Moral Enterprise

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“Contact with the World”
Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s West Street Bookshop

HENRY DAVID THOREAU voices a common refrain among critics of nineteenth-century print culture when he complains in his “Reading” chapter of *Walden* (1854) of “a work in several volumes in our Circulating Library entitled Little Reading” which the populace consumes with “saucer eyes, and erect and primitive curiosity, and with unwearied gizzard . . . just as some little four-year-old bencher his two-cent gilt-covered edition of Cinderella,—without any improvement, that I can see, in the pronunciation, or accent, or emphasis, or any more skill in extracting or inserting the moral.” Thoreau’s lament over “Little Reading” registers long-standing assumptions not only about the poor character of popular literature and the questionable taste of those readers who peruse it, but also about the character of institutions that circulate such texts. He reiterates a complaint dating back to the beginnings of circulating libraries themselves in Boston, when they first began appearing during the second half of the eighteenth century. Far from inculcating edifying principles in readers, the creation, circulation, and consumption of light reading, Thoreau maintains, is a “sort of gingerbread,” merely a sugary sweet that rots the mind instead of the teeth, resulting in a general “sloughing off of all the intellectual faculties” (105). Yet, with booksellers and distributors aiming only to make a profit, this bread is “baked daily . . . in almost every oven,” and finds an eager audience more than willing to consume it (105).
But even as Thoreau complains about the processes of a print culture he sees as both corrupting and “provincial” (109)—one that refuses to grow up and embrace more than narrow interests—there had already been at least one well-known, local bookstore and library that rejected the “gingerbread” model of business, and without the reactionary insistence on a return to “classics” that Thoreau himself articulates when he composes his own reading list in *Walden.*

Founded in the summer of 1840 and remaining open until 1852, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s West Street bookshop and foreign circulating library garnered seemingly universal praise from the residents of antebellum Boston who frequented it. The bookstore was “a part of the educational influences of the period,” Thomas Wentworth Higginson, famous Boston resident and one-time frequent customer remembered fondly, a place where he himself had made “acquaintance” with various foreign books, both classical and contemporary, including the “relics of the French Eclecticism, then beginning to fade, but still taught in colleges” and “many of the German balladists who were beginning to enthrall [him].”

Indeed, at the heart of Peabody’s enterprise was the act of opening for customers an “acquaintance” with world literatures, exposing them to new ideas and literary experiences beyond those of New England. As Peabody would later describe it, “About 1840 I came to Boston and opened the business of importing foreign books . . . and then I came into contact with the world as never before.” This expansive, cosmopolitan notion of “contact with the world” was one of the driving impulses of her enterprise. By the time she established her bookstore, Peabody had come to view the idea of “contact” both as indispensable to fostering her customers’ self-culture and as a corrective measure against the “spirit of coterie,” the exclusive, self-interested circles that she saw pervading American life and letters. This chapter, therefore, investigates Elizabeth Peabody’s career as a transcendentalist bookseller, lender, and publisher striving to forge a space within a male-dominated profession, and examines her efforts to “transcend” the coterie practices dominating business as usual in Boston. In the process, it argues that Peabody’s search for “contact with the world” points to some of the larger concerns of transcendentalism with which she wrangled, encapsulating both her struggles as a woman trying to overcome obstacles to a career in literature and her interest in importing the foreign as a way to escape provincial American thinking.

My reading of Peabody is markedly different from earlier assessments of her career, which have tended to dismiss her as an eccentric and relatively
minor figure in the antebellum scene. I join a recent body of criticism interested in Peabody as a source of insight into a wide range of important nineteenth-century issues, including, as Leslie Perrin Wilson points out, “Boston intellectual history, book trade history, library history, reform history, [and] women's history,” not to mention transcendental attitudes toward antebellum print culture. But while Wilson has examined the organization and daily operations of the bookshop, I am interested in reconstructing Peabody’s initial vision of herself as its proprietor, and in how that vision deepens our own understanding of the relationship between gender, transcendentalism, and the literary marketplace. Born out of her experiences as a woman intellectual within the patriarchal confines of nineteenth-century New England, and thus uniquely embodied in notions of contact and collaboration, Peabody’s transcendentalism would find its apotheosis in her West Street bookshop and foreign circulating library. What is so interesting about Peabody is that although she would become the poster-child for charges of liberal New England intellectual fuzziness that critics of the movement heaped upon it, the bookstore reveals her as, in some respects, a much more sensible transcendentalist than many of her colleagues. Ultimately, Peabody’s enterprise offers us a more nuanced understanding of the varieties of American transcendentalism since, as it demonstrates, her brand of transcendentalism was practical and ethical, a kind of feminist cosmopolitanism that was as much a tool for coping with the gendered dimensions of the antebellum marketplace as it was a religious or philosophical orientation.

At least part of Peabody’s modern obscurity rests, as others have observed, on the fact that most of her efforts were in collaboration with, or on behalf of, other literary figures, thus tending to deflect attention away from herself and toward her contemporaries. Whether through her essays, translations, biographies, or bookstore, she continually sought to act as intermediary between some favorite associate, writer, or text, and the reading public she hoped would receive them. When literary critics have mentioned Peabody, it has been in relation to people such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Ralph Waldo Emerson—in other words, in connection with the great men, and sometimes women, in whose circles she moved. Not surprisingly, literary critics have tended to treat her bookstore as merely a stage where other, more significant players enacted their parts—the location, for instance, where Fuller held her famous conversation classes, or where George Ripley held the first discussions on what would be the Brook Farm experiment.

No doubt the critical neglect of Peabody has been perpetuated by the
gendering of the literary canon itself, and by reliance on sources, such as Hawthorne, Emerson, and Henry James, each with extremely vexed relations to women and/in the marketplace, that enforce her secondary status. Emerson, for instance, described her as someone “who, by her constitutional hospitality to excellence, whether mental or moral, has made her modest abode for so many years the inevitable resort of studious feet, and a private theatre for the exposition of every question of letters, of philosophy, of ethics, and of art.” In positing her essential value as a “constitutional hospitality to excellence” and in dubbing her bookstore a “modest abode” and “private theatre,” Emerson reinforces gendered notions of passivity, domesticity, and privacy that were, ironically, at odds with the expansive purpose of the enterprise; it was a business venture, a public endeavor designed both to make money and at the same time to actively foster a more open, and thus “transcendental,” print culture. But, given such accounts, Peabody’s fate as a footnote to American transcendentalism, it seems, was sealed.

On the contrary, the bookstore and lending library obliged her to function as importer, bookseller, lender, publisher, educator, editor, and writer all at once, and in a way that made her a virtually omnipresent influence in the literary and intellectual circles of Unitarian Boston during the early 1840s. Although, in her search to disseminate a more moral literature than the character of the market had thus far allowed, she clearly sought to regulate certain types of popular, “trashy” texts her efforts did not necessarily translate into a vision of a world with fewer books in circulation. Unlike many of her male peers whose anxieties manifested themselves in desires to restrict the literary market, Peabody hoped to encourage a larger variety of texts than was currently available to the American reader, seeking a diverse and eclectic set of books, both domestic and foreign, to foster readers’ self-development by promoting the exchange of ideas between the sexes and across cultural barriers. Profoundly affected by the gendered practices of both the literary market and the circles in which she moved, she harbored a transcendental vision of the book trade as inclusive and encompassing, rising above provincial ends and seeking increasing avenues to captivate the public interest and earn a profit without resorting to best-selling, but morally questionable texts. Envisioning her bookstore as an embodiment of her lessons in “contact,” Peabody turned to bookselling, publishing, and importation as essential means to the dissemination of a new print culture, seeking success through an establishment that would rise above the spirits of coterie and exclusion she envisioned as threatening American cultural life.
Engendering Controversy

For Peabody, transcendentalism was inseparable from gendered dynamics of power precisely because even the most liberal-minded male intellectual was subject to restrictive, masculinist paradigms of thinking that could have potentially serious consequences for her efforts to collaborate with them. Indeed, the bookstore would be Peabody’s own chance to restore “contact with the world” after what was the fantastic and catastrophic failure of the Temple School in Boston, a fraught collaboration with fellow (though, importantly, male) transcendentalist Bronson Alcott that essentially forced her into an almost unbearable, four-year social and intellectual exile in Salem. Her involvement with Alcott began in late 1834 with the opening of their school and ended in mid-1836 when she quit a few months before the publication of their *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (1836), a transcript of weekly conversations Alcott held with their class, initially purporting to validate the truths of Christianity as uttered through the mouths of babes. Concluding with the abrupt dissolution of their partnership, her retreat to Salem for the sake of her reputation, a public outcry against the *Conversations*, the eventual collapse of the school, and the destruction of Alcott’s teaching career, their collaboration reinforced the harsh realities of gender proprieties in antebellum New England and offered an important lesson on the viability of educational commodities in connection with them. Ultimately, however, it served to reinforce her commitment to contact, circulation, and exchange as absolutely essential to self-culture, helping to push her toward the foundational principles of her bookstore by hardening her resolve for “contact with the world,” not merely for herself, but also for her customers.

Scholars have already outlined Peabody’s life-long battles against what she saw as the problematic tendencies fostered by an otherwise timely and necessary self-culture movement: excessive individualism, or even downright egoism. In her *Reminiscences* (1880), a lengthy biography of her former mentor, influential Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, Peabody records detailed conversations with him on these misguided tendencies. In one such conversation, Channing confesses his belief that the “danger that besets our Transcendentalists is that they sometimes mistake their individualities for the Transcendent” (Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 365). Although, on Peabody’s prodding, he absolves Emerson of the tendency to confuse personal idiosyncrasy with universal human nature, Channing warns her that many of Emerson’s “professed followers” had yet to recognize this problem (365). Assessing the
direction of the transcendental movement, Peabody herself considers whether its introduction into Boston society might not have been better served by one of its “some what more conservative” members, wondering, for instance, if “perhaps Dr. [Frederick Henry] Hedge might have introduced Transcendentalism in such a way that it would not have become identified with the extreme Individualism which is now perhaps indelibly associated with it in America” (371).

While Peabody involved herself in every stage of the Temple School’s development, functioning as its organizer, promoter, recorder, and, when worse came to worst, its fervent defender despite a serious falling out with Alcott, it is in the context of Alcott’s growing egoism that we should understand her dissatisfaction with him during their Temple School years. Most disconcerting to Peabody was the fact that, as a progressive endeavor built upon the principles of self-culture (seeking to remove all outside impediments to students’ self-development and employing Socratic conversations to enable their voices), the school failed namely because of the masculine ego behind Alcott’s supposedly transcendental practices. While it was ultimately Alcott’s brazen intrusion, in a fit of suspicion that his assistant was turning against him, into her private correspondence that precipitated Peabody’s final break from him, much of what soured her to their collaboration arose from his obvious failures to live up to the school’s original aims.

To better understand her mounting vexation with Alcott, one might look to the optimism expressed in the preface of the *Record of a School* (first edition, 1835), her original account of the school and its curriculum, composed from notes taken while observing its classes. By the time she published the book’s second edition in 1836, Peabody would be on the defensive. She made several changes to the edition, and, after she had revised its preface, what was once a modest five-page introduction now ballooned to over 40 belabored pages of clarification on the school’s principles and practices. In the first edition, however, she lauds Alcott as a great “mediator” of the “influences of those great principles of spiritual self-culture,” whose sole purpose is “removing inward and outward obstacles to their full and harmonious development” in his students. She also informs her readers proudly that while teaching as an employment “has been too often assumed . . . with avowedly mercenary ends, or at least for secondary purposes,” Alcott’s methods would remedy this problem because, in demanding “a better spirit, where it was wanting,” they put children’s educational and “spiritual” needs first. All other things, she implies, would follow from this lofty “primary” premise of helping students cultivate their own minds, characters, and consciences.
By the end of the first year, she had begun to register serious disagreements with Alcott’s classroom practices, even as some parents had grown uneasy about the school’s curriculum, with its intense focus on mind, spirit, and soul almost to the exclusion of all other subjects. For instance, Peabody tells Alcott in an 8 October 1835 letter that she “wanted to see if you did not change my opinions” about what she thought was becoming his deleterious obsession with introspection, “But a year’s observation of your practice has not convinced me, and my own opinion and feeling have only grown more strong.” More troubling to both Elizabeth and her sister, Mary, was the fact that Alcott was growing downright manipulative with the children, orchestrating class discussions so that they would come to predetermined conclusions of his own choosing, rather than allowing the conversations to unfold on the students’ terms, as both he and Peabody had intended. And this was only the tamest of the techniques he employed to coerce the students into agreement with his will. In some cases, he would goad the children into acts of disobedience in order to make individuals an example to the class, while, in others, he would indulge in corporal punishment, requiring that students beat him for their transgressions, which they then would have to do in front of the class, and often on the verge of tears. Mary, for one, had watched these exploits with what she ironically termed “great interest,” confessing to Elizabeth in mid-1836: “All you express of Mr. Alcott I respond to. . . . I have not by any means felt that he did not lead the minds of his scholars, though I know he does not intend to. I have heard them questioned out of their opinions more than once. I think these faults of Mr. A’s have grown upon him very much and begun to appear very much in his whole manner.” Both women, therefore, feared that Alcott had become a subtle, yet substantial bully in the classroom, his disingenuous manipulations casting uncertainty not only on his abilities as the spiritual “mediator” that Peabody’s Record preface had championed, but also on the school itself as a place dedicated to removing “inward and outward obstacles” to students’ self-culture.

In mid-1836, Mary cautioned Elizabeth that the position was no longer worth the dangers it engendered. Alcott’s domineering personality had spilled over to his professional relationship with Elizabeth, and he began to treat her more and more like his subordinate rather than as his collaborator. Although she continued to be crucial to the success and credibility of the school, it seems the fact that, under the terms of their initial arrangement, their relation “was not a partnership” was coming back to haunt her. Mary was worried especially that Alcott—who was not about to change his ways—would damage the integrity of their next collaboration, Conversations with
Children, as a text dedicated to Christian self-culture, and with which her sister’s professional and personal reputations were deeply intertwined: “You do not in your heart think he is quite honest always about his record and if I were in your place I should not be willing to have anything to do with it unless it can be a true record—You do not agree in all his measures, and [yet] you are obliged to sanction them tacitly or else explain the disagreement to people.” In another letter, Mary tells Elizabeth that she “would give the world if you were no longer in association with Mr. A” because “that book will not be honestly printed & if not you will suffer for it. It is your record. That is known—but if you gave it up to Mr. A to print you may be sure he will print it his own way.” That he would alter the book to his liking given the chance was certain, not only given his dealings with the children and Peabody, but also as Mary recalls “being startled a year ago when you & Mr. A were discussing the record & disputing about a fact, by his saying he wished to have the book a perfect one—as if the truth might be sacrificed to that!” She therefore implores Elizabeth to be the one to guide the book to print, hoping “you are to do it all yourself & to correct the proofs.”

What ultimately doomed the school was, in fact, the publication of the first volume of Conversations in December 1836, after Elizabeth had left the school. While what had disturbed Peabody were his numerous violations of the principles of self-culture, she also correctly feared a reactionary fervor on the part of readers over the text’s occasional indulgence in illicit subjects such as birth and circumcision. On 7 August 1836, after she had already gone, but before he had published the Conversations, she wrote him one final letter, noting the precariously gendered implications of their situation. She warns him that “many persons, liking the school in every other respect, think it is decisive against putting female children to it especially” (Letters, 180). Although she not did not agree with these sentiments and believed that girls as much as boys deserved the kind of education the school hoped to offer, Peabody tells Alcott that, still, “something of an impression was gratuitously taken up that I left the School” on account of its class discussions being inappropriate for mixed company, and, what was more, “it was thought I,” as a woman, “ought to leave it” (180).

In the months leading up to Elizabeth’s break with Alcott, even Mary had begun to think her sister’s involvement improper, advising her that perhaps she “ought to be teaching great girls. That is your peculiar calling[,] your voca-
tion.” She implored her to leave Boston, to “go into the country,” and to “take a class of country young ladies for almost no price.” There she could “see the grass grow, and the brooks run & hear the wind in the trees,” noting “there
are enough interesting people in Concord & Margaret Fuller in Groton,” although, from what we know of Fuller’s country experiences, rural life was not exactly conducive to fostering the interests of intellectual women. Of course, the last thing Elizabeth wanted to do after the vistas opened to her through contact with the likes of Channing and the rest of her Boston friends was retreat into rural Massachusetts, to some intellectual backwater in the countryside where she would find very little stimulation, only to be doubly confined by gender proprieties to a class of young girls. Reluctantly, however, Elizabeth capitulated to her sister’s suggestion, taking over her girls’ school in Salem when Mary herself returned to Boston in early 1839.

Peabody did not think Alcott’s discussions inherently “obscene,” as one of the critics of Conversations would famously claim when it appeared in print, but she did find it ill advised that Alcott should lead his students into controversial topics, believing them forced upon the children by Alcott’s misguided intentions rather than provoked by the spontaneous flow of their own conversation. Addressing this issue of his repeated manipulations directly, then, she confesses in her 7 August 1836 letter that, although she thinks that “it is impossible to keep children ignorant and that it is better to lead their imaginations than to leave them to be directed by idle curiosity,” she does not feel she “should ever have ventured so far myself,” and she even calls a “great many” of his questions “quite superfluous” (Letters, 180). She left no doubt as to where the blame would lie for their impending disaster, should he insist on proceeding with his plans for publication. Having left the school, she tells him, “I am conscious of the effect of a few weeks’ freedom from the excitement of being a part of the School, or taking down that exaggerated feeling which made every detail of it seem so very important to the great course of Spiritual Culture; and I never was under half the illusion in this respect that you were” (180–81).

In order to save her reputation as a lady, Peabody begged Alcott to omit all reference in the book to her involvement in his conversations. Calling forth traditional constructions of femininity, she tells him that she hoped that it “may be felt that I was entirely passive” in recording the transcripts. She also asks him to omit the questionable elements of the conversations (such as those on sex and birth), and to write his own preface to be placed before hers, further distancing her from the project by stating that “the Recorder did not entirely sympathize or agree” with him “in respect to the course taken,” or something to that effect (181). She then concludes her letter with a remarkable commentary on the constraints placed upon women, telling Alcott that he “as a man can say anything; but I am a woman, and have feelings that I
Chapter 3

... dare not distrust, however little I can understand them or give an account of them” (181; emphasis in original). Of course, Alcott largely ignored her warnings, rejecting them, it seems, as he might dismiss the impositions of a woman who did not know her proper place.28

When Alcott published the book over Peabody’s objections, its fate, and that of the school, was sealed. Although he wrote his own introductory note and included Peabody’s own preface distancing herself from the book, he still printed the text on his own terms, including all the questionable moments in an appendix at the end instead of removing them completely. Then, when he had made these changes, he sent review copies of the book to all the local newspapers. In a sense, Alcott neatly and noticeably packaged together and delivered all the materials that hostile reviewers would need to launch their savage attacks on him in the coming months. Apparently, there were some things that even a man could not say or write about. Though she had warned Alcott against publishing the manuscript in its current form, the book was, in Peabody’s opinion, unfairly attacked as a moral abomination. One particularly galling assault called it a “more indecent and obscene book . . . than any other one we ever saw exposed for sale on a bookseller’s counter.”29 Despite her reservations about Alcott’s constant meddling, Peabody would hardly grant that the book was the worst ever in existence. It was, at least, a principled text, seeking to demonstrate the lofty educational ideal of allowing children to speak for themselves, however poorly Alcott put that ideal into execution.

Despite their numerous flaws, she believed there was unrecognized potential in Alcott’s methods. In an 1837 letter to Horace Mann, in which she unflinchingly criticizes Alcott for the “great deal of nonsense about [him] all along,” Peabody laments that his “disputed views” should overshadow the strength of his “general plans,” which, even then, she still considered “wise.” She believes that, despite his mistakes, “there is a current of the true method—an infusion of Truth—which I think neutralizes the error.”30 In one of her journal entries, she articulates the exact nature of this “Truth,” offering a way to read the Conversations beyond merely as an account of Alcott’s disingenuous manipulations:

I thought Mr. Alcott’s practical ability was much greater than he or any one else was inclined to give him credit for. That he could rouse the sense of justice and moral ideas practically in the minds of children to something like omnipotence, and this done the children’s own wits would and did apply the principles to particular cases often in a superior manner to Mr. Alcott himself.
My faith in his good influence was founded on the fact that he so truly roused their moral principles as to enable them to hold out and beat him in an argument upon special cases in which he concluded wrongly.\textsuperscript{31}

Peabody marvels that Alcott, in love with his own voice and often arguing in the wrong, can still “truly rouse” the children’s sense of “justice” and their “moral ideas” to something like “omnipotence,” forcing that sense to assert itself and to triumph over his errors. The fact that this process takes place despite Alcott’s misguidance—that the students themselves can “hold out and beat him in an argument . . . in which he concluded wrongly”—gives the episode an air of the transcendental. Even error, these conversations revealed, can function in the service of moral truth so long as it incites or inspires, offering the children something against which they might define themselves, some resistance against which they could instinctively respond and react. Her own collaboration with Alcott had, at least, taught her that much.

Ultimately, the debacle over the book forced Elizabeth to articulate to the world her own views on the school. In a short newspaper article, entitled “Mr. Alcott’s Book and School,” Peabody would lay out her case for the worth of Alcott’s pedagogical practices, expressing in the process a transcendental manifesto on the circulation of ideas as essential to education. Articulating startlingly modern criticisms of the pedagogical status quo, she declares that “our actual Education, generally speaking,” is “a violent imposition of the confessedly imperfect adult mind of the time upon the rising generation”—what a friend had described colorfully as the “steam-engine system” of educating children.\textsuperscript{32} Adopting her own materialist analogy, she then informs the reader that, in a system merely presupposing a “dead capacity” in students “into which knowledge can be poured like material liquid,” there is “no cultivation in the world—except by chance” (1). But Alcott’s conversations with the children, and their victories over his wrong-headedness, suggest that they are not empty vessels into which elders can dispense their beliefs. In the process, his book proves conclusively that an alternative method of self-exploration “can be successfully pursued; that children can be interested in spiritual subjects, without doing violence to their natures; that it is easier to interest them . . . in such conversations, than to make them diligent in any other intellectual exercise” (1).

The worth of Mr. Alcott’s book, therefore, lies in the “suggestive character” of its conversations, and the strength of Alcott as a teacher rests in the “cherishing influence” he exerts over the “spontaneous faculties of the mind” (1). It is this inspirational influence, she insists, that marks the “great
value of the school” and constitutes the “very principle of education.” Ultimately, Peabody insists that while students may sometimes “go away from [Alcott’s] school with a hundred fantastic notions,” in the end it did them a great service because they left his classroom carrying “with them the first principles of the act of finding truth, by means of which all false notions are made temporary” (1). By attempting to foster their intellectual freedom, the school allowed students to explore in themselves “tendencies of mind to be encouraged or regulated,” a process she believed was “the surest way to self-knowledge” (1). Even in his missteps, she contends, Alcott “allows the various associations [the children make] to act upon each other; knowing that the universal alone can survive a fair meeting. By observing one another the children learn what is invaluable—to see how the peculiarities of temper and disposition modify the understanding, and to discriminate the accidental from the absolute” (1; emphasis in original).

“No Worthless Books”

The problem, of course, was that it was not always a “fair meeting,” and, in the face of masculine prerogative, for instance, the free exchange of ideas, the process of discriminating the “accidental” from the “absolute,” might be stifled, as it was when Alcott bullied their students and warped the presentation of his and Peabody’s pedagogical experiment; or as it was when male periodical editors denounced the Conversations out of hand as immoral without considering its high principles; or even as it was when Peabody was forced by notions of propriety to retreat to the backwaters of Salem. For generations of students, young and old, who had long been denied “contact” by the provinciality of their surroundings, then, the West Street bookstore would be a chance for intellectual cultivation without arbitrary imposition, a place where customers could leisurely browse, buy, and read books, or simply seize an opportunity to converse with the proprietor or any one of the personages that graced her premises. It also marked an opportunity for Peabody to combat the kind of provincial thinking that had relegated her to Salem in the first place, as she hoped to give voice to authors, texts, and perspectives overlooked or pushed out by the market’s shortsighted practices. Her enterprise would resist, for example, what she saw as the literary industry’s obsession with money at the expense of everything else, and its patriarchal structure, which thwarted not only women like her in their attempts to break into the publishing business, but also male writers like Hawthorne who struggled to find a
place for themselves as authors in a role defined by male-female/publisher-writer power relations.  

Admittedly, Peabody’s explicit motivations for opening a bookstore were, to quote one of her biographers, “something of a mystery.” But it would be just the thing she needed after Salem, where she could, essentially, “do nothing in the world by way of helping in the world.” Confessing to Elizabeth Davis Bliss that Salem “seems another world than Boston” because its residents “care about nothing stirring—& read every species & form of transcendentalism as if it were Evil Lore,” she jokes, “I like to hear from Boston folks—do they ever keep up foreign correspondences?” (Letters, 190). There is poignancy behind her humor; in poking fun at her isolation, the village’s provinciality, and its residents’ intellectual stagnation, she articulates a desperate yearning for the “world” beyond Salem’s borders, as well as for “foreign correspondence” with it. Such cosmopolitan sentiments anticipate not only her foreign circulating library, but also the transcendental sensibilities informing the entire enterprise. In “foreign correspondence,” or the search for continuities through comparative cultural study and the eclectic, unexpected connections it enables, Peabody sought the means toward the sounding of a more universal human culture, or as Bruce Ronda puts it, the sense of “belonging not simply to oneself or one’s family but to the entire human race.” Committed to “stirring” correspondence even from the far recesses of Salem, she mentions at the end of this letter “negotiating with a publisher” to write a book containing “all my odd ends on education” (Letters, 190). This book did not materialize, but understandably so: why settle for a single book when nothing short of an entire bookstore might be enough to contain the “odd ends” that a competent teacher could provide, or a student might need?

While this book is not the same one that Peabody also intended to write for The School Library, still, her conversations with Mann, and intermediaries like him, on the subject of education could only have confirmed her decision to go into the “schoolbook” (in its broadest sense) business for herself. In her 3 March 1838 letter to Mann, Peabody discusses his efforts to organize The School Library, while he was soliciting support for the state’s common schools as Secretary of Education. She approved of his plan for the series, calling it “very interesting as well as wise,” but she demurred at one particular aspect of it (Letters, 199). Mann intended that the Board itself choose the books for inclusion, but Peabody wondered whether the committee was really best qualified for the task. “[I]t seems to me that you think school committee men more important than the teachers,” she tells him, “You will smile if I say you speak of teachers as if they were the schoolboys in comparison. You speak of
the legislature & school committee men as choosing books. . . . Teachers are the best judge of books” (199; emphasis in original). Unfortunately, Mann’s response was not very encouraging. He essentially dismissed her suggestion while complaining that there were currently no “suitable” books “fit to be recommended” for the series, even though in her letter Peabody had explicitly recommended Hawthorne as someone whose work more than qualified him to write for it (at least in her teacherly opinion).

In a sense, then, Peabody’s bookshop would be a chance to exercise her own judgment in the selection and recommendation of books. She would disseminate only “the most choice and valuable” texts “selected carefully by one who knows,” as she would advertise them in one of the local papers—chosen by someone “who knows” presumably because she was first, foremost, and always a teacher. In describing her bookstore to Samuel Gray Ward, Peabody echoes these sentiments, acknowledging that it was, in the words of one of her friends, “so desirable to have this foreign bookstore—where people could obtain information—& so desirable to have the matter so much in my own hands as for me to be able to have only that in my shop which I chose—& could in a measure recommend.” Who better, after all, than a publisher, bookseller, and teacher to “render an inestimable service to the public,” as the Board of Education had put it, “by the circulation of good books, at reasonable prices”? (Second Annual Report, 18). In her search for “good books,” to take one example, one of her first acts as a publisher would be to ignore Mann’s “school committee men” sensibilities and begin publishing Hawthorne’s Grandfather’s Chair series of children’s books under her own imprint, although she happily stocked and advertised Mann’s School Library as well.

Choosing to begin her “first commercial enterprise” just as commerce itself “seemed about to be reformed out,” that is, in the midst of vociferous debates over the perils of capitalism that marked the decades of 1830s and 1840s, Peabody embarked upon a literary establishment that she believed would contribute to the great works of moral, educational, and economic reform. In her 1841 letter to her friend, Samuel Gray Ward, Peabody offers a more detailed rationale for the enterprise. “This was the plan of my store,” she writes, “that I should keep one in which were to be found no worthless books—shadows of shadows—& nothing of any kind of a secondary nature.” With these remarks on the moral and commercial value of her new enterprise, she articulates a desire to combat what she sees as a print culture promoting, to use her description of teaching in the preface to her Record of a School, “avowedly mercenary ends, or at least, secondary purposes,” and thus
indiscriminately circulating bad texts over good ones. But if her notion of “no worthless books” in this letter to Ward is akin to Mann’s plan for “good books” because they both seek to cultivate restraint in a print culture run amok, there are distinctions to be made between them nonetheless, as her differences with Mann on the selection of books also suggest.

With such considerations in mind—and after the debacle over the Conversations—Peabody was poised to tackle the state of antebellum print culture. By the time she decided upon the bookstore, she had already witnessed first-hand the kind of communal damage that the circulation of bad texts could cause. In early 1831, when she was teaching school in Boston with her sister, Mary, Elizabeth became aware of a scandal involving one of her “lovely and beloved” female pupils and a fast and loose set of young Boston men, whose antics Peabody claimed were inspired by the widely read English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Perhaps now best known for the opening of his 1830 novel Paul Clifford, which begins “It was dark and stormy night,” Bulwer-Lytton was then fashionable in Boston for his novel Henry Pelham, or, The Adventures of a Gentleman (1828), whose exposé of high-class life prompted interest in the hedonistic activities it decried. The scandal was a formative experience; she returned to it nearly fifty years later, mentioning it not once, but twice in her Reminiscences. Declaring that news of scandal brought her into “intimate knowledge of the corruption of the imagination and life of some gifted young men of Boston,” she confesses that it “was a frightful revelation to me to see crime committed . . . out of purely egotistical profligacy” (Peabody, Reminiscences, 320).

But those who distributed and promoted such books—editors, publishers, and booksellers—were generally thought to be culpable in the evils of the press and as bad in their tendencies as writers like Bulwer-Lytton. One periodical implored everyone involved in the production and distribution of books to consider the consequences of their actions, asking “those authors who have consciences, to weigh well what they write; with publishers, to consider beforehand what they publish; and with booksellers, to remember that readers, even female readers, have souls.” Some believed that industry practices made assembling an entire collection of good books impossible. Bronson Alcott himself had publicly attacked the character of most bookstores, declaring them “filled with their trash” and “a great field of temptation to children and youth”:

The child finds his way into one of them. Here is a pretty book—he wants this—the parent is unwilling to refuse him, and the book is bought; and what
is it? He would not be understood as saying that there were no books in our bookstores which were of the right character. Some, there indeed were, but they were few and far between. His own collection at his school room was small; and he did not believe it possible, he would again say, to find a large collection.\footnote{47}

While Peabody had learned not to trust his judgment—Alcott’s low opinion of books led her to complain that he had no plan “to search the thought and views of other minds—in any faith that they will help his own. He only seems to look in books for what agrees with his own thoughts”—his were not isolated opinions.\footnote{48} At the very least, comments like these reveal the power that antebellum Americans attributed to the printed word, which, according to one editorialist, was “daily and hourly exerting its influences on the youthful mind of our country, whether perceived or unperceived.”\footnote{49} By striking at character of print culture, therefore, reformers thought they were striking at the essence of the modern condition, and tackling the task of reform at one of its roots: the modern world was a reading world, after all.

Not surprisingly, new library ventures were exceedingly popular in the antebellum period, and several kinds of libraries existed simultaneously, with varying levels of access. First, there were traditional college libraries, which were not available to the general public. Then there were social libraries, private book collections acquired by groups of individuals joined together expressly for the purpose of forming their own library. The most prominent example of a social library was the Boston Athenaeum, founded in 1807, which quickly became one of the premier libraries in the country. It was very exclusive, to say the least.\footnote{50} There were also the circulating libraries, first established in Boston in 1765. These commercial enterprises, their proponents maintained, were democratic in principle, their goal being to “make available to persons of moderate means the sources of knowledge previously obtainable solely by the wealthy.”\footnote{51} Since books at the turn of the nineteenth century were still relatively expensive to make and buy, these enterprises were very popular, distinguishing themselves not only by moderate subscription rates but also by their willingness to cater to women. Whereas an institution like the Boston Athenaeum restricted its membership to men (on one occasion, Peabody had to ask for special dispensation to conduct research there, seeking permission to borrow books on her own rather than through one of its male members), circulating libraries were willing to lend their articles to anyone who could meet their modest fees.\footnote{52} But if social libraries’ membership costs and practices effectively restricted participation to the elite classes,
circulating libraries’ accessibility came at the cost of literary and cultural value. Aimed at making a profit, these libraries catered to what their critics claimed was the public’s taste for pernicious forms of entertainment, namely novels and others fictions. Over time, they even trimmed their holdings, once dominated by newspapers, histories, and other nonfiction forms, until they carried fiction almost exclusively.\textsuperscript{53} Not surprisingly, these libraries were stigmatized, especially when considered in connection with the “fairer sex.” From the late eighteenth century onward, numerous texts condemned the image of the young woman who attempted to improve her mind through the stock of a circulating library.\textsuperscript{54}

In fact, when Peabody informed her friends about her plans for such an enterprise, some hesitated to endorse it. Among those responses we have on record, Theodore Parker, for instance, admitted to Peabody that “the plan [for her bookshop] did not at first strike me so favorably as it did you.”\textsuperscript{55} William Ellery Channing was also cautious. Though he generally approved of her idea for a bookstore (apparently agreeing with her crusade for the necessary elevation of business, and telling her that such an endeavor might “partake of the dignity of literature”), he expressed reservations about her ideas for an accompanying circulating library. “The only objection I have to a circulating library,” he tells her in a 22 June 1840 letter, “is the corrupt taste of readers, who often want books which one would not like to circulate” (quoted in Peabody, \textit{Reminiscences}, 409). Channing, as Peabody remembered it, had on more than one occasion expressed his “fear that to lose oneself in imaginative sympathy with beautiful heroes and heroines, sympathizing as we always do with the noble, and gratified by the poetic justice which was dealt to all the characters, satisfied us with ourselves, though our own life was of a lower tone” (\textit{Reminiscences}, 267). Essentially, Channing worried that the usual circulating library fare tended to foster complacence where there was a great need for continual self-improvement, the heart and soul of a Unitarian self-culture movement that saw the challenge of human life as a steady progression toward self-perfection. This was putting nineteenth-century fears of fiction in the best possible terms, since (as Thoreau’s complaints at the start of this chapter also suggest) most objections centered on the moral degeneration and intellectual decay that novel-reading engendered in those who indulged it, especially women.

Peabody, however, took pains to reassure her friends that her plan was well within the bounds of propriety. For instance, she wrote to Channing: “On the first of August, I shall make my debut in the mercantile world, having made all my arrangements. . . . The plan is a very safe one. It will be hardly possible
for any loss to accrue in any direction even if it does not succeed and there is
every encouragement of success. Every body assures me they think it perfectly
‘lady-like.’ Her emphasis on the “lady-like” dimensions of the endeavor, not
to mention its “safety,” indicates that she knew full well that others were wor-
rried a certain kind of trade might not only sully her image as a woman but
also damage her social status, a distinction intimately connected with, and
as equally rigid as, nineteenth-century constructions of gender. In claiming
business for the realm of women, however, she posits it as a kind of a “debut”
or coming of age for herself, comparing the opening of her store to the party
at which a young woman is officially presented to society. Thus, business was
not incompatible with proper gender roles, but merely a step in the full devel-
opment of a woman.

The discussion of sex and business talent was in fact an ongoing issue
between Peabody and Channing. In a 7 June 1840 letter, he offers his qualms
about her entrance into the book trade, and, in a gendered moment of slip-
page between moral and commercial concerns, cautions her that in an “age
of proprieties” difficulties may arise in her business efforts that she cannot
anticipate (quoted in Reminiscences, 408). Despite being nonetheless “glad”
to see what he calls an “experiment made by a woman equal to the task,”
perhaps she was not the woman he had in mind; he bluntly tells her that
he “distrust[s]” her “business talent” (408). For her part, Peabody was quick
to find evidence to the contrary, calling his attention to her early successes
at the store. “I have now been a month in my new business and I think you
will be interested to know how I get on,” she writes him, “Well, I have sold
a hundred dollars worth of books, the profit on which, together with your
kind present, has covered all the expenses, and my getting under way.” Then,
responding directly to his doubts about her “talent” for business, she asks:
“Now do you not think this proves quite a business talent? Nothing in a
mercantile line could be as agreeable.” Things were going so well, in fact, that
she had big plans for the enterprise; she had “a great deal many orders on
Europe” and had begun “to dream of the time when I shall go thither myself
on direct transactions with the French and German bookstores.” Her book-
shop, therefore, was a chance to silence her critics, to show them that not only
did there exist large collections of good books in the world, as Alcott and
others had denied there were, but also that she, a woman and teacher, would
be the one to assemble and disseminate them.

While she was not the first woman to own and operate a circulating
library in Boston, nor the only bookshop to sell foreign books, Peabody’s
enterprise would be an influential source for the dissemination of foreign
literature in the city. In an 1840 letter to Channing, Peabody explains one of the more tangible benefits of her establishment:

I have ordered the two principal German periodicals, which having been retained a short while in the room to be examined by the subscribers, I shall allow to circulate with the other books. None of the Continental periodicals I have ordered are taken out [at] the University or Athenaeum, and this will be an attraction of the library. I shall have more than a hundred and fifty dollars worth of periodicals, which are to be circulated only among fifty subscribers. Therefore those who subscribe will have some real benefit.

While one might bring books back from the continent (if one could afford to travel there) or subscribe to foreign periodicals oneself (again, if one could afford it), foreign texts were generally a scarce and expensive commodity in antebellum America. Indeed, mere months before Peabody opened her shop, Margaret Fuller lamented, in a 12 January 1840 letter to her friend Sarah Helen Whitman, the dearth of German literature available in the area: “There are few German books for sale in Boston, now Burdett has given up his shop. You will be more likely to find them at Behr’s in New York. The vol of Tieck could not I presume, be bought, you might get it from the library of Harvard university, if you have a friend there” (LMF, 2:118). Of course, the problem was whether one had a male connection at the university, since, like the Boston Athenaeum, the Harvard library was closed to the public at large and accessible only by men. Peabody’s enterprise, therefore, would seek to counter such practices, making what were rare foreign commodities available to those interested in the materials regardless of their sex or affiliation, offering them literary “contact with the world” within a culture that largely excluded it.

Transcending West Street

Indeed, Peabody posits this notion of “contact” as a defining feature of transcendentalism itself. In an essay entitled “Plan of the West Roxbury Community” (1842), appearing in The Dial (1840–44), the transcendental periodical that was, for a time, published out of her own bookshop, she offers advice to Ripley and his Brook Farm associates as they embarked upon their utopian experiment (they had, after all, first discussed in her bookstore their plans for the commune). In the process, she warns against dangers inherent to the “spirit of coterie”:
Some may say, “already this taint has come upon them, for they are doubtless transcendentalists.” But to mass a few protestants together and call them transcendentalists, is a popular cant. Transcendentalism belongs to no sect of religion, and no social party. It is the common ground to which all sects may rise, and be purified of their narrowness; for it consists in seeking the spiritual ground of all manifestations. . . . [I]t would be seen, if the word were understood, that transcendentalism, notwithstanding its name is taken in vain by many moonshiny youths and misses who assume it, would be the best of all guards against the spirit of coterie.  

Chafing at the term “transcendentalist” as a catch-all phrase for those seeking to counter troubling cultural tendencies, whether it be the growing materialism that worried the Brook Farmers or the cultural ignorance and provincialism that were her own concerns, Peabody asserts that the transcendentalist is not simply a nay-sayer. While those who gathered at Brook Farm were indeed all “protestants” because they dissented against the social and economic arrangements of their day, they were certainly not all “transcendentalists.” To call them all by this name is to try to dismiss transcendentalism as nothing more than a coterie. Instead, the transcendentalist is one who embraces the vast potential of a human culture expanding above and beyond the bounds of self or nation. Aligning “coterie” with intellectual and spiritual “narrowness” that the transcendentalist flatly rejects, she asserts the necessity of expanding rather than contracting one’s involvement in and knowledge of the world.  

As a counter to the “spirit of coterie” threatening American life, and as a way to “transcend” the vices of its largely parochial print culture, Peabody’s bookshop therefore sought to provide customers with an array of foreign materials and to allow their curiosity greater room for experimentation without resorting to the kinds of questionable texts already monopolizing circulation. In her Dial essay “A Glimpse of Christ’s Idea of Society” (1841), the companion piece to her article on Brook Farm, Peabody makes a case for her transcendental model of education:

Moral and Religious life should be the atmosphere in which the human being unfolds . . . . Thus only may he be permitted to freely act out what is within him; and have no temptations but necessary ones; and the intellectual apprehension follow rather than precede his virtue. This is not to take captive the will, but to educate it. If there were no wrong action in the world organized in institutions, children could be allowed a little more moral experimenting than is now convenient for others, or safe for themselves.
In this context, one can argue that Peabody envisioned her bookshop as a kind of right “action in the world organized in [an] institution.” If “education,” in the grandest sense of the term, was a freeing of the will rather than the imposition of some set of ideas upon it (as the mishaps at the Temple School confirmed, and as she indicated in her published defense of Alcott), then the bookstore and foreign library would aim to achieve this lofty goal by offering nothing more than a place for “moral experimenting” using a method of both convenience and safety. It would offer convenience in the form of easy access to a variety of otherwise unattainable materials such as foreign-language texts, and its safety as an environment for experimentation came from the fact that Peabody only stocked books of which she herself approved, having considered them unquestionable in quality.

The bookstore offered customers several tiers of access to books, from the chance to purchase for themselves lavish editions of both classic and modern writers, foreign or domestic, to the opportunity to subscribe to her reading room for immediate access to new texts, to simply waiting to borrow, for a small fee, what books and periodicals she allowed to circulate. Announcing a yearly subscription price of $5 or individual texts at 12 ½ to 25 cents a volume depending on their size, her foreign library’s book catalogue for 1840, for instance, lists roughly 1,187 entries, initially consisting of 26 periodicals and collections of books arranged by language, most notably French, German, and English, but also Italian and Spanish. The library was, as the catalogue states, “on the increase,” and would later grow to include texts in several other languages. The list includes transcendental favorites such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle, prominent foreign periodicals in English, French, and German, as well as American journals such as The Dial, the Christian Examiner, the Boston Quarterly, and the Western Messenger, histories both ancient and modern, travel narratives, poetry, numerous English translations of foreign texts, including one of Peabody’s own favorites, Herder’s Spirit of Hebrew Poetry, and even novels in various languages.

But Peabody did not merely sell books and distribute foreign texts; as one of the only female publishers in Boston, she also printed local talent. In accordance with her pledge to circulate only books of the highest moral “worth,” her first acquisition as a publisher was William Ellery Channing’s Emancipation (1840). Channing gave her his manuscript, its copyright, and the rights to all possible profits resulting from its publication as a show of good faith in her enterprise, but the sales of the edition were not favorable. Although some would charge her with mismanaging the affair, according to
Peabody the problem was less a matter of business incompetence than of sexism and bookseller collusion:

Very soon after this publication, Dr. Channing was written to by the Antislavery Societies of New York and Philadelphia for leave to print editions, each of twenty-thousand copies. He said it must not be done until my edition of a thousand copies had been sold. But I told him that I found booksellers would only take copies of me on sale to be accounted for in six months; for the publishers seemed to conspire to discourage a woman from attempts to publish; and I feared that if the popular tide was not taken at once, his dearest end—to serve the Antislavery cause—would be frustrated. I also said that if he did not, I should write to the Societies to go on with the cheap editions and risk the loss of mine. Mine, indeed, was never entirely sold. (Reminiscences, 412)

Suggesting that local booksellers “conspired” to discourage a woman from publishing by purchasing her goods only at discounted rates and even then postponing their payments, Peabody faced a choice between personal profit and much-needed exposure for Channing’s greater cause (which 40,000 copies were sure to achieve, being an impressive number of volumes in circulation). While she kept to the principles of the bookstore, choosing to promote the “dearest end” of anti-slavery and, thus, the communal good over her own pecuniary interests, here, then, she came face to face with the specter of “coterie” in the shape of antebellum Boston’s sexist publishing practices. She had to confront book publishers’ masculine designs to keep a woman out of what they narrowly claimed as their business despite her best efforts to “transcend” them. Certainly, it did not help that Channing, having visited Philadelphia, informed her, “My ‘Emancipation’ (which is yours in a sense) has been spread widely, and I believe done much good. It has been put into the hands of men of influence” (Reminiscences, 420–21). In attributing his book’s success to “men of influence” (whether its male readers or the men who distributed it to them), he reproduces masculinist logic even as his parenthetical aside admits another possibility; the book was hers, not only in the sense that she held its copyright, but also in the signification that she, with “shrewd business sense,” had accurately judged its popular demand where he had not, allowing it to find its way into the right men’s hands in the first place.

The opposition she faced from men within the industry is not surprising when one considers the rise of the “gentlemen publisher” in antebellum America. Even though the realities of business often clashed with such an ideal, this model, as Susan Coultrap-McQuin has noted, emphasized pater-
nal, family-like relations with authors while espousing noncommercial aims, and envisioned the male publisher as society’s moral steward. The image solidified itself as chaos, competition, and profit in the industry increased, not to mention as the prevalence of professional women writers and their female readership became increasingly hard to ignore. Whether this formulation arose in response to the overwhelming female presence in the literary profession, or whether increasing female participation in the literary market resulted from the existence of a patriarchal structure with which many women were already comfortable, the power dynamic between “male” publisher and “female” author set the terms for much of women’s and men’s participation in the marketplace. Perhaps, then, many of Peabody’s male counterparts in Boston did not appreciate her efforts to upset the conventional order of literary business.

Peabody continued to express her frustrations with an industry dominated by men whose practices were so much worse than she had anticipated. In a June 1841 letter to Channing, she details “disappointments in [her] undertaking” in both bookstore and library, writing, “I am disappointed because encouragements and expectations held out to me by those in the trade, with whom I conversed have not been acted up to.” First, she was “curtailed of my plan of importing according to my own judgment by Wiley’s refusing to give me more than ten days credit—too short a time to sell books, so I am obliged to limit myself to orders which makes my business smaller.” The Wiley referred to in the quotation is the New York publishing firm of Wiley and Putnam, where Peabody’s cousin, George Palmer Putnam, and his partner, John Wiley, had agreed to act as agents in furnishing her with books. The change in terms must have been galling for Peabody since the whole point of the enterprise was, as she indicates, to establish a bookshop guided by her “own judgment.” Yet here was another man imposing himself upon her plans. Second, she was “disappointed” with respect to her circulating library because, here too, “Wiley has withdrawn his first agreement which was to let me have them on credit, to be paid only in January. So my library is at a stand still, and unless I can get a letter of credit on London, I shall have to sell it next winter.”

Similarly, she shared with Channing her dismay “in finding rules of the trade so bad morally, and the whole concern so rotten. I have obtained some insight into a deeply rooted evil in society that I would have appreciated no other way. But there is here and there a man who cares more for his conscience than for money. All such that I know are poor—small dealers.” Peabody’s protests notwithstanding, most antebellum booksellers were,
in fact, “small dealers.” In 1850, there were only 1,720 booksellers in the nation, while the average lifespan for a bookstore was barely over one year. At twelve years (1840–52), Peabody’s was a long-lived enterprise, even as it would never rival the successes of bigger firms. But if her observations about “poor” book dealers simply reflect the material realities of the antebellum industry, in lamenting “rules of the trade” she found “so bad morally,” and in identifying only “here and there a man” who fully understood such literary ventures as moral enterprises, Peabody expresses her frustration with male competitors who, more often than not, placed the “mercenary” or “secondary” aims of business before the “primary” one of self-culture. Ultimately, then, the “deeply rooted” industry “evil” of which she speaks is not the lack of capital or the economic instabilities that modern historians identify as endemic to the period, but rather what she came to understand as a spirit of masculine coterie. While some complained bitterly about what they saw as the literary market’s increasingly feminized character, as Hawthorne did when he famously recoiled from its “mob of scribbling women” (CE, 17:304), Peabody saw it as a space of male prerogative (embodied in the male reviewers, editors, publishers, distributors, and booksellers with whom she had contact), which could be arbitrarily competitive, inhibitive, and restrictive.

Peabody’s struggles with booksellers in Boston and Wiley and Putnam in New York are not the only problems worth noting. From January 1842 to July 1843, she published The Dial, having been suggested as successor by Margaret Fuller after the journal’s financially troubled publisher, Weeks and Jordan, went bankrupt. She inherited it in precarious financial condition; not only was Weeks, Jordan, & Co. “much in debt” financially to The Dial, but Fuller had also not been paid “a penny” in all her time as editor, overall journal subscriptions were down, and the journal was barely covering its publishing costs. Peabody made several sensible suggestions as publisher. First, she issued a notice in the April 1842 issue in which she asked subscribers to help the journal by paying on time or in advance (a common refrain among periodicals with long lists of delinquent subscribers). Next, she asked them to send their money and names directly to her rather than the journal’s agents in order to save on commission. Finally, hoping to rein in excessive publishing costs, she encouraged those who bought single issues to subscribe so that she could more accurately determine the number of copies to be printed. Despite these management decisions, when Peabody failed to get the April 1843 issue to booksellers by the first of the month, Emerson changed publishers, hiring his own, James Munroe of Boston. Emerson seems to have blamed Peabody for the journal’s continued woes, pointing to her April
When all was said and done, Peabody was not so easily deterred by such setbacks, or by narrow-minded opinions on the prospects of her business, and through her own persistence, as well as the help of various friends, what Channing had envisioned as merely a “resort for ladies” in fact became a bustling of intellectual exchange for those of both sexes. She was pleased to find “at the end of the first year that I had done something, notwithstanding the failure of my first plans” (Peabody, Reminiscences, 413; emphasis in original). One customer, Edward Everett Hale, called the store an “immense convenience” for “young Boston” in its determination to “keep more in the current of the flow of German and French life,” and claimed that to “one who remembers how very ‘English’ the training of young Boston had been till now,—fed on Blackwood, Fraser, and the English quarterlies,—it will be seen that the opening of this modest reading-room for books printed in France and Germany, with a chance to meet those who read them most, was an enlargement of the means of education.”82 Another contemporary, George Bradford, called the bookstore “a sort of Transcendental Exchange” where people “young and old resorted . . . to talk with the learned and active-minded proprietor, to get the literary news of the day, the last word of philosophy, of religious literature and thought,” as well as “questions then agitating the community.”83 Peabody’s transcendental revolt against narrow-mindedness through the importation of foreign learning and the push for intellectual collaboration obviously had personal resonance in the sexism she faced, in so far as she understood it as symptomatic of a larger cultural parochialism, or “spirit of coterie,” at work.

Peabody’s example shows us that nineteenth-century American women could be positioned toward cosmopolitanism, attracted to the transcendental, by the necessities of their circumstances. In a culture largely refusing women any active participation in its intellectual life, it is not surprising that Peabody turned to importation as a means for intellectual fulfillment, filling in the

Conclusion: “Transcendental Exchange”

failure as evidence of what he believed were her generally “careless” policies with regards to The Dial’s distribution.80 One cannot help but wonder, then, whether in his decision to replace the journal’s female publisher with a male one, Emerson hoped that a more capable man might not improve the periodical’s prospects—just as when Fuller resigned as editor and Emerson took over, Theodore Parker declared to him that The Dial could finally “grow up to vigorous manhood.”81
process a market void that others in their short-sightedness had overlooked or denied. The bookshop became a place where Boston residents could go to satisfy their need for more than what the mainstream market had to offer, and where there were sure to be others who shared their interests. As Margaret Fuller reveals in a 7 November 1840 letter to Emerson, Peabody’s business model actually worked: “Will you send to me at Miss Peabody’s,” she asks him, “the remaining volume’s Pietro della Valle which she is to have in her Foreign Library, and foreign they will surely be.—The other day I was sitting there and two young ladies coming in asked first for Bettina and then for Les Sept Chordes &c—I suppose next time they will ask for Pietro and Munchausen” (*LMF*, 2:182). Fuller’s wry comments about the popularity of Peabody’s stock (the books were “foreign” indeed because she could never quite get her hands on the ones she wanted), and her minor competition with the other young ladies over their voracious desire for the same foreign literature, reveals that women devoured the cosmopolitan and the “transcendental” alternatives that Peabody provided them.