reminiscences of Thoreau" (March, pp. 7-11); Blanding's "Of New Bedford 'Feelosofers', and Concord Real Estate" (June, pp. 2-8), which includes an unpublished Thoreau letter; and Jeanne M. Zimmer's "A History of Thoreau's Hut and Hut Site" (December, Supplement). In the Bulletins worth mentioning are B. F. Skinner's "Walden (One) and Walden Two" (Winter, pp. 1-2); Roger Cummins' "Thoreau and Isaac Newton Goodhue" (Spring, 2-3), a forgotten reminiscence; Robert Sattelmeyer's "David A. Wasson's Elegy on Thoreau" (Spring, pp. 3-4); Victor Friesen's "Alexander Henry and Thoreau's Climb of Mount Katahdin" (Spring, pp. 5-6); and Mary Gail Fenn's "Thoreau's Rivers" (Thoreau Society Booklet 27).

As for the lesser Transcendentalists, the most significant article is Charles Strickland's "A Transcendentalist Father: the Child-Rearing Practices of Bronson Alcott" (Hist. of Childhood Quart. 1: 4-61), a very moving account of Alcott's role as a parent. The article is followed by commentary by three child-psychologists: Henry Ebel, J. Louise Despert, and John Walzer. George Carter, in "Theodore Parker and John P. Hale" (Dartmouth

College Lib. Bul. 13: 1972, 13-33), publishes for the first time the text of 41 letters of Parker and his wife to the Abolitionist politician John P. Hale, many on anti-slavery topics. Margaret V. Allen, in "The Political and Social Criticism of Margaret Fuller" (SAO 72: 560-73) traces her development "from political innocent to dedicated activist." Miss Allen, in "'This Impassioned Yankee': Margaret Fuller's Writing Revisited" (Southwest Rev. 58: 162-71) laments the long neglect of Fuller's work and predicts a well-deserved recognition awaits the publication of a scholarly edition of her writings.

Special recognition must be given to that indefatigable researcher of Transcendental archives Joel Myerson. He has in this one year contributed five noteworthy articles: "An Annotated List of Contributions to the Boston Dial" (SB 26: 133-166), which corrects and supplements greatly George W. Cooke's long outdated list; "More Apropos of John Thoreau" (AL 45: 104-16), which gives us new details of Thoreau's brother's tragic death; "Transcendentalism and Unitarianism in 1840" (CLAJ 16: 366-68) centered on a letter of Christopher Cranch complaining about his lack of success in finding a Unitarian pastorate because he has become branded a Transcendentalist; a delightful and enlightening account of home life at the Emersons--"Margaret Fuller's 1842 Journal: At Concord with the Emerson's" (HLB 21: 320-40); as well as the TJO article listed above. I do hope, incidentally, that Mr. Myerson's doctoral dissertation on the Dial soon gets into print. It is a tool we cannot spare.

I must also add a word of commendation for Kenneth Walter Cameron. I miss greatly his hand in ESO, which has turned into

quite a different journal since it transferred to the West Coast, but thankfully he still continues to edit ATQ which in its 1973 issues contain the usual "god's plenty" of miscellaneous materials on Transcendentalism; among the more significant are Arthur Biddle's "Bronson and Chatfield Alcott in Virginia--New Evidence" (17: 3-9); Vivian Hopkins' "Margaret Fuller: Pioneer Women's Liberationist" (18: 29-35); Gay Wilson Allen's "Emerson and the Unconscious" (19: 26-30); Madeleine B. Stern's invaluable "Elizabeth Peabody's Foreign Library (1840)" (20: 5-12); and Cameron's own "Some Alcott Conversations in 1863" (17: 3-9), "Emerson, Transcendentalism, and Literary Notes in the Stearns Wheeler Papers" (20: 69-98), and his continuing "Literary News in American Renaissance Newspapers" (20: 13-36; 195-97).

iii. Dissertations

The flow of doctoral dissertations on our subject continues unabated. Their quality this year, I am happy to say, seems appreciably higher. Fewer seem to be pro forma exercises in graduate research. Several seem to me to make genuine contributions to our knowledge of the field. Unfortunately in most cases the complete dissertation was not available to me and I have had to base my judgments on the abstracts. It is thus entirely possible that I am inadvertently unfair in denigrating or dismissing some of them.

On Emerson, I find Sharon Stuart Cobbs Olds' "Emerson's Innovations in Prosody: Poems (1847)" (DAI 34: 330A, 1972, Columbia University) most rewarding. She finds an interesting correlation between subject matter and form in his poems. Poems

conventional in subject matter tend to be conventional and regular in form; those unorthodox in subject matter tend to be unconventional in form. In this latter group are included most of Emerson's best poems and the ones through which he makes his special contributions to American prosody. By analyzing Emerson's use of certain word clusters--beauty, culture, fate, genius, greatness-heroism, nature, and soul-spirit--Mary Alice Ithrig, in "Emerson's Transcendental Vocabulary: An Expository Analysis and Concordance to Seven Word-clusters in His Prose" (DAI 34: 2565A, University of North Carolina), concludes that "the period of 1836-1844 did indeed represent Emerson's prime and transcendental peak."

William Michael Ross, in "The Shifting Viewpoint: A Key to the Thought and Art of Emerson's Essays" (DAI 34: 285A, Fordham University) asserts that Emerson regularly shifts his viewpoint between Reason and Understanding in his essays and realization of this fact is vital to an appreciation of the artistry of his essays. Jerome Francis Keating, in "Personal Identity in Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Alfred North Whitehead" (DAI 33: 5682A, 1972, Syracuse University) not surprisingly concludes that Emerson stands mid-way between Edwards' belief that God controls man's existence and Whitehead's belief that man determines his own fate. In considering "Form and Process in American Literature" (DAI 34: 1291A, Rice University), Carolyn Jane Porter, in a chapter on Emerson asserts that his journals reveal "A persistent conflict between the urge to reject social, intellectual and religious forms in the service of private growth and personal freedom, and the recognition that such growth and freedom presuppose a formlessness inimical to human needs." There are three studies of

Emerson's influence. George Sebouhian, in "The Emersonian Idealism of Henry James" (DAI 34: 739A, Ohio State University) concludes that "James is a part of the idealist tradition that informs the work of Emerson and . . . James dramatizes that tradition in his work." Maurice Yaofu Lin, in "Children of Adam: Ginsburg, Ferlinghetti and Snyder in the Emerson-Whitman Tradition" (DAI 34: 781A, University of Minnesota), endorses the frequently observed parallel between the Transcendental revolt of the 19th century and the "Beat" revolt of the 1950's. And Richard Welke Cass, in "The Implications of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Statements on Knowing for Revising Curriculum Concepts" (DAI 33: 3251A, University of Wisconsin: Milwaukee, Education, 1972) offers suggestions for modern educational reform based on Emerson's philosophy.

The most interesting of the new dissertations on Thoreau is Annette Matthews Woodlief's "Style and Rhetoric in the Sentences of Walden" (DAI 33: 4372A-73A, University of North Carolina, 1972) which makes a very enlightening statistical study of Thoreau's use of grammatical form in the first thousand sentences of Walden. Brian Christopher Bond, in "Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers: A Generic Study" (DAI 33: 3574A, Bowling Green State University, 1972) investigates the influence of the classical epic and the pastoral tradition on Thoreau's first book and concludes that Thoreau was not attempting to carry on specific literary traditions but rather was adapting their techniques to his own purposes. In "Thoreau's Development as an Observer and Critic of American Society" (DAI 34: 282A-83A, Miami University, 1972), Douglas Arthur Noverr discusses the tensions created when Thoreau in his writings attempted to fulfill his obligations both to

Transcendental idealism and practical society. Rhoda B. Nathan, in "The Soul at White Heat: Metaphysical Tradition in Thoreau's Journal and Dickinson's Poetry" (DAI 33: 6925A, City University of New York) wisely concludes that while there is hard evidence that Thoreau was impressed by the metaphysical poets, his work was not an imitation of theirs but rather a "resurgence of an equivalent ironic temperament." Robert Glen Deamer, in a chapter on Thoreau in "The American Dream: A Study in the Beliefs, Possibilities, and Problems in the American Dream as Dramatized in the Lives and Writings of Major American Authors" (DAI 33: 5717A-18A, University of New Mexico, 1972), comes to the rather interesting conclusion that "the ideal frontiersman which [Thoreau] dramatized in his life and writings was actually--and most ironically--embodied in the Old World social ideal of the English gentleman".

Dissertations on the more general topic of Transcendentalism include Elizabeth Ann Meese's "Transcendental Vision: A History of the Doctrine of Correspondence and Its Role in American Transcendentalism" (DAI 33: 6319A-20A, Wayne State University, 1972), which surprisingly chooses Thoreau rather than Emerson as its chief example for discussion, and Robert Emerson Ireland's "The Concept of Providence in the Thought of William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Orestes A. Brownson: A Study in Mid-Nineteenth Century American Intellectual History" (DAI 34: 703A, University of Maine, 1972) which finds "a distinct transformation" of the meaning of providence from 1830 to 1860, from the "Puritan concept of a providence which controlled the thoughts and actions of man . . . to a view which stressed the active, conscious agency of man." Attention is particularly

focused on the "Higher Law" issue. Charles T. Summerlin, in "The Possible Oracle: Three Transcendentalist Poets" (DAI 34: 3435A-36A, Yale University), suggests that Emerson saw the poet "as a dissolver of the empirical distinctions which imprison man's imagination and a perceiver of the infinite soul of the universe," while for Thoreau "Poetizing involved absorption into nature rather than dissolution of it," and Jones Very "believed that the conscious ability of man to perceive and do his duty was the key to" poetry.

iv. Conclusion

I complete this survey with feelings of both frustration and humility. So voluminous is the scholarly literature in our field today that it is impossible to examine the better works with the depth they deserve or even to mention some of the lesser but nonetheless worthwhile pieces. I have, for space's sake, arbitrarily ruled out virtually all reprints of either articles or books and have likewise eliminated effusions and popularizations even though they serve their purpose. I am even more aware than the reader is that judgments I have made herein are inevitably deeply colored by my own predilections and prejudices. For that fact I beg the forgiveness and understanding of both authors and readers.