Literary Transcendentalism

Buell, Lawrence

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to survey the literary art and criticism of the American Transcendentalists and to contribute in the process to a better understanding of the relationship between style and vision in all nonfictional literature.

Most of what the Transcendentalists wrote falls into this category of nonfictional literature, presenting a mixture of piety, poetry, and sententiousness that is neither art nor argument but a compound of both. Their criticism shows a similar ambivalence. Largely for this reason, their aesthetic is still imperfectly understood, even though much scholarship has been devoted to various aspects of the movement. It is relatively easy, for example, to picture Emerson as a romanticized descendant of Jonathan Edwards or as a harbinger of America's literary independence; it is harder to explain how his combination of the roles of clergyman and poet distinguishes his work in its own right, because he did not realize either role in a profound or consistent way. Compared to the great European romantics, Emerson seems provincial and inhibited; compared to Edwards, he seems dilettantish, a gourmet of spiritual ideas. The Transcendentalist movement as a whole, by the same token, has appealed to scholars more as a symptom of New England's intellectual flowering—or decay—than for its intrinsic merits as a body of literature or as a system of thought.

From one point of view this consensus is justified: undoubtedly Emerson and his circle are more important for historical
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reasons than for the quality of their achievements in art, philosophy, and theology. As is often pointed out, however, their stature increases when one considers them as "thinkers" or "prophets" rather than in terms of a particular intellectual discipline. One then begins to get caught up in the excitement of their vision; their very lack of discipline begins to seem a source of greatness; and it is the critics of their impure art or shallow theology who begin to seem parochial. Even those readers who are fundamentally unsympathetic to Transcendentalist idealism often come to respect the suggestiveness, rhetorical power, and fineness of discernment in works like Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Theodore Parker's Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity. Neither is fully satisfying as an exposition of theology or as a work of art, yet one feels that such classifications do not matter, that the two discourses are in any case impressive literary-religious performances.

Criticism needs to find better ways of measuring the qualities of such works, in order to account for the impression of excellence they convey and to explain their impact upon large numbers of readers both then and now. This book attempts such an inquiry. Through a combination of intellectual history, critical explication, and genre study, it undertakes to outline the nature and evolution of the Transcendentalists' characteristic literary aims and approaches, and the ways in which these express the authors' underlying principles or vision.

So far the word "Transcendentalism" has been used in a very general sense; to avoid confusion, it should be defined more precisely, since the term is notoriously vague.1 "Vagueness" was in-

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deed what "Transcendentalism" chiefly connoted in its first popular usage in New England. As Le Corbusier has remarked of the term "abstract" in art criticism, avant-garde movements always have ridiculous names, because they are baptized by their enemies; Transcendentalism was no exception. The label was first applied in disparagement, to suggest outlandishness. The implication of an organized school of thought with fixed doctrines was misleading: actually, the Transcendentalists had no specific program or common cause, and their beliefs were often in a state of flux. Some therefore refused to accept the rubric, and those who did differed in their interpretations of it. James Freeman Clarke called himself a Transcendentalist simply because he did "not believe that man's senses tell him all he knows." 2 For George Ripley the term meant, more specifically, a belief in "the supremacy of mind over matter" (Tr, p. 255). Christopher Cranch, however, considered Transcendentalism as nothing more than "that living and always new spirit of truth, which is ever going forth on its conquests into the world" (Tr, p. 301). Jonathan Saxton claimed that "every man is a transcendentalist"; 3 Emerson denied that there was such a thing as a "pure Transcendentalist" (W, I, 338). Small wonder, then, that at one time or another studies of every major Transcendentalist have tried to disassociate their hero from the charge of Transcendentalism.4

Nevertheless, the term does have an accepted core of meaning, which can be stated briefly and I think uncontroversially. Further ramifications are possible, and some will be introduced below, but for the moment a short working definition should suffice.

2 John Wesley Thomas, James Freeman Clarke: Apostle of German Culture to America (Boston: Luce, 1949), p. 131.
3 "Prophecy—Transcendentalism—Progress," Dial, 2 (1841), 87.
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Historically, New England Transcendentalism can be viewed as one of many instances of the widespread religious ferment which took place in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. As a self-conscious movement, Transcendentalism served as an expression of radical discontent within American Unitarianism (which, in turn, was a liberal movement within Congregationalism), arising from objections to Unitarian epistemology and the Lockean psychology upon which it was based. Locke held that all human knowledge is derived empirically, through the experience of the senses; the Unitarians, accepting this as a premise, held that God and his laws are apprehended by rational reflection on the natural creation and the revelations of scripture, rather than by direct intuition. To the young Unitarian radicals of the 1820s and 1830s, however, this position was oppressive, for it seemed to cut man off from God. Stimulated by post-Kantian thought, as interpreted chiefly by Goethe, Carlyle, and especially Coleridge, they began about 1830 to contend, with the aid of a distinction adapted from Coleridge, that in addition to his "understanding" or capacity for empirical reasoning man has a higher mental faculty, or "Reason," which enables him to perceive spiritual truth in-


6 A thorough discussion of the Unitarians' relation to Locke would take into account discrepancies between them and Locke resulting from the fact that the Unitarians received his ideas largely through the medium of his Scottish successors, the so-called Common Sense School. See, for example, Edgeley Woodman Todd, "Philosophical Ideas at Harvard College, 1817-1837," New England Quarterly, 16 (1943), 65-90, and especially Daniel Howe, The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 27-44 and passim.
The Unitarians' idea of reason/understanding (they used the two terms interchangeably) was actually more liberal than their critics realized; as we shall see in Chapter 1, Unitarianism can be said to have paved the way for the radicals' position. Nevertheless the distinction made by the latter between two sharply differing mental faculties was a significantly new departure.

The concept of a higher Reason is the heart of what came to be called Transcendentalism. Those who recognized such a faculty sometimes called it by different names, such as "Spirit," "Mind," "Soul," and they also differed in the claims they made for it. For some Transcendentalists it was simply an inner light or conscience; for others it was the voice of God; for still others it was literally God himself immanent in man. Some regarded the informing spirit primarily as an impersonal cosmic force; others continued to think of it in traditional anthropomorphic terms. Ecclesiastically, the Transcendentalists ranged widely in their radicalism: James Freeman Clarke, William H. Furness, and Convers Francis were moderates who eventually became pillars of the Unitarian establishment; Jones Very claimed (briefly) that he was the new Messiah. Though this might seem to have been an unacceptably nebulous situation, in fact the Transcendentalists did not differ among themselves as much as Kant did from some of his German successors.

The vagueness of the principle "uniting" the Transcendentalists seems to pose more of a problem when it comes to deciding who was a Transcendentalist and who was not. As we shall

7 Precisely what Emerson and other Transcendentalists meant by the intuitive perception of truth is a nice question which is discussed at length in Chapter 2, below. In calling the intuitive faculty by the name of Reason, they were faced from the start with a semantic paradox which they never satisfactorily resolved.

8 Individual Transcendentalists also differed markedly in their radicalism on specific issues. Thus Alcott insisted more than Emerson on the idea of immanence, but also retained a belief in a personal God, as did Very.
soon see, conservative Unitarians could sound quite transcendental when, in reaction against Calvinism, they praised reason and the moral sentiment. The idea of the authority of spiritual intuition also crops up in many contexts outside the Transcendentalist movement—as is to be expected, since mystical pietism was one of the most dynamic forces in the tradition of American evangelical Protestantism as a whole. Charles G. Finney, Horace Bushnell, Henry Ward Beecher, and John Greenleaf Whittier might all be called Transcendentalists of a sort. But these facts become troublesome only if one insists on placing a transitional figure like Channing either inside or outside the ranks, or on putting Emerson and Alcott in the same category with figures who had no direct connection with the original movement. The problem disappears if we think of Transcendentalism as a state of mind originating in a specific matrix—the reaction against rationalism within Unitarian thought—but emanating outward to stimulate such people as Whitman and Melville, and arising coincidentally in a number of other places besides New England under similar intellectual conditions. Some figures may be regarded as more or less central to the movement, others as more or less peripheral. Among the more important figures during the most vigorous years of the movement (1835–1845) one would certainly want to include Bronson Alcott, Cyrus Bartol, Orestes Brownson, Ellery Channing, W. H. Channing, James F. Clarke, Christopher Cranch, John S. Dwight, R. W. Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Henry Hedge, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Peabody, George and Sophia Ripley, Henry Thoreau, and Jones Very. In the next circle of importance would come such ministers as Charles T. Brooks, Convers Francis, William H. Furness, William B. Greene, Sylvester Judd, Samuel Osgood, Samuel Robbins, Caleb Stetson, and Thomas Stone; and such laymen as Caroline Dall, Charles Lane, the young James Russell Lowell, Charles K. Newcomb, Caroline and Ellen Sturgis, Anna and Samuel Ward, and Charles S. Wheeler. As harbingers, one would include William Ellery Channing, James Marsh, and
Sampson Reed; as third-generation keepers of the faith, Moncure Conway, O. B. Frothingham, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Johnson, Samuel Longfellow, Franklin B. Sanborn, and David Wasson. Eminent peripheral figures would include George Bancroft, Lydia Child, William Lloyd Garrison, Isaac Hecker, Caleb Sprague Henry, and Walt Whitman. This list could easily be quadrupled by adding the remaining members of Brook Farm and Fruitlands, and other outsiders like Emily Dickinson who imbibed large doses of Emersonianism.

Since this study is not a history of the movement but a description of one aspect of it, it seems less useful to present a complete roster and account of the participants, which has already been done by others, than to extrapolate a general profile. The majority were born and reared in the vicinity of Boston. Almost all reached Transcendentalism by way of Unitarianism before they were thirty years old; more than half were at least trained for the Unitarian ministry; almost all the men attended Harvard. Many were from backgrounds of wealth and gentility, though their immediate families were of widely varying economic status; and virtually all were of old New England stock, typically descending, on both sides, from ancestors who had come to America well before 1700. Almost all supported, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, the great moral reforms of the day—the temperance, antislavery and nonresistance movements—though most were reluctant to engage in organized social action, except in abolitionism during the decade before the Civil War. Finally, most were to some degree involved in the arts, especially literature, though usually as amateurs rather than professionals. At least half wrote significant amounts of poetry; more than half wrote literary criticism; most tried to keep diaries at some period; and almost all, at one time or another, wrote essays, sermons or orations with some pretension to literary merit. This predilection for literary activity seems to have been caused by a variety of factors, both cultural and personal, which are explored in Chapter 1.
Perry Miller once described Transcendentalism as an early instance of the recurring pattern of generational conflict in American society (Tr, pp. 12–13). In view of what has happened in America during the twenty years since Miller wrote, his appraisal is most provocative. In its liberal, upper-middle-class origins and in its short-lived but colorful exuberance, marked by insistence upon personal freedom and spiritual reform, the Transcendentalist movement strongly resembles the revolution of sensibility which we have been witnessing among educated young people in our time. Thoreau may not have been the first hippie, but he is justly cited as a precedent for “Consciousness III”; and unjustly neglected aspects of Transcendentalism and related contemporary movements, such as communalism, are now being taken more seriously than they had been for many years. The “relevance” of Transcendentalism is easy to exaggerate but useful to bear in mind, for although very little is said directly about the matter in this book, I believe that the Transcendentalists’ style of aesthetics has as much contemporary significance as their style of life.\(^9\)


\(^9\) For a good example of the use and misuse of the analogy between Transcendentalism and contemporary youth culture, see Herbert London, “American Romantics: Old and New,” *Colorado Quarterly*, 18 (1969), 5–20. To compare Whitman with Ginsberg is one thing; to link Theodore Parker with Bob Dylan is another. The term “Consciousness III” was coined by Charles Reich, in *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970), a book which is written in somewhat the same style as a Transcendentalist essay and has for that reason been received with somewhat the same perplexity.
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Very, and Whitman, because of their literary importance, than about Ripley, Hedge, and Brownson, who were more significant figures in other ways. I do not imply that literary excellence is to be considered the sole or even the primary interest of the majority of the Transcendentalists, for it certainly was not, nor that the Transcendentalists are important chiefly as writers, rather than as pastors, educators, reformers, or ideologues. On the contrary, writing was for most of them little more than a means of pursuing these commitments. I would argue, however, that the spirit of the Transcendentalist movement is best understood by taking a literary approach toward what the Transcendentalists had to say about the issues which preoccupied them, because their way of looking at those issues is markedly poetic rather than analytical and because they attached great value to creativity and self-expression.

How should we read Transcendentalist literature? Or any nonfictional literature, for that matter? Now that the "new criticism," to quote one of its original advocates, seems to have "reached a point of exhaustion" as an innovative force in the analysis of poetry, drama, and narrative fiction, an increasing number of scholars have begun to realize that large areas of the western literary tradition to which new critical methods are not so easily adaptable have been almost entirely unexplored. In the case of American literature, Howard Mumford Jones has diagnosed the situation well.

Our histories of American literature are deficient in a number of areas. They seldom or never, for example, recognize the greatness of American biographical writing. . . . They scarcely know what to do with most nonfictional prose. . . . They do not know what to do with the powerful library of travel literature written by Americans. . . . But I think the greatest deficiency in these manuals is

their failure to recognize the existence of that type of writer the French call the moralist. For him American literary criticism has small space.\textsuperscript{11}

Unfortunately it is much easier to agree with Jones's critique than to answer his call. W. K. Wimsatt, in his reaction to Boswell's \textit{Journals}, no doubt speaks for many readers: "This true drama refuses to be measured completely by the norms of the fictional." But "having said that," he adds, "we return to the categories—because these are all we can pretend to expound or criticize." \textsuperscript{12} The same idea runs through the recent and timely critical reappraisals of Victorian prose: that the way to understand nonfiction is to treat it as if it were fictive. As the editors of one important symposium point out, the general consensus of the contributors is that

the correct critical attitude toward an object viewed aesthetically must then be formal rather than ethical or practical, although it may well be concerned with the ethical and practical questions which are the substance of the aesthetic object. So viewed, the object will seem to be flawed insofar as the writer's vision lacks formal coherence. (One of the traditional and, we believe, generally valid assumptions of critics is that the failure of formal coherence implies the inadequacy of the vision itself.) It is not a question of whether the writer finds the best form for the expression of his vision, for this implies a distinction between the vision and the materials he uses to give it expression.\textsuperscript{13}

As this passage suggests, criticism still finds it hard to resist moving from a concern with form to a philosophical formalism,

\textsuperscript{11} History and the Contemporary (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp. 135–136.
from a concern with expression to a disregard for the demands of the author’s vision. Such an attitude cannot help but impose on literary history a hierarchy of values according to which the more fictive genres seem by definition “better” than, say, the autobiography or the sermon, and the distinctive literary purposes of the latter are undervalued or, at worst, even considered stumbling blocks which prevent the author from achieving the “ideal” literary effect.

Scholarship on Transcendentalism has been faced with such problems for a long time. The Transcendentalists have had a history of being caricatured by experts who have judged them by the standards of a particular specialty, beginning in 1836, when Francis Bowen “exploded” their philosophical pretensions. Today they do not lack sympathetic scholarly attention, but the traditional problem of interpretation remains. Partly because the serious study of the movement has largely devolved upon students and professors of literature, analysis has tended to center on a few classic works—for example, Emerson’s “Language” and “The Poet,” Thoreau’s Walden, and a half-dozen poems in Leaves of Grass. These are valued according to the degree to which they are seen as measuring up to modern standards of literary sophistication. This narrowing of focus has led to some faulty interpretations. In Charles Anderson’s view of Walden, for instance, exposition and narrative “are really only anti-structures”; the book’s “true stylistic mode” is “the interplay of wit and metaphor.” Though there is much truth


16 Ibid., p. 38.
to this claim, in the long run it conveys a misleading impression of the man who once declared that "it is the style of thought entirely, and not the style of expression, which makes the difference in books" (JT, I, 344). The same can be said of Charles Feidelson's verdict that Emerson's theory of symbolism "has weight chiefly as a literary program," "his writings survive as literature," and "his literary theory and practice were limited by the philosophic issues that led him to symbolism." 17 Feidelson's essay brilliantly describes Emerson's affinities with modern symbolist aesthetics but understates the dependence of art upon belief in his writing. So does much recent Whitman criticism, despite that poet's repeated warning that "no one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism." 18

Many scholars have of course continued to emphasize the spiritual bases of the Transcendentalist movement and its impact upon American thought and culture. Perry Miller, for example, has regarded Transcendentalism essentially as a religious phenomenon, in the context of the revivalism of the Second Awakening; William R. Hutchison has viewed it as a reform movement within Congregationalism; Stanley Elkins has (mistakenly, I believe) classified Transcendentalism as that species of northern bigotry which precipitated the Civil War. 19 But even as one takes account of the contributions of Transcendentalist...
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talism to our social and intellectual history, one is repeatedly struck by the movement's strongly aesthetic cast, which was unprecedented in the annals of American religious movements. Though Miller is right in saying that "Transcendentalism was not primarily a literary phenomenon" (Tr, p. 9), it remains that the Transcendentalists regarded "poetry [as] second only to religion," and often inseparable from it. What John Holloway has said of the Victorians is true of them also: they are not committed to logical defense of particular propositions of beliefs so much as to stimulating their audiences to a new perception of things by appeals "to imagination as well as intelligence." 21

A balanced study of Transcendentalist writing—and other nonfictional literature also—must therefore take into account its simultaneous commitment to beauty and truth, without scanting either. The techniques of explication developed by modern criticism must be adapted to such obviously sophisticated works as Culture and Anarchy, Emerson's essays, and Boswell's Journals, in a way that will illuminate their strengths as well as their shortcomings, that will not continually contrast them with what they might have been had their language been more metaphorical and their structure more closely knit, but that will demonstrate precisely how whatever message or vision they communicate enhances their imaginative subtlety and force. Or if the work seems to fail, the failure must be explained in terms of its own particular literary objectives. Conversely, the student of nonfictional literature must be prepared to show why the thought of an Emerson or an Arnold leads irresistibly to strongly poetic or rhetorical forms of expression rather than to a relatively unadorned argument or exposition.

Three principal approaches to these issues are employed in

the present study. None is startlingly original, but if thoughtfully applied they may yield some new insights.

The first is to investigate ways in which the demands of vision and the demands of expression reinforce and qualify each other in Transcendentalist writing. The most challenging critical problem it poses consists not so much in its content per se (which is often half-baked) or in the style per se (which is often awkward and inchoate) as in such questions as What is the tone? To what extent is a given assertion serious or rhetorical? How much is left to implication and nuance? To what extent does the idea depend for its expression upon a circuitous, baroque, even obfuscatory style? As an example of the dimensions of the problem, consider the following passage from Emerson's Divinity School Address:

If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. If a man dissemble, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being. [W, I, 122]

To the conservatives in Emerson's audience, this was one of the most obnoxious passages in the whole address—and with reason, since it seems to assert the identity of man with God. But does it really? Actually, it is quite unclear what, if anything, is being advanced. When one takes into account the qualifications with which Emerson surrounds his claims (the just man equals God is explained as meaning that "the safety of God" and so forth "do enter into that man with justice") the statement becomes quite tame: the just man partakes of the divine; the vicious man is alienated from his better nature. Yet this reading is not fair either, for it deprives the passage of all its boldness. Can it be that Emerson himself was unsure of what he meant? According to Theodore Parker, Emerson admitted precisely that to his former mentor, Henry Ware, Jr.; and Emerson's later writing would seem to bear Parker out. In "Self-Reliance," for example, changeableness in one's views of the nature of God is advanced
as an argument in favor of inconsistency. This assertion in turn makes one suspect that Emerson didn't care about being clear, that he was primarily writing for effect, to stir up his audience. The elegant balance of his sentences, with their paradoxes and antitheses, would seem to invite this suspicion. It is not at all unlikely that Emerson might have willingly departed from sober truth for the sake of coining two good aphorisms. Still, one cannot regard them simply as a rhetorical performance, any more than as a straightforward exposition of doctrine: Emerson's tone is far too urgent for that, and his journal for the period when he was formulating his thoughts for the address shows that they were the product of prolonged and conscientious meditation.

The passage, then, dwells somewhere between metaphor and metaphysics, between the word as message and the word as art. If considered as either one alone it is unintelligible, coming across either as muddleheadedness or exhibitionism, neither of which characterizations is fair. It has to be seen from two angles at once. Emerson has a "truth" to communicate, but "truth" to him is a matter not of mathematical demonstration but of feeling. Accordingly, he prefers to make a striking general impression rather than to be exact. To the very casual or the very precise reader this approach may seem careless and sentimental.

Parker to Elizabeth Peabody, 8 Jan. 1839, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Cf. Mary W. Edrich, "The Rhetoric of Apostasy," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 8 (1967), 547-560, which argues that the difference between Emerson’s address and the Unitarian position was rhetorical rather than substantive. Ultimately the essay overstates its case, but not by much.

For Emerson's state of mind at the time of the Address, see Emerson's Journal for 1838; Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Barnes, 1961), pp. 72-76; and Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Beacon, 1970), pp. 41-61. Neither scholarly account is, I think, strictly accurate: Whicher reads into Emerson's career too much of a thirst for greatness; Wright sees him as an irresponsible Unitarian. But both make clear Emerson’s great emotional investment in the Address.
And indeed the passage does have a nonchalance which is typical of Emerson. But in craftsmanship if not in tone the passage is the reverse of casual; clearly much premeditation has gone into its writing. It is the work of a keen mind and able craftsman; it simply will not reveal its depths to those who ask no more of it than “What does it say?” and “What are the rhetorical strategies?” One must further inquire, “What is the exact degree of commitment? How much does the style work for and against it? How much is the rhetoric an end in itself?”

In recent years such questions have been dealt with. To name but three examples, Holloway’s *The Victorian Sage*, J. Hillis Miller’s *The Disappearance of God*, and Jonathan Bishop’s *Emerson on the Soul* all contain admirable insights into these matters. Unlike these works, however, I do not focus exclusively on particular authors and their rhetorical methods but discuss the Transcendentalists in the context of the principal genres or formal traditions upon which they drew. This is the second major way in which this book attempts to clarify the aesthetic objectives of the Transcendentalists and of nonfictional literature in general. The distinctive qualities of such writing cannot, I think, be fully appreciated without reference to whatever stylistic conventions underlie them. Without such knowledge, it is almost impossible to keep from thinking of nonfictional literature as belonging to one large, nebulous category, to which one then applies the conventions of the more familial genres for purposes of evaluation. Thus *Walden* is praised because it has elements of poetic structure, and *Sartor Resartus* attracts attention because it is almost a novel. These analogies are often illuminating, and I myself draw some below; but they hold only to a point. On the whole, the Transcendentalists were exceedingly weak in the genres most in favor today (poetry, drama, prose fiction); but they had strong affinities with other genres and subgenres about which less is known but which, when once defined, make Transcendentalist literature more comprehensible and interesting. The present study describes a number of
these generic traditions and how they apply to Transcendentalist writing: the conversation, the essay, the sermon, the literary travelogue or excursion, the catalogue, the diary, and the autobiography. In each case my method is to show the relevance of certain features of Transcendentalist thought to a given form of expression, the degree to which this form was traditionally practiced as an art as well as a vehicle for prophetic statement, and the ways in which Transcendentalist use of the form deviated from traditional practice.

A generic approach to any body of postromantic expressivist writing must of course be applied with caution. Works like *Walden* and *Nature* are to a large extent unique, and the problem of sorting out actual stylistic influences is insuperable. To call one an autobiography and the other a sermon is almost as simplistic as to call both poems. Such models are therefore used tentatively and in combination, to suggest a range of possibilities rather than to define within narrow limits; and each model is viewed as a cluster of motifs rather than as a fixed form.

Another risk of the generic approach is that it tends to make different authors seem too much alike. I have tried to compensate for this by indicating the range of dissent on major issues and by including one or more extended discussions of Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, Jones Very, and Walt Whitman. I could have put still greater emphasis on individual Transcendentalists and organized this study by author rather than by topic. Certainly there is a need for a survey of Transcendentalism that will do justice to the peculiarities of its lesser figures, just as there is an even greater need for a comprehensive history of the movement in all its aspects. But it seemed most useful for present purposes to organize in terms of unifying features, for such features surely exist. Despite their own vociferous protestations that no two of them thought alike, the Transcendentalists did have a great deal in common, such as their pride in their own individuality. As for their aesthetics, it is possible to distinguish not
only shared critical principles but also a definite Transcendentalist rhetoric. Its leading characteristics are inchoate structure, prodigal imagery, wit, paradox, symbolism, aphoristic statement, paratactic syntax, and a manifesto-like tone. Examples include the passage quoted from the Divinity School Address, as well as most of Emerson’s essays through 1844; Thoreau’s *Antislavery and Reform Papers* and parts of his first two books; Alcott’s *Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture*; Bronson’s *New Views of Christianity, Society and the Church*; and a number of Theodore Parker’s sermons.

Literary Transcendentalism was not an isolated phenomenon; its hybrid mixture of religion and rhetoric had its origins in the cultural milieu from which the movement arose, namely Boston Unitarianism, cross-fertilized by English romantic thought and the antecedent tradition of platonic mysticism. A third way in which I attempt to clarify the relationship of style and vision in the Transcendentalist aesthetic is to examine it as an outgrowth of this intellectual heritage, or at least the most important part of it. Especially in Chapter 1, but throughout the book as well, I have much to say about the ways in which the Transcendentalists’ situation as New Englanders seems to have preconditioned their relative allegiance to vision and expression in literary art. This subject has been less understood than one might expect. Commentators have generally pictured the heritage of Transcendentalism in panoramic terms as a legacy of the Puritans that suddenly resurfaced in reaction to Unitarianism, with the romantic movement as a catalyst. Although the study of any intellectual movement would seem properly to begin with an account of the immediate context in which it arose, not until the 1950s did scholarship attempt a thorough examination of Boston Unitarianism except as something the Transcendentalists repudiated. They themselves encouraged this omission, of course, with their caricatures of Unitarianism as “heartless” and “corse-cold,” and since then the myth has been kept alive by such influential statements as Perry
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Miller's "From Edwards to Emerson." 24 But subsequent intellectual and church historians have shown that Unitarianism was considerably more complex and vital than had been supposed. 25 Building on their researches as well as my own, I take the position that Transcendentalism in all its aspects, including the aesthetic, is best seen not as a repudiation but an outgrowth of trends in Unitarian thought. This is not to deny the catalytic role of European influences. I also note these when it seems most appropriate, though for reasons of scope I do not go into much detail.

The major portion of this study is organized so as to emphasize what I take to be the three most significant intellectual and literary concerns of the Transcendentalist movement: spirit, nature, and man. Broadly speaking, Parts I and II describe in general terms how the Transcendentalists sought to express spiritual truth. Part III discusses their inquiries into the meaning of nature and, in particular, the ways in which the style and structure of some of their writings express conceptions of natural order. Part IV discusses the uses of personae in their writing and how these reflect their conceptions of the divinity of the self. Although this scheme is a matter of expediency as well as design and is not intended as a complete theoretical framework for the study of the Transcendentalists, it does have the value of highlighting the most complex and interesting areas of their intellectual and literary activity, and it also indicates the chief lines of relationship between their writing and American literature as a whole. To trace the literary "legacy" of Transcendentalism is not my major purpose here, but I try to


25 The scholars who have done the most significant work in this area are Howe, Hutchison, and Wright. In addition to their works cited above, see Wright, The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955).
suggest the principal ways in which this can be done. Certainly the main tendencies in Transcendentalist writing discussed here—the impulses to prophesy, to create nature anew for oneself, and to speak in the first person singular—are three of the dominant motifs in American literary history.