Literary Transcendentalism
Buell, Lawrence

Published by Cornell University Press

Buell, Lawrence.
Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47563
3 From Conversation to Essay

Garrison made the Convention
Greeley made the Newspaper,
Emerson made the Lecture,
and
Alcott is making the Conversation.
—A. B. Alcott

If a writer believes that inspiration is more valuable than expression and that it cannot be fully expressed in any case, he is bound to ask himself at times, "Why bother to write at all?" The Transcendentalists often did. Partly for that reason, much of the spirit of the movement was never recorded in a lasting and memorable form. As an organized movement, Transcendentalism can almost be said to have begun and ended as a discussion group. Much of its internal ferment and a good deal of its external impact can be attributed to talkers like Alcott and Margaret Fuller; even its writing is largely oral literature, in the sense of having been composed originally for the pulpit or the lyceum.¹

Alcott's choice of "Conversation" as his proper medium is understandable. He was, first of all, a teacher by vocation, a

¹ The most important contemporary published accounts of transcendental conversations are, for Alcott, Conversations with Children on the Gospels, 2 vols. (Boston: Munroe, 1836-1837); and conversations on "Woman," "Plato," and "Personal Theism," reported in The Radical, 5 (1869), 89-102, 177-200, and 6 (1869), 22-33. In addition, see Alcott's scrapbook of newspaper clippings ("Autobiographical Collections") and his unpublished journals, Houghton Library, Harvard University; and the manuscript collection of reports on Alcott, "Notes of Conversations," Concord Free Library, Concord Massachusetts. For Fuller, see Ossoli, I,
teacher who believed in the value of dialogue with the student. The basis of his pedagogy was the idea of education in its root sense, a "drawing out" of the pupil by a combination of induction and response, a method which he did not fail to note was "the ancient mode of instruction," sanctioned by the greatest of teachers, Socrates and Jesus. In his use of it to teach young children, he seemed alarmingly radical for his times, especially when he began to imitate Jesus too closely and make the Oversoul a part of his curriculum. But in his general fondness for informal and spoken discourse he was quite typical of his age. As Mason Wade observes, "it was far more a vocal than a literary era." The contemporary Americans whom the Transcendentalists most respected as young people—Channing, Everett, and Daniel Webster—were pre-eminently public


The best source of information about the meetings of the Transcendental Club or Symposium is Alcott’s unpublished journals. See also Odell Shepard, Pedlar’s Progress (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937), pp. 246–261. "Alcott’s ‘Conversation’ on the Transcendental Club and The Dial," a newspaper account re-edited by Clarence Gohdes, American Literature, 3 (1931), 14–27, has some interesting reminiscences. Two modern attempts to reconstruct the atmosphere of a public conversation are, for Alcott, Pedlar’s Progress, pp. 231–246, and, for Fuller, Granville Hicks, "A Conversation in Boston," Sewanee Review, 39 (1931), 129–143. Madeline Stern’s portrait of Fuller as a conversationalist in The Life of Margaret Fuller (New York: Dutton, 1942), pp. 181–198, is well researched though effusive.

2 Table-Talk (Boston: Roberts, 1877), p. 91. For Alcott’s references to Socrates and Jesus, see JA, pp. 63–64, 104; and "The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture," in Conversations with Children on the Gospels, I, xxxiv–xxvi. For studies of Alcott’s teaching, see Shepard, pp. 180–218; Dorothy McCuskey, Bronson Alcott, Teacher (New York: Macmillan, 1940); and Charles Strickland, "A Transcendentalist Father: The Child-Rearing Practices of Bronson Alcott," Perspectives in American History, 3 (1969), 5–73, which gives a full and absorbing account of how Alcott applied his theories in his own home.

speakers; three of their foremost European literary heroes—
Goethe, Coleridge, and Madame de Staël—were also famous
talkers. In cultivated Boston society, the conversation club was
also in fashion, commonly as a nexus for some literary enter-
prise. The affairs of the *Monthly Anthology* were transacted at
the meetings of the Anthology Society. Andrews Norton, J. G.
Palfrey, the Everetts, and other establishment literati formed a
later group which met for dinner and talk. For the Transcen-
dentalists, the best-known group, the Symposium or Transcen-
dental Club of the later thirties was only one of several. It was
preceded by a Cambridge group which gathered around
Margaret Fuller, as well as a Boston group formed by Elizabeth
Peabody, and followed by a club organized in the late 1840s
by James Freeman Clarke and ultimately by the Radical Club.
Those Transcendentalists who wanted to go respectable in their
middle age could also join the Saturday Club or the short-lived
Atlantic Club. And in addition to these organizations, of
course, were innumerable ad hoc gatherings at Brook Farm,
Fruitlands, Concord, and Boston.

Much of the interest of those Transcendentalists who par-
ticipated in such groups can doubtless be explained in terms
of the fashion of the day, the lack of other entertainment, and
the perennial desire of intellectuals to talk together. But for
the truly devoted, such as Alcott, Fuller, and Emerson, con-
versation was not just a pastime but also a fine art and fit sub-
ject for philosophy. Conversation had a special mystique for the
Transcendentalists because of its spontaneous nature. As the

4 See *Coleridge the Talker: A Series of Contemporary Descriptions and
Comments*, ed. Richard W. Armour and Raymond F. Howes (Ithaca: Cor-
nell University Press, 1940); *Goethe: Conversations and Encounters*, ed. and
trans. David Luke and Robert Pick (Chicago: Regnery, 1966); and Emile
Deschanel, *Histoire de la Conversation* (Brussels: Office de Publicité, 1857),
pp. 161–166. The Transcendentalists would have been especially stimu-
lated by Mme de Staël's remarks on conversation in *Germany*; Coleridge's
*Table Talk*; and Margaret Fuller's translation of Johann Eckermann's
*Conversations with Goethe* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1839).
least studied form of expression, it approached most closely the ideal of a continuous inspiration. Good talk was perpetual discovery and improvisation. The inspired talker could also take more satisfaction in his performance than the writer because the formal requirements were less strict. In conversation one needed simply to express each thought as it came. This unfettered quality also appealed to the Transcendentalists for the range and versatility it permitted. "The magic of liberty" in such moments, as Emerson put it, makes "the world like a ball in our hands" (W, III, 32). "All we have, all we can, all we know, is brought into play, and as the reproduction, in finer form, of all our havings" (W, XI, 408–409).

Then, too, conversation was an available art. It was not the property of an elite, like the creation or connoisseurship of painting, but a universal ability. Of course it did require special gifts; Alcott periodically asserts that there is "nothing rarer than great conversation," that indeed he has never found any "surpassing talkers." At the same time, conversational success was in reach of any thoughtful person, without extensive training. Thus conversation appealed to the Transcendentalists both as equalitarians of the spirit and as aesthetic amateurs, people of sensitive tastes with a largely untechnical interest in art.

Finally, conversation came closer than all other arts to realizing the Transcendentalists' idea of the proper relation between art and life. They believed in the romanticist notion of sincerity as a test of literary merit, that the reader should be able to sense a man behind the work. Whitman was proud to be able to say "Who touches this touches a man." Although most Transcendentalists looked down upon Byronic egoism and Rousseauistic confessional as perverse, they were equally romantic in insisting that literature seem to be an utterance from the depths of one's being, a human communication. Thus Emerson liked Montaigne because "the sincerity and marrow

of the man reaches to his sentences. . . . It is the language of conversation transferred to a book. Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive” (W, IV, 168). From this point of view, as Emerson's analogy suggests, conversation could be thought of as superior to writing. If the end of writing is communication, if literature is essentially a conversation between writer and audience, then how much more noble is conversation itself. “By it I come nearer the hearts of those whom I shall address than by any other means,” Alcott wrote (JA, p. 104). “The lecture is too formal. It is, beside, presuming. Man doth not meet his fellow on equal terms. . . . And similar deficiencies are felt in regard to the book. Only the living, spoken, answered, word, is final.” 6 At the best it leads to a truly communal inspiration, “a pentecost of tongues, touching the chords of melody in all minds.” 7

Not all Transcendentalists were as enthusiastic conversationalists as Alcott. Emerson, for instance, sometimes wearied of Alcott's marathon capacity for talk, though he enjoyed his company as much as any man's.8 “Good as is discourse, silence is better, and shames it” (W, II, 311), Emerson concludes, in such a mood. Thoreau professed to think even less of talk. Devotees of conversation struck him as trying to “eject themselves like bits of packthread from the tip of the tongue.” 9 When he himself was pressed to participate against his will, Thoreau liked to give his interlocutor the silent treatment. This usually proved discomfiting, which Thoreau took as a sign that he had exposed a false facade in the other person. Alcott and Margaret Fuller, on the other hand, were people whose best inspirations

---

6 “Diary for 1838,” p. 23, MS 59M-308 (11), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
7 Tablets (Boston: Roberts, 1868), p. 76.
8 For works on the Emerson-Alcott relation, see Chapter 1, note 39, above.
9 “Conversation,” The First and Last Journeys of Thoreau, ed. Franklin B. Sanborn (Boston: Bibliophile Society, 1905), I, 114.
came in company. "Conversation is my natural element," Fuller put it. "I need to be called out, and never think alone, without imagining some companion" (Ossoli, I, 296). With George Ripley it was evidently somewhat the same way. "If he could preach as he talks," Theodore Parker told a friend, "he would surpass all." 10 Even Emerson, Alcott once declared, was better at conversation than lecturing (JA, p. 425). And as for Thoreau, despite his crusty pose, he admitted that "I love society as much as most" (Wa, p. 140); and Franklin Sanborn agreed that Thoreau, like Emerson, "was ever ready in conversation." 11

This combination of individual talent and romanticist ideology had the effect of making talk a Transcendentalist institution. The informal club became a rallying point; Fuller and Alcott became professional conversationalists. The three instances of Transcendentalist conversation which had the most public impact were the original Transcendentalist Club (1836-1840), Fuller's series of conversations in Boston (1839-1844), and Bronson Alcott's long career, first as an elementary school teacher and then as a conductor of adult discussion groups from New England to Iowa. Taking the extant records of these sessions as our principal texts, so to speak, let us try to see what the art of conversation meant for the Transcendentalists in practice. Though what is on record was more or less organized for special occasions, it may for that reason be all the more revealing.

Unfortunately, our texts are all quite corrupt, except for the Conversations with Children on the Gospels, which is the least typical because the conversations were geared specifically for "infant instruction." "I am at the mercy of reporters," Alcott complained in old age. "My subjects, and extemporizing these,

10 To George E. Ellis, 27 May 1838; typescript, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Emerson also praised Ripley as a conversationalist (Ossoli, I, 320).
leave me open to misconception and frequent mortification” (JA, p. 535). Almost all accounts of such meetings are written either with unconscious pomposity or deliberate intent to caricature. Take for example the closest approach to a detailed account now in print: Margaret Fuller’s session with the women of Boston on the subject “What Is Life?”

March 22, 1841. The question of the day was, “What Is Life?”

“Let us define, each in turn, our idea of living.” Margaret did not believe that we had, any of us, a distinct idea of life.

A[nn]a S[haw] thought so great a question ought to be given for a written definition. “No,” said Margaret, “that is of no use. When we go away to think of anything, we never do think. We all talk of life. We all have some thought now. Let us tell it. C[aroline Sturgis], what is life?”

Caroline replied, “It is to laugh, or cry, according to our organization.”

“Good,” said Margaret, “but not grave enough. Come, what is life? I know what I think; I want you to find out what you think.”

Miss P[eabody] replied, “Life is division from one’s principle of life in order to a conscious reorganization. We are cut up by time and circumstance, in order to feel our reproduction of the eternal law.”

Mrs. E[merson]: “We live by the will of God, and the object of life is to submit,” and went on into Calvinism.

Then came up all the antagonisms of Fate and Freedom.

Mrs. H[oo]per] said, “God created us in order to have a perfect sympathy from us as free beings.”

Mrs. A[lmira] B[arlow] said she thought the object of life was to attain absolute freedom. At this Margaret immediately and visibly kindled.

C[aroline] S[turgis] said, “God creates from the fulness of life, and cannot but create; he created us to overflow, without being exhausted, because what he created, necessitated new creation. It is not to make us happy, but creation is his happiness and ours.”

Margaret was then pressed to say what she considered life to be. Her answer was so full, clear, and concise, at once, that it cannot but be marred by being drawn through the scattering medium of
my memory. But here are some fragments of her satisfying statement.

She began with God as Spirit, Life, so full as to create and love eternally, yet capable of pause. Love and creativeness are dynamic forces, out of which we, individually, as creatures, go forth bearing his image; that is, having within our being the same dynamic forces by which we also add constantly to the total sum of existence, and shaking off ignorance, and its effects, and by becoming more ourselves, i.e., more divine—destroying sin in its principle, we attain to absolute freedom, we return to God, conscious like himself, and, as his friends, giving, as well as receiving, felicity forevermore. In short, we become gods, and able to give the life which we now feel ourselves able only to receive.

On Saturday morning; Mrs. L[idian] E[merson] and Mrs. E[llen] H[oooper] were present, and begged Margaret to repeat the statement concerning life, with which she closed the last conversation. Margaret said she had forgotten every word she said. She must have been inspired by a good genius, to have so satisfied everybody—but the good genius had left her. She would try, however, to say what she thought, and trusted it would resemble what she had said already. She then went into the matter, and, true enough, she did not use a single word she used before. 12

In this case, the scribe is the unconsciously pompous one, with the editor, perhaps, as the caricaturist. Introduced by a preface in the breezy, ironic style with which Miller usually handles the Transcendentalists, the selection effectively deRates their pretensions to high seriousness. Cliché and incongruity abound. Instead of the salon, we have the schoolroom or quiz program setting ("The question of the day was . . . "). Who would think of calling Caroline's reply "good," let alone "not grave enough"? One has the general impression of novices trying to talk above their heads: Mrs. E "went on into Calvinism"; "Then came up all the antagonisms of Fate and Freedom." For a while,

one remains hopeful of Margaret, who at first only puts questions. But then comes the rosy, effusive digest of her "satisfying statement," "drawn through the scattering medium of my memory" by the adoring scribe. It is the usual neoplatonic stuff, only worse. We proceed to rank Margaret with the other ladies, equal in kind if somewhat more glib. The ending clinches this impression. When pressed to recapitulate, "true enough, she did not use a single word she used before." No doubt this is meant in admiration but it can be taken as additional proof of flightiness.

This report, then, hardly explains Fuller's reputation as a conversationalist and the admiration obviously felt for her by the scribe, except on grounds of mutual fatuity. The same is true of extant reports of other conversations. They seem either elliptical or rhetorical. However they may have been received at the time, on the printed page they are dull. The fact is that Transcendentalism lacked a Boswell, so we can never be certain whether it deserved one, though the mutual admiration of the group suggests that it did.

Even a totally accurate text of a Transcendentalist conversation might not explain very much about its success or failure. The effect of speech is inevitably distorted by transcription; nonverbal factors may have been as important to the effect as any words spoken. The general atmosphere of the gathering, the decorations in the room, the historical occasion, Alcott's pale blue eyes and air of serenity, Fuller's flushed animation and elegance of manner and dress—all these were noticed by their contemporaries but are lost to us.

Still, some facts about Transcendental conservation are evident. First, it was serious, especially in any public session, where it was being used essentially as an "organ of instruction." "What avails any conversation but the sincere?" Emerson asked (JMN, VIII, 17). Geniality alone would not suffice. You had to be grave enough. "The fault of literary conversation in general," says William Hazlitt, "is its too great tenaciousness. It fas-
tens upon a subject and will not let it go. It resembles a battle rather than a skirmish, and makes a toil of pleasure.” Hazlitt would not have enjoyed the Transcendental Club. He thought the long-winded Coleridge a conversational failure; presumably Alcott would have struck him the same way. For Hazlitt, conversation was essentially a recreation and a social grace; but the Transcendentalists gathered not for witty banter but to trade ideas on such knotty topics as “Does the Species Advance beyond the Individual?” and “Mysticism in Christianity.” Usually the meetings inspired Alcott to write pages of abstruse meditation on the issue at hand. His own conversations, likewise, he took very seriously as an instrument for converting the world to the spiritual philosophy. His topics were equally grandiose: The Corporeal Relations of the Soul, The Doctrine of the Godhead, Instinct, Behavior, Private Life, and—inevitably—Conversation itself, since part of his mission was to vindicate his method. It might indeed be argued that discussions on such mind-bending and preset topics as these should not be called conversations so much as informal seminars.

Margaret Fuller’s announced goal, in opening her conversations for the women of Boston, was somewhat more secular than Alcott’s but just as ambitious in its own way. “It is to pass in review the departments of thought and knowledge, and endeavor to place them in due relation to one another in our [i.e., female] minds. . . . To ascertain what pursuits are best suited to us, in our time and state of society, and how we may make best use of our means for building up the life of thought upon the life of action” (Ossoli, I, 325). In short, she intended not only to supply the ladies with a comprehensive liberal education but to come up with some sort of practical program for improving the lot of women in society.

Of course few are going to approach an ordinary, friendly
conversation with such zeal, even if they are Transcendentalists. Their tone in speaking of their public conversations derives partly from the sense that they are bringing light to the gentiles, partly from the awareness that they must use some sort of come-on to attract a public. In private Fuller at least was more quotidian. Indeed she struck Emerson, upon first acquaintance, as frivolous, “for I was, at that time, an eager scholar of ethics, and had tasted the sweets of solitude and stoicism, and I found something profane in the hours of amusing gossip into which she drew me” (Ossoli, I, 202). The thing to note here is that Emerson found her manner both tempting and unsatisfactory. Clearly the young Transcendentalist enjoyed those “profane” pleasures, but unlike the middle-aged Brahmin who is writing the memoir, he resolutely suppressed them as inferior to the higher conversation with the soul.

This element of sublimation in Transcendentalist relationships is characteristic. The trivial must be symbolic to be worth anything; the initial love is always giving way to the demonic and the celestial. Every Transcendentalist had his familiar side, but not in his capacity as Transcendentalist. Thoreau, for example, liked children and town characters and got along with his family, but when it came to associating with his fellow mystics he stiffened. Thus Emerson told Sanborn that he never had “the least social pleasure” with Thoreau, “though often the best conversation.” 14 Even toward those Transcendentalist friends most devoted to him, Channing and Blake, Thoreau condescended. Unrequited friendship was indeed a universal byproduct of the Transcendentalist seriousness. The Fuller-Emerson relation is another instance, and the Alcott-Emerson relation perhaps the most interesting of all. Although Alcott was in a way the epitome of Transcendental abstruseness, his conversation as abstract as his diary, he was temperamentally a sociable person who longed in particular for Emerson’s affection. When Emerson did not fully reciprocate, Alcott chalked

14 Sanborn, p. 297.
it up to his friend’s reserve, classifying him as a “pent personality from which his rare accomplishments have not yet liberated his gifts, nor given him unreservedly to the Muse and mankind.” But Emerson on his side seems to have concluded much the same thing. Put off by the abstruseness of Alcott’s conversation, he described him as “a man quite too cold and contemplative for the alliances of friendship” (W, X, 341). One might say that the two men were trapped in a convention of serious conversation. At any rate, it was a convention. Thus when Jones Very came to Emerson’s house and insulted all the guests, they did not cry breach of decorum or bad fellowship because what Very said was profound (JMN, VII, 124).

Also because it was “charming.” The Transcendentalists did not value in conversation any more than they did in writing the kind of profundity or seriousness which was merely “sound” or “weighty.” The highest compliment to pay a participant was “So-and-so said fine things,” not “weighty things.” Emerson’s habitual way of recording conversations in his journals, in fact, was to note down the best aphorisms. Sallies of wit, even puns, were preferable to elaborate reasoning and logic-chopping. Parker and especially Brownson, who called for continuity and definition of terms, were often an annoyance. When Margaret Fuller asked her friends to say something grave, what she had in mind was a few good apothegms, not an elaborate speech.

This, then, was a second characteristic of Transcendentalist conversation which somewhat qualified the first. It was serious, but its method was desultory, sometimes to the point of caprice. The Club met not in order to reason, argue, or even come to a consensus, but to be mutually stimulated and speak as the spirit moved. Alcott and Fuller, in their public conversations, also liked to proceed by having each participant speak to the topic or leading question with a minimum of guidance from the coordinator and without criticism of what others had said.

15 Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Estimate of His Character and Genius (Boston: Williams, 1882), p. 51.
Both also liked to give introductions, and sometimes conclusions too, and if they were warm and their audience cold this could make the session very one-sided. Both were periodically accused of monopolizing discussion in this way, just as Coleridge was; and given the fact that they both thought of conversation as a means of instruction and themselves as instructors, they must often have been tempted to hold forth. But each really wanted to draw the company out in the manner just described and felt that they had failed if they didn’t.

The method had its risks, as in any nondirective discussion: vagueness, disjointedness, the tendency to play around the edges of topics rather than to confront them in depth. But it did not follow from this that the speakers were careless in what they said. On the contrary, the desire to be both grave and clever must have led to a great amount of premeditation, at least as much as in a good undergraduate seminar. To come up with anything like “life is division from one’s principle of life in order to [effect] a conscious reorganization” (assuming Elizabeth Peabody actually said this—and it isn’t at all out of character) is pretty difficult to do on the spur of the moment. Their frequent cross-allegations of personal coldness, their praise of the “eloquence” and “brilliance” of each other’s conversation suggest that the Transcendentalists rarely let themselves go in each other’s company.

“What is life?” bears out this impression of Transcendentalist conversation as carefully calculated. Each lady chirps out her gem in the proper order. Anna Shaw begins first, and lowliest, by trying to be let off the hook. Then we get the commonsense definition (Caroline), the pedantic definition (Miss P.), the Calvinist definition (Mrs. E.), the Unitarian definition (Mrs. H.), and finally the Transcendentalist definition Margaret likes (Mrs. A. B.), which Caroline tries to outdo, until at last we are ready for the rhapsody of Margaret. The whole process is a model of inductive method, of drawing out your pupils by getting them to make progressively better generalizations. Per-
haps Miller included it in his anthology for this reason too, in addition to its humorous aspects. In its formal tightness, it proves that Transcendentalist conversation could take on the symmetry of a work of art, even though that symmetry is a denial of the principle of spontaneity upon which conversation is supposedly based.

A professional conversation is naturally apt to be more patterned than those in which there is no coordinator. Both Fuller and Alcott, being ex-teachers and missionaries of a sort, inevitably sought to steer their audiences around to certain pet ideas, with varying degrees of tact. Alcott sometimes made preliminary outlines of the topics he wanted to cover and, as he grew older, even used note cards. In the reports of his and Fuller’s public conversations, therefore, one usually finds at least an inchoate structuring of some sort, although in no case is it as pronounced as in “What is Life?” Presumably they were not so schoolmasterish with their friends. But, as I have pointed out, even the informal intercourse of the Transcendentalists seems to have had a sculptured quality to it. Hawthorne made the definitive comment when he said of one casual gathering that everybody seemed to be straining to say the profoundest thing that had ever been said. This self-consciousness, common in some degree to all cultivated people, was intensified in the Transcendentalists by their devotion to what they called “self-culture,” meaning, roughly, the total growth of one’s intellectual-moral-spiritual faculties, the ultimate in liberal education. Their literary source for this idea was Goethe; but essentially it was another of Unitarianism’s legacies to the movement, formulated most memorably by Dr. Channing, for whom the idea was the quintessence of the Unitarian principle that religion consists chiefly in the improvement of the character.16

16 “Self-cultivation was the essence of Massachusetts Arminianism,” notes Daniel Howe (The Unitarian Conscience [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970], p. 110). Howe has much to say on this subject throughout his book.
Almost by definition, self-culture encourages a view of life as an art, the converse of the notion that art is subordinate to life. All the Transcendentalists flirted with this idea; in some, notably Margaret Fuller, it threatened to become a ruling passion. According to Emerson, Fuller "looked upon life as an art, and every person not merely as an artist, but as a work of art. She looked upon herself as a living statue, which should always stand on a polished pedestal, with right accessories, and under the most fitting lights. She would have been glad to have everybody so live and act" (Ossoli, I, 238). Throughout her Memoirs her biographers tend to describe her through the analogy to art: "She wore this circle of friends . . . as a necklace of diamonds about her neck"; "Like a moral Paganini, she played always on a single string, drawing from each its peculiar music,—bringing wild beauty from the slender wire" (Ossoli, I, 213, 97–98). From our perspective it is clear that such behavior was as much a matter of compulsion as wiles, that her biographers perhaps half saw and disguised that fact. Her overtures to Emerson, for instance, were more spontaneous than he was willing to admit. Still, consciously or not, Fuller was a collector and manipulator of personalities, a virtuoso of friendship. One gets much the same impression from what Alcott, Emerson, and Thoreau have to say about friendship. The sense of personal longing and unfulfilment is continually being stiffened into high-minded rationalizations for ever more noble, more distant relationships.

Seeing this pitfall in the Transcendentalist ethos, the danger of becoming too enmeshed in the self-conscious pursuits of the art of life, one is tempted to reverse the emphasis of the previous chapter and suggest that far from having an excessive regard for spontaneity the Transcendentalists had too little. Craftsmanship in art they undervalued, but they more than made up for this by harping on the craft of life, which must have been a continuous frustration to them. "Emerson," reports Ellery Channing, "was never in the least contented. . . . The
Future,—that was the terrible Gorgon face that turned the Present into 'a thousand bellyaches.' 'When shall I be perfect? When shall I be moral? when shall I be this and that? when will the really good rhyme get written?' Here is the Emerson colic. Thoreau had a like disease.'

He who would make self-culture his ideal, warns Hedge in "the Art of Life the Scholar's Calling," "must become a living sacrifice." "Let him who would build this tower consider well the cost" (Tr, pp. 473, 472). Hedge goes on to praise the ideal, but his metaphors suggest only too well the emotional casualties of Transcendentalism.

Nevertheless the Transcendentalists continued to value conversation as a high art, whatever their frustrations, both in private and in public; and Alcott and Fuller even won a share of public acclaim. Both were erratic, but Fuller had charisma and Alcott at least had atmosphere and sometimes even mystique. Though to the modern reader their seances seem amateurish, stilted, and slightly bizarre, they were historically significant as harbingers (along with the lyceum) of the adult education movement and anticipations of modern nondirective pedagogy. And as an art form, the conversation came as close to a truly transcendental utterance as the movement ever attained.

Neither Alcott and Fuller nor any other Transcendentalist was content to rest in conversation alone. Characteristically, the Transcendental Club talked from the first about launching a new journal. Alcott and Fuller became professional conversationalists only after despairing of success as writers, and even so they never resigned their literary ambitions, but later returned to writing. Alcott confessed to having "a profound superstition about books" (JA, p. 526). The first sentence of his Table-Talk, ironically, reads: "One cannot celebrate books sufficiently." 18


18 Table-Talk, p. 5.
After the modest success of Tablets and Concord Days his hope revived that he might "add a syllable or two to the living literature of my time" (JA, p. 462), though he always remained very modest about his chances. Nor could Fuller help but feel that being better at talk than writing "bespeaks a second-rate mind" (Ossoli, I, 107). The other Transcendentalists were usually quite unequivocal about the superiority of writing. In the long run, "conversation is an evanescent relation—no more," Emerson cautions (W, II, 208). On the other hand, he regarded conversation also as a sort of model for the best literary works, like Montaigne's. Altogether, the Transcendentalists as a group valued conversation less as an autonomous art form than as a quality in literature. To a degree, their prose reflects this quality.

To begin with, the Transcendentalists composed a fair number of literary dialogues, in the manner of Landor's Imaginary Conversations, which Emerson, Fuller, and Alcott all admired. These included, for example, Ellery Channing's Conversations in Rome, "Fashionable Dialogues," and "Walks and Talks" (in Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist); Margaret Fuller's dialogues in the Dial; Brownson's in the Boston Quarterly Review; and, on the fringes of the movement, the young Lowell's Conversations with a Critic. In somewhat the same vein are two poetic dramas Channing wrote in old age: Eliot and John Brown, and the Heroes of Harper's Ferry. These performances vary in content and tone from theology to farce. But none is of much literary consequence, partly because the language is too stilted to sound conversational, partly because the writers are less interested in drama than monologue. The conversation is usually just a device for presenting ideas in a loose form, as Lowell frankly admits in his preface. As an approximation of actual speech, only Channing's manuscript dialogues come close.

19 Helen Neill McMaster, "Margaret Fuller as a Literary Critic," University of Buffalo Studies, 7 (1928), 79; JA, p. 184; W, XII, 337–349.
The same percentage holds true for the rest of Transcendentalist writing, contrary, it would seem, to their expressed purposes. In their criticism, they all incorporated in some form or other the Wordsworthian dictum that the writers should use the language of common speech. Brownson even went so far as to praise the style of newspaper-writing and to make popularity a test of literary merit. But he himself did not use a colloquial style. Emerson even grew away from it—the plain prose of his early sermons is much closer to ordinary speech than the baroque style of the essays. Walt Whitman had a point when he declared of Emerson's writing that "no performance was ever more based on artificial scholarships and decorums at third or fourth removes" and compared Emerson's work to porcelain statuettes. Far from attempting the kind of familiar style praised by Hazlitt and Lamb, Transcendentalist conversation and prose seems continuously to be striving to rise above the colloquial to a more literary level.

The picture changes, though, when one considers the prose tradition that the Transcendentalists inherited. The principal forms in which a serious-minded young Bostonian of literary inclinations could respectably express himself were oratory, the sermon, the highbrow review, and the periodical essay. For the latter, which was the only "informal" one of the four, The Spectator was still the primary model (Addison rather than Steele, of course, and often alloyed with Samuel Johnson); Irving was still looked upon in some quarters as bohemian.


22 E.g., W. H. Prescott, "Essay Writing," North American Review, 14 (1822), 319–350. For the way in which the young Emerson was influenced by the prejudices of his elders, see JMN, I, 172. For information on the background of the essay tradition in America, I am indebted to Martin Christadler, Der Amerikanische Essay, 1720–1820 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1968), particularly chapters xiii–xvii.
Even Addison was really revered, at least in public, more for his moral soundness than for the familiar aspects of his style. And in their own writing, Bostonians tended to compartmentalize these two elements: either they played it straight, writing on a rather ceremonious level with a minimum of wit and rambling, or else (like Hawthorne in his sketches) they made it plain that they were not really trying for high seriousness. Their notion of the style in which matters so significant as the subjects of Emerson’s major essays should be discussed was in short very conservative, to the point that when Emerson first discovered in himself a taste for the more desultory forms of journal-writing and seventeenth-century prose as a way of expressing his deepest thoughts he was somewhat apologetic about it (JMN, I, 25, 268). Indeed he never outgrew the suspicion that his writings were inferior because they were not more elaborate and systematic.

The style of his essays, nonetheless, is actually a reaction against the finished evenness of American Unitarian Association prose in the direction of a less formal, more fanciful and discontinuous, more “individualistic” style which would better express nuance of meaning and tone but which would remain morally serious and intellectually tough. In varying degrees, other Transcendentalists followed Emerson’s example. For inspiration the Transcendentalists drew both upon elements within their native culture which will be discussed later on and upon such European models as Carlyle and other romanticist visionaries; the analects of Coleridge, Luther, and others (including Socrates); the metaphysical rhetoric of Sir Thomas Browne; and the Senecan tradition of epigrammatic, asymmetrical rambling prose from Plutarch through Montaigne. The Transcendentalists’ indebtedness to these writers can be

23 The Monthly Anthology and Boston Review is an excellent example of this dichotomy. For excerpts and a scholarly analysis of the periodical, see Lewis Simpson, The Federalist Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962).
and has been studied at great length. For our purposes it can be epitomized, however, in terms of the idea of conversation. In general, what the Transcendentalists learned from the models just named was how to inject a conversational note into moral discussion, how to give the impression of obiter dicta rather than treatise.

Perhaps the most striking example of this quality in Transcendentalist writing is its fondness for aphorism, which of course is both a hallmark of good conversation and a condition to which analects and moral essays aspire. W. H. Channing was attracted to Margaret Fuller because “she knew how to concentrate into racy phrases the essential truth gathered from wide research, and distilled with patient toil” (Ossoli, II, 20). Emerson, similarly, declared “compression,” or “the science of omitting,” a cardinal virtue of rhetoric and advised him who would attain to it to read his compositions aloud (W, XII, 290–291). Part of the reason Alcott composed his “Orphic Sayings,” very likely, was to capture an aspect of his conversation. At first glance they of course seem to fail miserably. “Thou art, my heart, a soul-flower, facing ever and following the motions of thy sun, opening thyself to her vivifying ray,” and so on—what could be more un-conversational? Certainly it must be a pale imitation of his public manner. But it probably is an imitation, either of himself or of Socrates, insofar as good intellectual conversation tends to become a series of aphorisms. “Orphic Sayings” could be read as a literary dialogue with the interlocutor left out.

Another resemblance between conversation and Transcendentalist prose is its desultory, improvisational quality. “Its beauty,” as Alcott said of Emerson, “consists in its suggestive-


25 Tr, p. 303. Alcott was somewhat more successful in the aphoristic mode in his lesser known Table-Talk (1877).
ness, unexpectedness, saliency; it vaults the passes, flashes the whole of things upon the imagination at a glance, sets life and things anew for the moment." 26 It was this quality which led Alcott to nickname Emerson "The Rhapsodist." The following passage illustrates it well:

How many volumes of well-bred metre we must jingle through, before we can be filled, taught, renewed! We want the miraculous; the beauty which we can manufacture at no mill,—can give no account of; the beauty of which Chaucer and Chapman had the secret. The poetry of course is low and prosaic; only now and then, as in Wordsworth, conscientious; or in Byron, passionate; or in Tennyson, factitious. But if I should count the poets who have contributed to the Bible of existing England sentences of guidance and consolation which are still glowing and effective,—how few! Shall I find my heavenly bread in the reigning poets? Where is great design in modern English poetry? [W, V, 256]

This is a quite literary style of writing on the whole, but it also has the scattershot, staccato quality of lively talk, as in the sudden tonal shifts from amused impatience to high-minded yearning to hardheaded criticism to exasperated outburst. As always in Emerson, the thoughts have gaps between them, as if the author were thinking them up and throwing them out off the top of his head. Twice his syntax breaks in mid-sentence. Finally, there is a kind of nonchalance mixed in with the precision and subtlety of detail: "jingle through," "heavenly bread" (to go with Bible), the dismissal of all of modern English poetry—"of course" it is "low and prosaic," one sketchy epithet sufficing for each poet.

This casualness is typical of Emerson, and even more of Thoreau, since he is more unpredictable and also more aware of being casual.

Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!

26 Table-Talk, p. 84.
I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. [Wa, p. 91]

Again, the utterance is formal; it stays within the convention of the jeremiad; but the prophet is so earthy and droll ("frittered away," "lump the rest," "keep your accounts on your thumbnail") it seems almost as if Thoreau is deliberately burlesquing himself—as some commentators have in fact alleged.27

Still another unconventional prose stylist was Theodore Parker. Parker was as contemptuous of the stuffiness of his colleagues' pulpit manner as he was of their theology, and in his own writing he tried to inject colloquialisms and common references. It was typical of him to enter the miracles controversy in the rustic disguise of "Levi Blodgett." As that pamphlet shows, Parker was not always successful in conversation-aliyzing his theology, but he made some interesting attempts. His homiletic specialty, as far as experimentation in colloquial style is concerned, was to drive home his point with a mixture of hard-hitting exhortation and curt, sometimes even vulgar sarcasm:

It is a good thing to get up pious feeling; there is no danger we shall have too much of that. But the feeling should lead to a thought, the thought to a deed, else it is of small value; at any rate, it does not do all of its work for the individual, and nothing for any one beside. This religious sentimentality is called Mysticism or Pietism, in the bad sense of those two words.28

As in much of Parker's writing, the passage maintains a certain level of decorum, which even assumes a scholarly air at the end. But the emotional thrust is supplied by the salty colloquialisms in the first sentence and the last clause of the second, and in the contrast between the level of these and the literariness of the rest.

The analogy between the style of conversation and that of Transcendentalist prose has definite limits, even in Thoreau, as these passages suggest. Emerson's citation of Socrates as a model of the "low style" (W, XII, 287) which writers ought to cultivate shows that the low he had in mind was still pretty high. Compare Parker's sermons with Henry Ward Beecher's, or any Transcendentalist essay with the journalism of Poe and it becomes clear that Emerson and his circle came nowhere near a truly popular style of expression. The very way in which they put this ambition refutes them: "Plain speech is always a desideratum," says Thoreau (JT, I, 342); "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low," Emerson effuses (W, I, 111). Indeed it was almost impossible to be earthy after being processed at Harvard by Professor Edward Tyrell Channing, whose reputation for producing great writers is utterly undeserved. Channing discouraged the bombastic and the illogical but he brought out the didactic, the moralistic, the abstract, and the conventional in his young charges—most of which it took Thoreau and Emerson ten years to begin to outgrow.29

A more important reason, however, why the Transcendentalists did not pursue the idea of writing as conversation as far as Hawthorne or Poe, not to mention Lamb and Hazlitt, was of course their own intellectual seriousness. To picture them as essentially conversationalists, in any recognizable sense of the word, is to misrepresent them as dilettantish, nonchalant patricians; to picture them as committed to a colloquial standard in writing is to mistake their understandable endorsement of a romanticist cliché with democratic overtones for an indispensable doctrine. In the long run, the very thing which most attracted them to conversation limited its appeal. They became fascinated with the mystique of conversation less for its own sake than as the primary example from ordinary life of the transmission of the living word from soul to soul. This vision, of an eloquence which, as Emerson put it, could "alter in a

pair of hours, perhaps in a half hour's discourse, the convictions and habits of years" (W, VII, 64), was the deepest basis of the Transcendentalists' admiration for great literature and oratory, as well as for conversation, and it was most responsible for the analogies they drew between the three.

The ultimate value of studying Transcendentalist conversation, therefore, is in calling attention to the importance of personal communication in Transcendentalist aesthetics: the idea of the superior man speaking through his art to fulfil himself and inspire other men. To have begun with the artistic successes of the movement, like Walden, and worked from explication of them into their expressivist and didactic implications would have largely reversed the order of priorities, for Transcendentalist literary works are less aesthetic products than aesthetic processes—forms of communication, transitional links between author and reader. Emerson and Thoreau are quite explicit about this in the contrasts they draw between the imperfectness of the vehicle of expression and the nobility of the thing expressed; and their pronouncements should not be disregarded because they are hyperbolic. For one thing, they tell a part of the truth about literature which modern literary criticism tends to leave out: art does not simply mean, or even be; it is also a communication between artist and reader. Secondly, to accept this fact is to alter in certain important ways one's assumptions about literary excellence. When art is seen as a process of communication rather than as a product, static elements like structural patterning seem less important than kinetic elements like the flow of images or ideas; and clarity (or ambiguity) and refinements of diction in general seem less important, in themselves, than sheer impact or suggestiveness, though the one may of course result from the other. The present study assumes the validity of these alternative criteria, in view of the Emersonian dicta that "there is higher work for Art than the arts" (W, II, 363); "the poetic gift we want, as the health and supremacy of man,—not rhymes and sonneteering"
From Conversation to Essay

(W, VIII, 63–64). This old-fashioned view of art as the vehicle of inspiration will not satisfy the demands of modern formalist criticism, but neither will the latter suffice to explain Transcendentalist aesthetics. In judging a conversation held by Alcott or Fuller, for instance, one would want to demand continuity rather than unity, provocativeness rather than precision, edification rather than elegance, and (in some cases) tone or atmosphere or ambience rather than the exchange of words itself. The same is also true to a marked degree of the literary forms of expression favored by the Transcendentalists.

Of these forms, the traditional moral essay is of course the most evident, since it furnished the concept of topical meditation used in the organization of the most central oeuvre of the movement, Emerson's essays. To establish a kinship with Montaigne and Bacon takes one but a limited distance, however, into the intricacies of Transcendentalist literature, for the category "moral essay" defies close specification, and the special contexts in which the Transcendentalists altered the tradition of the essay are much more important for our purposes than affinities with the tradition as a whole. The moral essay cannot be defined much more narrowly than as a short, unsystematic meditation on a given abstract issue, often marked by curtness, lack of transition, and aphoristic statement. All of these qualities are indeed prevalent in Transcendentalist prose. Its more particular themes and techniques, however, are better understood in terms of the conventions of form discussed in the remainder of this book. The manner in which the Transcendentalists approached moral issues, for example, becomes fully clear only when one sees it as an outgrowth of their special religious concerns and the conventions of religious discourse which they inherited and adapted, especially the sermon. These will be the subject of the next chapter.