Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalist Movement

Part I

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Professor Ashton Nichols was born in Washington, D.C.; grew up in Baltimore, Maryland; and graduated in 1975 from the University of Virginia with a Bachelor of Arts degree with high honors in philosophy. As an undergraduate, he was a DuPont Scholar and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He pursued a career in journalism, first at the Free-Lance Star in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he received awards from the Associated Press and the Virginia Press Association, and later, at the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C. In 1978, he returned to the University of Virginia, receiving his M.A. in English in 1979 and his Ph.D. in English in 1984.

In 1988, after four years of teaching at Auburn University, Dr. Nichols was appointed assistant professor of English at Dickinson College. His first book appeared that year, The Poetics of Epiphany: 19th-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment (University of Alabama). He was promoted to associate professor in 1992 and to full professor in 1998. In 2003, he was named the John J. Curley ’60 and Ann Conser Curley ’63 Faculty Professor of Language and Literature in the English Department at Dickinson. His research and teaching focus on the relationship between 19th- and 20th-century literature and, more recently, on connections between literature, particularly poetry, and science during the century before Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species.

Dr. Nichols published The Revolutionary "I": Wordsworth and the Politics of Self-Presentation (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin’s) in 1998, and most recently, he has edited a teaching anthology, Romantic Natural Histories: William Wordsworth, Charles Darwin, and Others, for Houghton Mifflin in Boston (2004). He has also produced A Romantic Natural History: 1750–1859, a hypertext scholarly project that has been recognized for excellence by The New York Times and the BBC in London. His scholarly publications cover a wide range of topics: Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Thomas Pynchon, Seamus Heaney, African exploration narratives, Victorian poetry, and travel writing. Dr. Nichols has also published nature writing essays, numerous poems, and several short stories. His awards include the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching and the Ganoe Award for Inspirational Teaching. In recent years, he has delivered keynote addresses and invited lectures in China, England, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Cameroon, and Morocco.

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Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalist Movement

Scope:

Few movements in American social and intellectual history have been as influential as the cluster of ideas we have come to call Transcendentalism. From Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “self-reliant soul” and Henry David Thoreau’s “different drummer” to modern ideas about individualism and democracy, Transcendentalism has had a powerful impact on central aspects of American life. In addition to familiar names, such as Emily Dickinson and Frederick Douglass, this series of lectures will examine a number of less well-known American originals: Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing, A. Bronson Alcott, and Jones Very. After exploring the religious dimensions of this wide-ranging movement, as well as its contributions to American politics and society, these lectures will end with reflections on the impact of Transcendentalism on contemporary American and world culture.

Our course will begin with the life and career of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the single most important figure behind American Transcendentalism. We will then move to a careful examination of Henry David Thoreau, Emerson’s most influential disciple. From Emerson’s contention that divinity resides in every person to Thoreau’s defense of civil disobedience, we will examine the details of Transcendentalism, the powerful intellectual movement these two helped to found and foster. After our study of the two figures at the heart of the movement, we will explore a wide range of engaging individuals: educational activists, such as Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody; literary figures, including Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson; and social reformers, such as Theodore Parker and Moncure Conway. Many of these teachers, writers, and thinkers were calling for nothing less than a remaking of society: the abolition of slavery, equal rights for women, freedom of religious thought and practice, educational reform, and attention to those aspects of experience that were essential to a good life. It is hard for us now to appreciate how radical and revolutionary Transcendentalism seemed in the decades leading up to the Civil War. These ideas, however, contributed to reforms and ways of thinking that are still with us today.

By tracing these wide-ranging currents of thought, we will come to understand ideas that led to other social changes, such as the development of liberal theologies, the rise of the periodical press, and numerous utopian and religious experiments. Our lectures will engage major texts, including Emerson’s Nature and “Self-Reliance,” Thoreau’s Walden, Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. We will also confront crucial historical events: John Brown’s raid, the Civil War, the rise of industrial New England, and the decline of the agricultural South. Our concluding lectures will identify Transcendentalism as a movement that not only shaped the 19th century but also continues to have a powerful influence on our own era. From the passive resistance of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., to increased gender equality, from the role of liberal denominations in American religion to emphasis on global understanding and cooperation, Transcendentalism continues to shape a uniquely American way of viewing ourselves and our place in the wider world.
Lecture One

Emerson, Thoreau, and Transcendentalism

Scope: The title of our first lecture is linked to the title of this series because the lives and ideas of two remarkable individuals form the basis of all that follows. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were giants of 19th-century America. Without them, the United States would not have developed into the nation it has become. We would not believe in the power of the individual to the extent that we do, nor would we see nature at the center of one view of the American psyche. Indeed, the decades from the 1830s through the 1860s saw a flowering of ideas that shaped new ways of thinking. Like such categories as Romanticism or the Enlightenment, however, a single term such as Transcendentalism resists easy definition. Suffice it to say that the search for a truth that might be true at all times in all places, the belief that evidence for such a spiritual truth might be found in and through the physical world, and the idea that each individual has the capacity to experience this truth in a personal way produced a series of writings and beliefs whose powerful currents can still be felt today.

Outline

I. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) is one of the greatest thinkers that America has produced.
   A. His ideas emerge out of European, classical, and even non-Western thought.
      1. He is often compared to the great Victorian sages of England: Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin. His ideas were as revolutionary as theirs, particularly his emphasis on the value of the individual.
      2. At the same time, Emerson is an American original, especially in his definitions of nature and the self.
      3. His ideas, though often abstract, had implications that could be interpreted in practical ways by others: abolition, women’s rights, educational reform.
      4. Emerson’s is not a unified system but, rather, a series of linked reflections that produced a wide-ranging “transcendental” philosophy.
      5. He offered belief in a personal divinity that resides in every human being and a version of nature that links us all to the wider world.
   B. Emerson appeared at a time when America was emerging from its chaotic beginnings to become a more stable and secure nation.
      1. He was born in 1803 to a liberal Unitarian minister and his quietly devout wife. Emerson’s father died when he was eight. His early privations led him to appreciate members of all classes of society.
      2. Emerson was never a distinguished student at Harvard or at divinity school, partly because of poor eyesight.
      3. He was ordained at the Second (Old North) Church in Boston shortly before marrying Ellen Tucker in 1829.
      4. Three years later, after her death from tuberculosis, he resigned; troubled by such theological doctrines as the Eucharist, he found himself too liberal even for liberal Unitarians.
      5. To recover from this spiritual crisis, Emerson traveled to Europe, where he met Coleridge, Wordsworth, Mill, and Carlyle.
      6. He returned home and moved into the Old Manse, a house later occupied by Nathaniel Hawthorne, where he finished his first masterpiece, Nature, and wrote the “Concord Hymn” with its famous “shot heard round the world.”
   C. The second phase of Emerson’s life began when he married Lydia Jackson in 1835 and became one of the first members of the Transcendental Club in 1836.
      1. He and Lydia (later Lidian) went on to have four children while he established a steady income through lecturing and writing.
      2. Along with his fellow Transcendentalists, he sought to bring about reforms in the arid, conservative intellectual climate of Harvard at the time.
      3. Such friends as Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau came often to visit.
      4. With Bronson Alcott and George Ripley and with Margaret Fuller as editor, Emerson began The Dial in 1840.
5. More essays and decades of success in his role as “Sage of Concord” followed; he lived a long life for these times and was buried near Hawthorne and Thoreau in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

II. What does Henry David Thoreau have to do with Emerson and the wider movement?

A. In short, Thoreau applied a number of Emerson’s ideas to the practical business of living.
   1. Walden was his most important experiment.
   2. His ideas also had direct political implications: individualism, abolition, resistance to civil government.
   3. Thoreau provides a version of “applied” Transcendentalism.

B. The idea of nature was central to this thinking—not just the more abstract Emersonian idea of nature, but a wild nature beyond humans.
   1. Thoreau also helped to create the idea of the power of place in America.
   2. He inspired a powerful strain of American sensitivity to the natural world.
   3. He encouraged us to “Simplify. Simplify,” and his basic ideas were simple.

C. Thoreau’s outer life may have been less eventful than Emerson’s, but his inner life was equally profound.
   1. He never married or produced a family, and he died in his mid-40s.
   2. He traveled widely throughout New England and helped to create a powerful sense of specific places: the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Cape Cod, and Maine.
   3. His Journals, recorded in careful detail for decades, offered up his powerful responses to his immediate experience.

III. The Transcendentalist movement was about a group of people, whom we will explore in detail, but also about a complex cluster of related ideas.

A. The concept is hard to define in simple or formal terms.
   1. It embodies the desire to reconcile science and rationality with religion.
   2. These thinkers linked theological ideas from Calvinism and Unitarianism to the idealism of Plato.
   3. This was a set of ideas that left much room for individual interpretation.
   4. Our initial working definition of Transcendentalism, however, will stress a divine force in each individual, a force that is also linked to nature and has the power to transform lives, as well as social institutions.
   5. This time in American history has been called the American Renaissance in relation to art and literature; our focus will extend beyond the literary and the artistic to emphasize philosophical, religious, and social ideas.
   6. Our method will not be chronological; rather, we will begin with detailed discussions of Emerson and Thoreau, followed by biographical focus on key individuals and thematic development of concepts, moving backward and forward in time.
   7. Some scholars have tended to emphasize the literary or the historical at the expense of the philosophical. Our lectures will establish the philosophical principles, then examine their applications to the themes of theology, social change, education, and literature.

B. This series of lectures will, thus, emphasize the lives and thoughts of Emerson and Thoreau but will link to literary, religious, and social figures and events.
   1. The sources of Transcendentalism include English Romanticism (especially Coleridge and the idea of the “one Life” and Wordsworth’s view of nature), German idealist philosophy, and Unitarianism, as well as Eastern religions.
   2. The movement began in a remarkably small geographic area. In Boston alone, the area from Beacon Hill to the Athenaeum, down Pinckney Street and Washington Street to West Street, encompassed the homes and workplaces of Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, the Alcotts, the Parkers, and the Peabody sisters.
   3. The ideas that began in Boston and Concord in the 1830s and 1840s, however, soon spread to other thinkers in New England, then to the rapidly expanding United States and eventually to Europe and beyond.

C. A number of important dates and events help us to begin.
   1. In 1819 William Ellery Channing preached “Unitarian Christianity,” a sermon designed to set out the tenets of an anti-doctrinal and non-Trinitarian Christianity.
2. In 1832 Emerson resigned his ministry.
3. The Transcendental Club was formed in 1836; Emerson’s *Nature* appeared.
4. When Thoreau moved to Walden Pond on July 4, 1845, he established a personal Independence Day.
5. Emerson’s death in 1882 can be seen as an arbitrary end date for the movement. Indeed, Transcendentalism was not so much a formal movement as a cluster of ideas that spread out like ripples on Walden Pond.

D. The impact of Transcendentalism was local and immediate, then wide-ranging and long-lasting.
   1. Margaret Fuller offered a new view of women in the 19th century.
   2. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* redefined American literature.
   3. Emily Dickinson’s poems offered a new picture of the human mind in an experimental version of the language.
   4. Thoreau wrote “Resistance to Civil Government” and later lectured to the people of Concord (“A Plea for John Brown”), echoing the abolitionist spirit.

E. The legacy of Transcendentalism has transformed these ideas in many ways, but they nevertheless continue in various strains of American and global culture.
   1. Religious liberalism and the secularization of American life can be traced to reforms begun in Massachusetts at this time.
   2. Literature, especially in America, owes a debt to writers as diverse as Hawthorne and Dickinson, Thoreau and Whitman.
   3. The Unitarian denomination today, the social gospel movement, and even such ideas as liberation theology, all have links to Transcendentalism.
   4. Transcendentalism developed within a uniquely American environment, but it also extends back to roots in Europe and forward to a global audience.
   5. More attention is devoted to these writers and thinkers now than at any time since the 19th century: There are outstanding biographies of such figures as Emerson and Thoreau by Robert Richardson, an important article on Bronson Alcott by Pulitzer Prize-winner Geraldine Brooks in *The New Yorker*, and superb Web sites, such as the one produced by Professor Ann Woodlief at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**Essential Reading:**
Myerson, Joel, ed. *Transcendentalism, A Reader*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Buell, Lawrence. *Literary Transcendentalism; Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Why did Transcendentalism begin with two such different figures as Emerson and Thoreau?
2. What was it about the ideas of the early Transcendentalists that made them so attractive to such a wide range of people?
Lecture Two
The Roots of American Transcendentalism

Scope: Like most important movements in intellectual history, American Transcendentalism did not spring fully grown from the heads of a few individuals. In fact, it had essential roots in earlier European, and even non-Western, ways of thinking. German idealists, Swiss educators, British and Continental Romantics, Neo-Platonists, and Christian mystics all contributed streams of thought to the philosophy that would shape the Transcendentalist movement. In addition, early American emphasis on freedom and democracy led to a new view of the value of the individual. Emerson was reading Buddhist and Hindu sacred writings when most Americans did not know that such texts existed. Both Emerson and Thoreau were attracted to idealist philosophies that saw permanent truth residing somehow beyond the physical world. On a practical level, the movement emerged at a moment when books and ideas from Europe were first becoming widespread in America and vice versa. As we begin to explore the ideas that developed as a result, it will be essential to see how many different sources contributed to what became a uniquely American way of thinking.

Outline

I. Transcendentalism was an American attempt to produce a new philosophy that would serve a new nation.
   A. A uniquely American religion or philosophy had to emerge in antithetical terms.
      1. The movement was anti-skeptical and opposed the empiricism of John Locke and David Hume, a reaction against rationalism.
      2. Transcendentalists accepted Immanuel Kant’s response to Locke and to David Hume’s skepticism.
      3. It was also a reaction to New England Calvinism and its senses of sin and damnation.
      4. America had been born in political idealism. Could it also produce philosophical idealism to match those democratic ideals?
   B. At the same time, there could be no such thing as complete originality.
      1. Thus, Thoreau’s revolutionary Walden begins with a chapter that includes references to the ancient myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the first doctor Hippocrates, the Asian philosopher Confucius, such historical figures as Sir Walter Raleigh, and the naturalist Charles Darwin on Tierra del Fuego.
      2. Emerson produced an English translation of Dante and remained influenced by European and classical models.
   C. The philosophical system of Kant became central as an apparent means of reconciling materialism with idealism.
      1. Kant says that we can know the phenomena revealed to us by our senses, but we can never know the noumena that lie beyond sense perception.
      2. Kant called “all knowledge transcendental which is concerned not with objects but with our mode of knowing objects.”
      3. The human self is not Hume’s mere “bundle” of sensations but closer to Kant’s version of the self, a “transcendental unity of the apperception.”
      4. Some have doubted the usefulness of this conclusion: What is it, finally, that is transcendent? How can we prove its existence?

II. This new “transcendental” way of seeing the world derived from a wide range of earlier sources and thinkers.
   A. English Romantic writers, primarily Coleridge and Wordsworth, were key sources, but also Blake, Shelley, and Keats, enhanced by American interpretations.
      1. William Wordsworth said that we might be able to see “into the life of things” (“Ode: Intimations of Immortality”) if we looked with an inward, spiritual eye.
      2. Coleridge talked of the “One life, within us and abroad,” a unifying spiritual energy found beneath the vagaries of passing sensory experience.
      3. Romanticism also embodied versions of Plato’s doctrine, in which the material world is composed of mere appearances, while reality is always a realm of pure and permanent ideas.
      4. The question is ultimately about what lasts: What knowledge is permanent?
B. German idealism was linked to Romanticism but added its own elements and emphases to New England Transcendentalist ways of thinking.
   1. Eighteenth-century German philosophers, such as Fichte and Herder, provided a naturalistic and organic mysticism.
   2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Novalis, Heine, and other German Romantic poets were all writing in powerful imagistic language.
   3. Schiller and Schelling had, by 1830, emphasized divinity in nature and stressed the value of human emotions.
   4. Knowledge of this German thought and writing arrived largely from English translations by Coleridge and Carlyle.

C. Christian mysticism provided another means of linking new ideas to traditional orthodoxy but provided less formal religious ideas.
   1. Such mystics as Jacob Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg were, by this time, internationally known for their visions.
   2. Both thinkers were Christians, but they were also mystics who claimed that the truth could be intuited directly and immediately without the need for intercessors; no priests, rituals, or texts were required.

D. Eastern religions and traditional writings provided concepts and ways of thinking that fit well with this cluster of ideas.
   1. Emerson was reading Asian sacred and historical writings long before most Americans knew they existed, especially those from India.
   2. The texts included the Bhagavad-Gita, the Vedas, and the Laws of Manu, in which Emerson encountered such concepts as maya.
   3. Thoreau read these works and reported on their immediate influence on him: “In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvad Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.”
   4. Emerson and Thoreau shared such ideas with Bronson Alcott and others.
   5. New England thinkers wanted a truth that had been true longer than the truth of Christianity; historicized religion had limits.

III. By the 19th century, countless thinkers were willing to separate their ideas from the past and advocate new ways of looking at the world.

A. Transcendentalism as a cluster of philosophical ideas arose among intellectual leaders around Boston and Cambridge from the 1820s to the 1850s.
   1. These thinkers emphasized the crucial importance of the personal self and the need for completely unfettered expression of individual minds, and they advocated a separate “inner light” that could guide each man and woman.
   2. “The highest revelation is that God is in every man,” Emerson wrote in his Journal.
   3. Thomas Jefferson had called himself a Unitarian and was clearly not a believer in the Trinity. Many Founding Fathers called themselves Deists.
   4. The Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi was meanwhile advocating for an innate personality in every child that could emerge through education.

B. These intellectuals looked for ideas that transcended ordinary sense experience. They also sought truths that were intuited rather than demonstrated, truths that could be found beyond established modes of thought and action.
   1. This desire for social and religious reform hearkened back to the American and French revolutions.
   2. These thinkers set forth schemes for effective social improvement, or they described unrealizable utopian dreams.

C. In terms of religious belief, the Transcendentalist “God” could be seen as the First Cause of the Deists, a force that created the material world and universal laws but did not intervene in human affairs.
   1. Deists, who believed in God but little else, and Unitarians had already argued for such a God, against the Calvinistic Old Testament judge.
   2. Emerson and Thoreau, like their followers, sought a mental or spiritual state that “transcended” the physical and empirical world.
3. Transcendental ideas demanded intuitive awareness that varies from individual to individual, creating a potential problem of relativism.

4. These ideas are linked to American democracy in terms of the ability of each individual to directly intuit what might be best for him or her.

5. Kant and the Neo-Platonists affirmed the possibility of transcendent knowledge, but Emerson believed it extended to morality. Emerson thus offered confusing ethics—if my moral truth is not your moral truth.

6. We can now offer an expanded definition of Transcendentalism: It derives from the “transcendental” philosophy of Immanuel Kant; its proponents emphasized the divine in nature, the value of the individual and of human intuition, and a spiritual reality that “transcends” sensory experience, while also providing a better guide for life than purely empirical or logical reasoning. The term refers to a cluster of concepts set forth by a number of individuals rather than a formal philosophy.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Harris, Kenneth Marc. “Coleridge, Carlyle and Emerson.”

Questions to Consider:
1. To what extent were the origins of Transcendentalism European, and to what extent were they uniquely American?

2. Why did American thinkers feel such a need to separate themselves from the philosophies that had preceded them?
Lecture Three
Emerson and the Idea of America

Scope: We begin our discussion of Emerson with a look at his remarkable life and times, because his life was so closely tied to his works and his works helped to produce a vision of America that is still with us today. Part of what made Emerson’s vision so powerful was its expansiveness. He placed few limits on the powers of the new nation or on the remarkable individuals who contributed to its democracy. “Self-Reliance” was not merely the title of one of his most influential essays; it was also a concept that summed up an entire philosophy of life. Just as each soul participated in the soul of the universe, so each American had a right to participate in the wider body politic. In addition, the Emersonian idea of an Over-Soul, a vaguely monotheistic deity with connections to many earlier ideas about God, allowed for a wide range of believers, and even nonbelievers, to participate in this new version of religious free thinking. Emerson’s ideas summed up young America’s emphasis on the liberty of each individual and the role of all those individuals in the formation of the state.

Outline

I. By 1830, America was, as we have seen, in need of a sense of its own uniqueness and defining qualities.
   A. There was a real anxiety about America not becoming a slavish copy of Europe.
      1. America had stated its ideals clearly, but what would they look like in practice?
      2. How might American literature, culture, and philosophy separate from their European forebears?
      3. How might a new democratic society draw the best from the past while leaving the worst behind?
   B. Emerson saw himself as one of these American originals.
      1. He strove for this level of originality throughout his lectures and essays.
      2. First, he broke with traditional structures, such as the church, the educational system, and politics as then practiced in the narrow two-party system.
      3. Second, he tended to use old words and ideas in new ways: self-reliance, the poet, nature, transcendental, and the like.
   C. His essays presented a series of ideas that shaped a new vision of America and Americans.
      1. His first essay was Nature (1836): “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” That nature is in me and I am in nature is a new and broad idea of nature, but Emerson is also saying, “So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes” and “Build, therefore, your own world” (Nature), which together, demonstrate the importance of point of view.
      2. He wrote in “The American Scholar” (1837): “I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy, in Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.” Here is our intellectual “Declaration”: nature, books, the past, the independent thinker, individuality, and the “scholar’s” power.
      3. “The Divinity School Address” (1838) caused widespread uproar because of its unorthodox emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, on the need for personal intuition of religious truth, and on the limitations of most ministers.
      4. “The Transcendentalist” (1842) defined the new philosophy in detail.
      5. “Self-Reliance” (1841) should perhaps have been called “soul-reliance” because it is not so much about rugged individualism as it is about emphasis on the “ideal” self. Emerson said, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist,” and “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.” I don’t need the old world, I need the new me.
      6. “The Over-Soul” (1841): “Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God.”
   D. By the time Emerson became editor of The Dial in 1842, he was seen nationally as the representative voice for the ideas being discussed by his circle.
      1. Each person must act as an individual, and this form of individual liberty was to be applied to almost every action.
2. Conscience should innately override the dictates of any particular religious or social practice or ritual.
3. The “inner voice” was the guide to this intuitive knowledge (Socrates).
4. These innate ideas came from a force that Emerson believed was the divine spark in all people, their connection to an infinite Over-Soul.

II. The Web of American Transcendentalism site (www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/) clearly explains the kind of America that Emerson was responding to at this time.

A. Populist Democrats opposed more conservative Whigs, but both parties supported few significant changes, except in their desire to add land to the United States.
   1. America needed progress, but also conformity, to move ahead.
   2. Challenges to industrialization and the dehumanization of workers and minority groups of “lesser” people could wait.
   3. The Industrial Revolution in England and industrial expansion in America were creating new forms of materialism (philosophical and economic) that provoked an “idealistic” response from Emerson and those like him.

B. Confrontations arose about the rights of others, but women, slaves, and Native Americans were virtually ignored by both political parties.
   1. Slavery was seen by some as necessary in order to keep the southern economy in balance with northern industry.
   2. Women were necessary, if unpaid, workers with no rights to vote and no rights for the redress of their numerous grievances.
   3. Native Americans continued to occupy valuable lands that would have to be bargained for or appropriated.

C. Such differences between individuals and classes of people expanded to include questions about ethical values and economic wealth.
   1. Immigrants came from as close by as Mexico and as far away as Asia, with large numbers coming from Ireland with the onset of the potato famine in 1845.
   2. Industry expanded rapidly and farming diminished. Farmers suddenly became factory workers, employed by others and seemingly threatened by minority groups and immigrants.
   3. Many questioned the value of commerce and monetary wealth. A self-sufficient, rural farmer had a very different sense of financial necessity than an urban factory worker, what Ruskin called a “wage-slave.”
   4. Rural life in the South felt equally threatened by northern industrialization and by abolitionists.
   5. Were America’s values only monetary and economic, or were there other sorts of ethical values that needed to be emphasized?

D. The decades from 1820 to 1860 saw numerous failed compromises that tried to reconcile northern free states with southern slave states.
   1. This covering up of underlying problems contributed to pent-up energies that were released, first, by John Brown’s raiders and, soon, at Fort Sumter.
   2. There were some halfhearted reforms, but these did not make it to Congress: Alcohol taxation led to temperance societies; such events as the Amistad mutiny (1839) fostered anti-slave societies; and the Indian Removal Act produced the Trail of Tears.
   3. In New England especially, numerous people called for new voices, new ideas, and new alliances that could offer effective solutions.

III. The links between this political mood and Emerson’s new ideas for America are evident by 1837, when he says in “The American Scholar”: “We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds […] A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.”

A. Emerson wanted to shrug off the shackles of European society and stake a prophetic claim for American culture. The result linked his intellect to a personal version of spiritual life.
   1. It was controversial to leave “group-think” behind to this extent.
   2. His ideas were seen as anticlerical, anti-organizational, anti-orthodox, and perhaps even antisocial.
3. “Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood” (“Self-Reliance”).

B. By 1836, Emerson was associated with a larger group of people, the loosely organized circle of intellectuals, reformers, and writers who united themselves under the term Transcendentalism.
1. The essential idea was that a portion or spark of divinity resided in each individual and could be accessed by a transcendent self.
2. The idea of the self gained a new value and authority because of the role played by this inner voice.
3. The individual soul could be identified with the Over-Soul, or the world soul, or perhaps even “God.”
4. The details of our own experiences are a microcosm of overall existence.
5. The world needed to be understood in spiritual terms rather than through reductive materialism.

C. Out of the Emersonian idea of America emerged a wide range of related ideas: Thoreau’s naturalism and commitment to civil disobedience, Walt Whitman’s self-conscious and first-person “I,” the doctrine of self-reliance, utopian experiments at Brook Farm and Fruitlands, a liberalized Unitarian theology, and a new view of educational theory and practice.
1. Each person could reflect privately or could commune with nature; then, through writing, study, art, or manual labor, each human might transcend the senses and come to understand beauty, goodness, and truth.
2. Social justice would emerge from this way of thinking because each person would see all individuals as equal.
3. The spiritual eye, what Blake called the “visionary” eye and Emerson the “transparent” eyeball, can see a different truth than the “vegetable” eye.
4. A new sense of the uniquely American landscape and the grandeur of its geographic places emerged but also a sense of the “mindscape” of sensitive, transcendent individuals.
5. A new view of the American psyche or soul arose, a soul that is expansive and sensitive, delicate in its observational abilities yet powerful in its potential to bring about social change.
6. “Let us, if we must have great actions, make our own so” (“Spiritual Laws,” 1841).

Essential Reading:
Richardson, Robert D. Emerson: The Mind on Fire.

Supplementary Reading:
Buell, Lawrence. Emerson.

Questions to Consider:
1. What was it about Emerson’s background and education that made him so well suited to assume the role of American sage?
2. What was it about America that made the country so ripe for a new movement in philosophical, theological, social, and aesthetic ideas?
Lecture Four

Emerson and Transcendentalism

Scope: More than any other single figure, Emerson is the intellectual father and the emotional godfather of Transcendentalism in America. Though many other thinkers contributed to the movement, it was Emerson’s lectures and published essays that gave form to this sometimes amorphous range of ideas. Emerson began his adult life as a Unitarian minister, but he left the church after only three years, feeling that his liberal attitudes made the pulpit no longer a viable place for the dissemination of his ideas. In the process of finding his own brand of religion, Emerson developed a new set of philosophical ideals for countless others to follow. He preached a gospel of almost secular salvation. The Transcendental Club, which he helped to form, was a gathering of individuals who were generally suspicious of organized religion; indeed, they were skeptical of organizations of any kind. When Emerson said, in his book-length essay *Nature*, that “Nature is the symbol of the spirit,” he set forth a powerful idea whose repercussions are still with us.

Outline

I. Emerson’s first and greatest fear, the one that led directly to his need for a new way of thinking, was dogmatism in religion.
   A. After giving the “Divinity School Address” (1838), perhaps his most controversial, he preached against the truth of miracles; he saw them as unnecessary. We can compare, for example, the poet Shelley on miracles.
      1. What were the spiritual truths that might be true for everyone?
      2. How could the objective truths of science be reconciled with the obviously conflicting claims of varying religions and various sects within religions? This became a special problem because Emerson saw himself as a naturalist and a scientist.
      3. In *Nature* (1836), he had said, “Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts,” but what was the precise relationship?
      4. What about the truths contained in the other great religions of the world?
   B. As the scholar Martin Bickman has noted, the response to attempts to establish such truth was not all positive. Such ideas often led to hostility and satire.
      1. One minister from Baltimore said, “[A] new philosophy has risen, maintaining that nothing is everything in general, and everything is nothing in particular.”
      2. Charles Dickens noted that he learned while visiting the United States that “whatever was unintelligible would certainly be transcendental.”
      3. Edgar Allan Poe told a young writer that it was easy to write like a Transcendentalist; just use small words and turn them upside down.
   C. In addition to this fear of abstraction, a related problem was the tension between individual thought and group activity. Discussions by small groups of individuals, however, became the vehicle for many of these ideas.
      1. Sometimes Emerson called the gathering a symposium, sometimes a club—Hedge’s Club, the Aesthetic Club, the Transcendental Club were all temporary names—but it was always a forum for new ideas, a room in someone’s house full of exciting conversation and often equally energetic disagreement. A sense of this group is revealed in the topics of their debates, as Robert Richardson’s biography describes them.
      2. In May of 1836, at George and Sophia Ripley’s in Boston, the group discussed the question “What is the essence of Religion as distinct from morality?”
      3. On October 3, 1836, at Bronson Alcott’s in Boston, the discussion topic was “American Genius—the causes which hinder its growth, and give us no first rate productions.”
      4. On October 18 of the same year, at Orestes Brownson’s house, it was “Education of Humanity.”
      5. “Is Mysticism an element of Christianity?” was the focus in May 1838.
      6. In June 1838, at Cyrus Bartol’s house in Boston, it was “On the character and genius of Goethe.”
      7. In December of 1838, also at Bartol’s, the focus was “Pantheism.”
8. Early members of the circle included a wide range of individuals: Henry Hedge, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller, among others.

D. Emerson’s theory of language was very important. In May of 1840, at Emerson’s, the topic for discussion was “The Inspiration of the Prophet and Bard, the nature of Poetry, and the causes of sterility of poetic inspiration in our Age and country”: a key role for literature as well.
1. Emerson followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau in claiming that language began in names for natural objects, which then operated as spiritual symbols.
2. Thus, every word was originally like a poem or a metaphor. The spoken word stood in for the object it represented but also for an immaterial, mental truth. As he says, the “natural” fact transmits a “spiritual” fact.
3. But this immediacy of organic language fades over time; language gets worn out and grows more and more abstract until it becomes merely arbitrary signs that remove us from our perceptions and their significance.
4. The poet, we might now say the “creative writer,” is an insightful being who can “pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things,” liberating us from the worn-out aspect of language.
5. Emerson restituted the imaginative writer in a central social role as the maker of newly minted and newly valid meanings. We will see how important this is when we get to Whitman and Dickinson.
6. In addition, Emerson became one of the most astute literary critics of the 19th century, offering a reader-oriented criticism of literature and elevating such authors as Milton and Shakespeare to the status of demigods.
7. Transcendentalists were drawn to all sorts of literary texts, including “ethical scriptures.” They tracked down, translated, and shared documents from religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufism.

II. Emerson’s expansive and influential personality emerged out of the details of his own life to provide a public version of titanic individualism that was identified with Transcendentalism.

A. All of us, according to Emerson, are responsible for our own growth and development. This is what self-reliance means: Individuals answer to a private inner voice, and individuals make their own religions.
1. However, our personal decisions have important effects on those around us; we are influenced by people, then go on to influence others.
2. Each person’s actions have consequences that reach far beyond their initial effects toward a possible universal response.
3. “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think” (“Self-Reliance,” 1841).
4. Emerson never approved of the term Transcendentalism. He preferred Idealism. He once said that Transcendentalism was simply a protest against dogmatic religion, not a philosophy but a spiritual outlook.

B. Emerson’s life consistently and continually influenced his thinking.
1. He loved his first wife so much that he exhumed her and opened her coffin in 1832 to see her once more.
2. He traveled to the wilds of Follansbee Pond in New York’s Adirondack Mountains to the Philosophers’ Camp with James Russell Lowell, Louis Agassiz, and others.
3. He despaired so much after the death of his five-year-old son Waldo that he doubted any justice in the universe and produced an almost Existentialist response to this tragedy: “Threnody,” meaning a song of lament for the dead: “Nature, who lost him, cannot remake him;/Fate let him fall, Fate can’t retake him;/Nature, Fate, men, him seek in vain.”

III. Emerson thought he could depend on this intuited version of the inner self in a way that he had not been able to depend on the various versions of God being worshiped from the pulpits of New England. He had a growing feeling of the need to link transcendent religious ideas to pressing social concerns.

A. In this regard, it is important to understand several of Emerson’s most often quoted or misquoted statements.
1. “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” (“Self-Reliance”).
2. “The god of the cannibals will be a cannibal, of the crusaders a crusader, and of the merchants a merchant” (“Worship”). We can compare Blake: “All deities reside in the human breast.”

B. We can conclude with another strangely representative Emersonian image: “This world we live in is but thickened light.”
   1. This statement is, of course, almost true from the perspective of modern physics in a way that Emerson never could have imagined.
   2. Like the Bible or Shakespeare, Emerson’s words can be used to prove almost anything or, at least, many different things.
   3. Emerson’s abstractness is part of what accounts for his widespread acceptance in his time. It also makes him sometimes difficult for us to read today, but that has not prevented his influence from being widespread.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Myerson, Joel. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson.*
Wilson, Eric. *Emerson’s Sublime Science.*

Questions to Consider:
1. How was liberal Unitarianism a logical outgrowth of religious history in America?
2. How would you define American Transcendentalism in terms of Emerson’s ideas?
Lecture Five
Emerson’s Influence

Scope: Emerson was one of those titanic figures in intellectual history whose thoughts were adopted by others almost immediately. Over time, those same ideas contributed to numerous ideologies, movements, and ways of thinking. He developed perspectives that rapidly influenced educational theory, theological and religious practice, and political debate. As what we would now call a public intellectual, Emerson was most widely known for his lectures and published essays, works that were quoted, taught, and discussed by individuals from all walks of life. His powerful rhetoric produced new definitions for common words and phrases that have subsequently come to be thought of as typically “Emersonian”: nature, self-reliance, the American scholar, the poet. His idea of representative men was derived in part from Thomas Carlyle and contributed to the view that history can be seen as the biographies of powerful individuals, for good and sometimes for evil. Emerson’s theological speculations lie behind a whole range of modern ideas about the dangers of religious extremism and dogmatism.

Outline

I. Nature was a crucial word for Emerson because it embodied the worlds of both matter and spirit.

   A. “Where does matter stop and where does spirit begin?”
      1. The problem is as old as philosophy, for even the pre-Socratics and Socrates.
      2. Plato presents one solution (idealism), which Aristotle denies (materialism).
      3. Emerson said: “Believe in magnetism, not in needles.”

   B. For Emerson, the answer was partly in the idea of immanence: Spirit was immanent in matter; matter could and did reveal the spirit within.
      1. This creates a problem in terms of the history of Judeo-Christianity.
      2. God cannot technically be “immanent” in much traditional Christian dogma, because divinity has to exist outside of our fallen physical realm. We need intercessors: Jesus, priests, scripture, ritual.
      3. Hence, the idea of transcendence: The transcendent lies beyond the material world but can nevertheless be revealed through the material world.
      4. That idea is not as easy as it sounds. Materialism, or scientific rationalism, is the ongoing challenge.

   C. The heart of Emerson’s initial influence, for good and for ill, was the abstractness of his thinking combined with his powerful rhetorical style.
      1. Some of Concord’s more conventional individuals would cross the street to avoid a face-to-face encounter with “Mad-dog Emerson.” Later, the rugged materialist H. L. Mencken would write off Emerson as nothing more than a “moon-struck parson.”
      2. At the same time, one washerwoman who attended several of his lectures at the Lyceum said that, although she did not understand what he was saying, she liked “to go up and see him stand up there and look as though he thought everyone else is as good as he is.”
      3. Even a recent president of the Emerson Society, Wesley Mott, said of Emerson’s lecturing style: “People went away tremendously uplifted—and had no idea what they just heard.”

   D. This style and these ideas may often have had the strongest impact on individual listener’s responses to Emerson, but his influence was also social and political.
      1. Emerson was always concerned with reform movements, among them, the abolition of slavery, women’s rights, and educational reform. The 1840 first publication of The Dial was intended partly to address just such issues.
      2. Even a former president of the United States, John Quincy Adams, described Emerson’s ideas as “wild and visionary phantasies,” partly because they seemed spiritually heretical but partly because their implications were politically radical and dangerous to society.
      3. This anti-materialist way of thinking was also perceived as an attack on unchecked capitalism. In 1854, Emerson railed, “It is the vulgarity of this country […] to believe that naked wealth, unrelieved by any use or design, is merit.”
4. Along with such ideas as self-reliance, the Over-Soul, and nature, Emerson also gave us a long list of practical aphorisms to live by: “Hitch your wagon to a star,” “Trust thyself,” “A minority of one,” “The only way to have a friend is to be one,” “What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not been discovered.”

II. Emerson found it impossible to remain a member of any organized denomination. Such an iconoclastic spirit is a key aspect of his influence.

A. This refusal, combined with the influence of his applied ethics, paved the way for countless other secular freethinkers.
   1. Ideas from science could be linked to religion or ethics; at least they did not have to be seen in conflict with spirituality.
   2. Natural or personal mysticism could go against accepted orthodoxy or historical traditions. The modern individual says, “Trust your own intuitions.”
   3. Non-Western thought offered truths that might be useful to even the most sophisticated Westerner.
   4. A person might be good without belonging to a group of good people.

B. This need to make personal decisions about such essential matters becomes a defining characteristic of the modern world.
   1. The separation of church and state is still seen as a personal, not just a political, distinction.
   2. One generation does not need to slavishly follow its parental generation or its intellectual predecessors.
   3. People of differing religious, spiritual and ethical dispositions, and traditions might live together, accept each other’s differences, and even learn from one another. The modern “ecumenical” spirit begins here.

C. The Unitarian denomination still sees Emerson as a direct and lasting influence.
   1. Gary Smith, minister of the First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts, says, “It’s haunting to imagine him sitting up there in the balcony… I feel Emerson and the other Transcendentalists walking with me. Because of them, we are so aware…of the notion that the holy is found in common places” (2003).
   2. “Emerson and the Transcendentalists are probably more relevant now than they were in their time,” claims Suzanne Meyer, an associate minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Atlanta. “They speak…to a postmodern mindset that is tired of scientism and reductionism, just as they were reacting against the Enlightenment rationalism of their day. They offer us a naturalist spirituality, a naturalist mysticism, without metaphysics and supernaturalism.”

III. Perhaps Emerson’s most widespread and obvious legacy, however, has been on writers and thinkers who have defined America over the past century and a half.

A. The journalist Richard Higgins has recently called Emerson “the architect of American intellectual culture.”
   1. This is not too grandiose a claim, as Emerson has provided a framework, a skeleton for the ideas of others.
   2. It is easy to link yourself to Emerson, to hang your ideas onto his.
   3. You can quote him to almost any purpose; more important, he is the first philosopher of American individualism.

B. Thoreau was his first and, in many ways, his foremost intellectual disciple.
   1. Like others, Thoreau admired the style and spirit of Emerson’s ideas as much as, or even more than, the precise contents.
   2. Emerson gave Thoreau a series of touchstones around which he might begin to build his own more applied philosophy.
   3. Thoreau eventually split with Emerson. Their falling out was based partly on the sense that Thoreau wanted to be seen as a powerful thinker in his own right.
   4. Thoreau ended up relying solely on experience, on the evidence of the senses and the immediate truths that come into the mind, linked to what we might now call “epiphanic” insight.

C. Other strains of American thought, and of a uniquely American literature, emerged from direct contact with Emerson or his works.
1. Nathaniel Hawthorne was influenced directly, even though he never got on well with Emerson and openly satirized the socialism of the Brook Farm community in *The Blithedale Romance.*

2. Herman Melville also grappled with these issues, even though his Ahab can be seen as a direct challenge to the abstract metaphysics and the optimism of Emersonian thinking.

3. Walt Whitman set out to fashion himself after Emerson’s description of the “poet” in the essay of the same name.

4. Emily Dickinson never had a public presence, but her poems reflect many concerns of her neighbors up the road in Concord and Boston.

5. Oliver Wendell Holmes described Emerson’s 1837 address on “The American Scholar” as “our intellectual Declaration of Independence.”

6. In recent years, the Harvard literary critic Lawrence Buell has linked Emerson to a major strain in American thought that he calls the “environmental imagination.”

7. Emerson helped to shape a new literary genre that connects the personal memoir to the nature essay: Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, and Bill McKibben.

IV. Emerson had his share of critics, some virulent, and many of these critics produced direct responses from Emerson or his followers.

A. He was often attacked for his apparently unchecked optimism.
   1. Even Thoreau made this complaint late in his life.
   2. Others said that Emerson lacked a sense of evil. He had said that if he were sent to hell, he would “make a heaven there.”
   3. At the same time, Emerson wrote movingly in response to the deaths of his 19-year-old wife, his 5-year-old son, and three brothers who predeceased him.

B. His rigorous individualism was seen as antisocial by some.
   1. Self-reliance for Emerson was not about isolation, nor was it for Thoreau.
   2. It was about finding strength within oneself to be of use to others.
   3. A late work was entitled *Society and Solitude* (1870).

C. Emerson’s agnosticism bordered on an atheism that was clearly unacceptable for his times, but his personal insights became useful pragmatism in the end.
   1. His was a non-mystical, non-supernatural religion but also a religion of right actions—we might say of good deeds.
   2. In his journal, he wrote, “I like not the man who is thinking how to be good, but the man thinking how to accomplish his work.”
   3. After his two series of *Essays* (1841, 1844), he published two works designed to offer practical advice about life well lived: *Representative Men* (1850) and *The Conduct of Life* (1860).
   4. He resisted the dualistic split between mind and body, matter and spirit. This anti-dualism is well expressed in one of his most famous poems:

   "They reckon ill who leave me out;
   When me they fly, I am the wings;
   I am the doubter and the doubt,
   And I the hymn the Brahmin sings. ("Brahma," 1856)"

   5. He sought a very modern goal: how to be spiritual without being religious. His belief was that anyone at any time can have access to his or her inner self.

V. Numerous sites and objects connected with Emerson and his followers receive thousands of pilgrims a year.

A. We can still go to his house in Concord or walk the path that he walked to visit his solitary friend at Walden Pond.

B. The Emerson museum houses buckets that he used to throw water on house fires in town and the blue robe he wore during his morning writing sessions.

C. The Emerson Society meets regularly to discuss his life and ideas.

D. A student of mine recently visited Concord and brought me a rock from Walden, almost like a saint’s relic.
Essential Reading:
Porte, Joel. *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time.*

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What ways of thinking that still affect our personal and social lives in America derive directly from the ideas of Emerson?
2. Who might criticize Emersonian ideas today, and why?
Lecture Six
Thoreau—An American Original

Scope: If Emerson gave us a new view of America and American thinking, then his foremost disciple, Thoreau, gave us a new way of living and a new vision of each American individual. Many earlier explorers, naturalists, and authors had described the natural wonders of the New World, but until Thoreau, no author had located wild “Nature” at the center of a unified vision of the American psyche. At the same time, Thoreau’s powers of observation, his anti-materialism, and his sense of a surging energy at the center of the nonhuman world all contribute to a sensibility that has resonated throughout America and beyond over the past two centuries. In the naturalistic version of his individualism, his devotion to history and to classical texts, and his belief in nonviolent resistance to unjust laws, Thoreau put into play the central tenets of Emerson’s thinking in ways that continue to shape American politics, populism, and popular culture. His effect on the tradition of nature writing and the wider environmental movement has been incalculable.

Outline
I. Who was this curious, but curiously influential, man who went to Walden Pond?
   A. Thoreau (1817–1862) was definitely an authentic American original.
      1. His touchstones were individualism, intelligence, and a sort of eccentricity that came to be associated with genius.
      2. But he also possessed a worldly wisdom that led to widespread influence during his lifetime and, especially, afterwards.
      3. He presented an alternative to conformity that has appealed to many sensibilities.
   B. Born in 1817, Thoreau went to Harvard and met Emerson in 1837; his subsequent life was solitary but eventful.
      1. His jobs included tutor, worker in the family pencil factory, and work as a surveyor, public lecturer, and as he often noted, “natural historian.”
      2. His personal activism was limited, but he was arrested and spent one night in jail for failure to pay a poll tax. Later, he spoke out in support of the ideals, if not the precise actions, of John Brown.
      3. Between 1845 and 1847, he lived at Walden Pond, but left after only two years.
      4. In 1849, he had published “Resistance to Civil Government” and A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the account of a boat trip taken by Thoreau and his brother 10 years earlier.
      5. He kept his Journal for almost 25 years.
      6. He died in 1862, while the Civil War was raging, at age 44, of tuberculosis.
   C. Emerson said of Thoreau: “He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun” (“Thoreau”).
      1. Not everyone was as positive. James Russell Lowell called Thoreau: “a Transcendentalist crackpot and phony who insisted on going back to flint and steel when he had a matchbox in his pocket; a fellow to the loonies who thought bran or wearing of the substitution of hooks and eyes for buttons would save the world.”
      2. The conflict between activism and pacifism went back to his mother, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau, and a number of his aunts, all of whom were energetic members of abolitionist societies.
      3. Thoreau did not join any formal abolitionist society or any other formally organized group.

II. Many wider Transcendentalist principles influenced, or were influenced by, Thoreau’s philosophical and political principles.
   A. There were numerous local influences around Concord and Boston in the 1830s and 1840s.
      1. Unitarianism was widespread but also under pressure to reform itself.
      2. Scottish Common Sense philosophy was democratic, anti-Aristotelian, and anti-Humean and was being formally taught at Harvard, Thoreau’s and Emerson’s alma mater.
French Eclecticism was a system of thought that linked Scottish Common Sense to German Idealist philosophy and was influential among Unitarians.

Thoreau gave up on the church in any form, but he had been baptized a Unitarian, and he was eventually buried in a Unitarian cemetery.

Other influences came from further away, even if he discovered them locally.

By 1841, Thoreau had found and was reading the *Bhagavad-Gita*, portions of the *Vedas*, and the *Laws of Manu* from Emerson’s bookshelves.

An entry from his *Journal* says: “What extracts from The *Vedas* I have read fall on me like light of a higher and purer luminary, which describes a loftier course through a purer stratum—free from particulars, simple, universal.”

He says, “even I am a yogi” in a letter of 1849, but we need the entire passage for context: “The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation: he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things. […] To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi.”

Calling himself a yogi was not a casual comment. Thoreau’s Walden days were often spent seeking an Eastern version of the loss of self:

I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise to noon, rapt in revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any of the work of the hands would have been. (“Sounds”)

Like Emerson, there is little if anything systematic about Thoreau’s thought.

He never sought to resolve his competing and even conflicting attitudes in his writings.

Like so many of the Transcendentalists, he was an eclectic thinker, as likely to draw on ancient Hindu as ancient Greek texts, but then as likely to cite his own experience as evidence for the truth.

Like many of us, he was not above changing his mind and recording such changes as part of a developmental process.

His unique brand of individualism is what we might call “naturalistic.” In this regard, he differs from an earlier Romantic naturalist, such as Rousseau, who saw his connection to the natural world as part of a shared human birthright. For Thoreau, by contrast, his link to nature grows out of the personal aspect of his own immediate perceptions.

It is also important to remember that Thoreau was a lyric poet who often preferred the isolated moment of sudden awareness to a unified, logical argument. See his poems “I am a parcel of Vain Strivings Tied,” “Inspiration,” and “Mist”:

I am a parcel of vain strivings tied
By a chance bond together,
Dangling this way and that, their links
Were made so loose and wide,
Methinks,
For milder weather.

Thoreau’s sources and influences parallel Emerson’s in some regards but move in other directions, as well.

He has often been described as a founder of the modern environmental movement.

Naturalists and early environmentalists, including John Burroughs in New York, John Muir in California, and Aldo Leopold in Wisconsin, cited his influence.

The philosopher Lewis Mumford called him “the Father of our National and State Parks.”

His views are much more concrete and practical than many of Emerson’s, for example, his sense that “in Wildness is the preservation of the world.”

Nature writers likewise have seen Thoreau as a father figure.

Annie Dillard calls her Pulitzer Prize–winning book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, “a meteorological journal of the mind,” the same phrase Thoreau used to describe *Walden*.

Such writers as Rick Bass, Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, and Terry Tempest Williams have all quoted from Thoreau, cited his influence, or been compared to him by critics.

Never just a nature writer, however, Thoreau is also a masterful travel writer.
C.  His widest global influence may be in terms of civil disobedience.
   1.  Mahatma Gandhi read from “Resistance to Civil Government” when he led nonviolent protests of hundreds of thousands of people in India.
   2.  Martin Luther King, Jr., cited Thoreau’s influence on his own form of civil disobedience during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.
   3.  The bloodless revolution in the Philippines, Polish shipyard workers, students taking down the Berlin Wall—all of these democracy movements have direct connections to the disobedient pilgrim from Walden Pond.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1.  How could someone as apparently isolated and self-contained as Thoreau have influenced such a wide range of social and political causes?
2.  Is there any aspect of Thoreau’s thinking that we might want to question or criticize in our own post-9/11 world?
Lecture Seven
Thoreau at Walden and Beyond

Scope: When we think of Thoreau in his tiny rustic cabin by Walden Pond, we often create a mistaken impression. Walden Pond was not in the middle of nowhere. Thoreau could walk into Concord to have supper with Emerson. Nor was Thoreau at Walden for a very long time. He wrote more than 200 pages about his first year in residence, then recorded his second year at Walden in a single sentence: “Thus was my first year’s life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it.” When he left Walden, he said that he had many other lives to lead. Indeed, among serious readers of his work, Thoreau is as well known for his time spent on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, in the deep Maine woods and at Mount Katahdin, or on Cape Cod. Even today, his influence continues. He is quoted by politicians and songwriters, and his wisdom appears from college classes to t-shirts and bumper stickers. This lecture will examine the hermit of Walden Pond in biographical detail but will also strive to reveal the continuing impact of his thinking and writing on students, teachers, naturalists, and political thinkers.

Outline

I. *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* is the ur-text, the foundational text, of American nature writing.

A. Walden Pond was not really so far away, but less than two miles to Concord.
   1. “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately”—what might that mean?—simplicity in the face of the increasing complexity of modern life.
   2. “Simplify. Simplify”: This was Thoreau’s credo.
   3. “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” The source of this desperation is materialism and the lack of a sincere or authentic spirituality.

B. Is *Walden* nature writing? Not really or not only; the book is remarkably complex.
   1. The first chapter, called “Economy,” refers to Sandwich Islanders; Deucalion and Pyrrha; Sir Walter Raleigh; Hippocrates; Confucius; Darwin on Tierra del Fuego; Salem, Massachusetts; Hanno and the Phoenicians; and St. Petersburg, Russia.
   2. The railroad is visible from the pond. What does this rail line represent? A threat but also energy?
   3. Thoreau praises a dead and rotting horse; how could he do so without a new view of nature:

   There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,— tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! (“Spring”)

   This is Darwin before Darwin.

C. The value of *Walden* is also about how well written it is. Thoreau is a masterful prose stylist who helps to change the language, as three examples will reveal:
   1. “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”
   2. “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.”
   3. “The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.” These are the final words of the book.

D. Emerson, in his essay “The Transcendentalist,” said:

   I mean, we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels’ food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how; clothed, sheltered, and weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his
own hands. [...] The squirrel hoards nuts, and the bee gathers honey, without knowing what they do, and they are thus provided for without selfishness or disgrace. (1842)

Thoreau, in one sense, sets out to fill this bill.

1. In 1845, he decided to move to Emerson’s property on the shores of the pond. He built a house with his own hands, and he decided to have only three chairs: one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.

2. Then, by 1847, Thoreau was collecting specimens of flora and fauna for Louis Agassiz, the foremost naturalist in America. Even after Walden, his life maintained its mornings full of writing, followed by long afternoon walks.

3. The English poet Coleridge had suggested that the laws of creation could be understood through a knowledge of natural history. Thoreau set out systematically to study botany, zoology, and taxonomic classification as a result.

4. He decided to organize a museum of specimens and a research space in his bedroom in the family home in Concord.

5. The critic Walter Harding says that Walden succeeds by combining five distinct genres between one set of covers: (1) a nature book, (2) a do-it-yourself guide to simple life, (3) a satirical criticism of modern life, (4) a belletristic achievement, and (5) a spiritual book.

E. Walden is not ultimately a physical location but, rather, a place in the mind.

1. First, it is a place in the mind of its author, Thoreau’s very self-aware consciousness.

2. Next, and perhaps foremost, Walden becomes a place in the mind of each of its readers down to the present day.

3. Finally, and leading to its lasting fame, it becomes a part of the collective American mind.

II. Earlier American explorers had described natural wonders of the new continent, but until Thoreau, no one had located nature at the center of the American psyche.

A. Like Wordsworth, Shelley, or Keats, Thoreau’s nature writing is as much about its author and his reading as it is about any objective vision of the natural world.

1. Thoreau was often alone, but he insistently said that he was never lonely.

2. He sensed that he would not have an ordinary social life. His relationships with others included two failed romances.

3. He had suffered, even enduring sympathetic lockjaw upon the death of his brother, John. An escape into nature was one escape from human pain.

B. At the same time, Thoreau’s powers of observation were as well developed as those of any experimental scientist or European Romantic author.

1. Sight, sound, smell, touch, and even taste contributed to the richness he described in the most ordinary of events, such as looking through the water to the bottom of the pond.

2. The value of the physical senses combined with his anti-materialism.

3. He felt a surging energy at the center of the nonhuman world that did not need to be analyzed or understood so much as described and celebrated.

4. The link between his idealism and realism is crucial: “In proportion as [you simplify your life], the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

III. Thoreau’s is a sensibility and a mode of living that have resonated through America and beyond for a century and a half.

A. Thoreau’s influential personality reaches well beyond Walden.

1. A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers contributes to the creation of a sense of place, and of the specific places, of America.

2. The Maine Woods, especially the ascent of Mount Katahdin, offers a new and challenging view of nature as inhuman, perhaps anti-human: “Here was no man’s garden [...] Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in [...] There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man.” And later, “What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!—Think of our
life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?” (“Ktaadn”).

3. **Cape Cod** presents readers with the sublime and starkly beautiful life at the liminal places, the borderlands.

**B.** Thoreau helped to create a sense of an America defined by its natural settings.

1. America is still a realm of wild, unexplored, or yet-to-be explored regions, such as our national and state parks.

2. America was the repository of a new natural sublime; it was not Europe, nor was it some distant, exotic locale.

3. America was, and still is, the home of places and spaces defined primarily by their emotional value: Main Street, home sweet home, the domestic pastoral, the summer retreat.

4. Wherever we are, Thoreau wants us to “Live the life [you have] imagined.”

**Essential Reading:**
Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind.*


**Supplementary Reading:**
Garber, Frederick. *Thoreau's Fable of Inscribing.*

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why has Walden, the book and the idea, proved such an attractive idea to so many people?

2. What does it mean to say that Walden is not merely a place or a book but, rather, a location in the human mind?
Lecture Eight
Thoreau's Politics

Scope: Thoreau’s politics are hard to isolate or to simplify, but they have been central to an evolving view of American democracy, human freedom, and the role of the individual in the political process. He is best known politically for an essay that is usually called “Civil Disobedience,” although its original title was “Resistance to Civil Government.” We see the document today in terms of the nonviolent resistance movements of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., but its influence reaches from those who protested Senator McCarthy’s blacklists to those who protested the Vietnam War, from civil rights supporters in the Philippines to those in apartheid South Africa. Of course, Thoreau’s radical individualism does not only appear in this single work. Evidence for his politics can also be found throughout his Journals and other writings. Ultimately, Thoreau’s politics are about the individual conscience, about the right of each person to answer to a higher law than the rules of any social, religious, or political system.

Outline

I. Thoreau’s political thinking arose from the life he experienced, not merely from an abstract political philosophy.
   A. He saw numerous injustices around himself in antebellum Massachusetts.
      1. Both Newport, Rhode Island, and Boston had been major ports in the transatlantic slave trade for two centuries, and slavery existed in the North well into the 19th century. Thoreau and his family were actively involved in the Underground Railroad, and when the fugitive slave Anthony Burns was caught and convicted in Boston under the Fugitive Slave Act, Thoreau delivered a lecture entitled “Slavery in Massachusetts.”
      2. He amassed hundreds of pages of notes on American Indian culture and language and knew much of the history of the numerous New England tribes and their violent conflicts with European settlers. He described Indian culture in detail in almost all accounts of his travels.
      3. His friend Emerson had said, “The slavery of women happened when the men were slaves of kings,” and even more concretely, that women “have an unquestionable right to their own property. And if a woman demands votes, offices and political equality with men […] it must not be refused.”
   B. Thoreau’s most famous political action resulted from the fact that he refused, on a number of occasions and over several years, to pay his poll tax.
      1. His friend Bronson Alcott had done the same and helped inspire Thoreau.
      2. His motives were complex: slavery, the recent Mexican War, and general dissatisfaction with government policies.
      3. Finally, in July of 1846, Thoreau was arrested one evening and sent directly to jail. After only one night in prison, the tax was paid by a person who still remains a mystery to biographers, probably his mother or aunt.
      4. By 1848, Thoreau gave the lecture “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government” to members of the Concord Lyceum.
      5. Then, in 1849, Thoreau’s lecture, now retitled “Resistance to Civil Government,” appeared alongside works by Emerson and Hawthorne in Aesthetic Papers, a journal published only once by Elizabeth Peabody.
      6. Very little notice was taken until it reappeared as “Civil Disobedience” in A Yankee in Canada, With Antislavery and Reform Papers, by which time the Civil War had ended and Thoreau had been dead for four years.

II. Thoreau may have been an individualistic thinker, but he was also a member of a group of reformers who included Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, and Lincoln.
   A. A complex set of ideas produced his political philosophy.
      1. Eighteenth-century ideas about natural law are the root; nature and nature’s “God” produce these laws.
      2. Like Emerson, Thoreau linked a very liberal version of Unitarianism to Scottish Common Sense philosophy.
3. His abolitionist ideas were drawn from thinkers ranging from his mother and aunts to William Lloyd Garrison.

B. Some have called “Civil Disobedience” libertarian, even anarchistic.
   1. The opening lines are, “I heartily accept the motto—‘That government is best which governs least’; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe—‘That government is best which governs not at all.’”
   2. Emerson had already said, “the less government we have, the better” (“Politics,” 1844).
   3. Like Emerson and other original thinkers, Thoreau is hard to place in any unified party or organization; his politics derive from personal responsibility and actions, rather than from any specific system of governance.

C. “Civil Disobedience” is about the power of the individual, about individualism derived from a higher law.
   1. Thoreau wrote:

      I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men,… if ten honest men only—ay, if one HONEST man, in this state of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.

   2. His argument is based on an absolutist morality: “under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.”
   3. Percy Shelley’s poem “The Mask of Anarchy” says much the same thing. Goodness eventually wins, because it is right in a higher sense to resist violence than to bend to the immediately practical, and because it shames others: “Look upon them as they slay/Till their rage has died away.”

D. Famous nonviolent resisters, such as Gandhi and King, have adopted Thoreau for their own political purposes.
   1. Gandhi’s jailhouse writings end with Thoreau’s image of the illusion of imprisonment: “I saw that,” Thoreau wrote, “if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar.” Gandhi promotes satyagraha, which combines “true force” with passivity.
   2. The idea that you cannot imprison an idea is at least as old as Socrates; it is an applied form of philosophical idealism.
   3. Even Leo Tolstoy commented that Americans should pay more heed to Thoreau’s thoughts than to their military leaders or capitalist millionaires.
   4. Martin Luther King, Jr., noted that reading Thoreau’s essay was his first contact with the idea of moral resistance to an evil system.

III. But Thoreau’s ethical ideas, as we have already seen, are not always unified or systematic.

A. Consider his discussion of the morality of vegetarianism as an example.
   1. He says, on the one hand, that eating meat is a bad idea, impractical, wasteful, and unethical: “I have no doubt that it is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized”; knowledge and awareness of other species will lead toward a new appreciation for their lives.
   2. But then, near the end of his famous discussion of vegetarianism, Thoreau says, “I was never unusually squeamish; I could sometimes eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary.” Note his phrase “if it were necessary.” Here, a general principle gives way to necessity; a moral rule gives way to pragmatism.

B. A related issue of his consistency emerges powerfully in Thoreau’s defense of the violent abolitionist John Brown, whom we will discuss in a later lecture.
   1. After Brown’s 1859 abolitionist raid on Harpers Ferry, Thoreau delivered an address, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” within two weeks of the raid and several additional times before Brown was executed by hanging in Charles Town (now in West Virginia).
2. Thoreau, it must be said, defended the idealistic and freedom-loving principles behind Brown’s actions more than the actions themselves, but in an often-quoted passage, he said, “I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable.” This is not nonviolence; actions are determined by specific circumstances, not by abstract rules.

3. Resistance to unjust laws is, for Thoreau, more about the morality of certain law-breaking than it is about the ethics of nonviolence.

C. In our own era, Arthur M. Schlesinger has described Thoreau’s doctrine of “inner regeneration” as a doctrine based on passive resistance.

1. Schlesinger concludes that Thoreau’s ideas about “Civil Disobedience” had more influence on modern India than on his own American countrymen.

2. However, within two decades of Schlesinger’s comments, Martin Luther King, Jr., claimed that Thoreau and Gandhi were two crucial influences on his own brand of activism.

3. Gandhi argued that Thoreau was not strictly a supporter of nonviolence, and he added that he had developed his own ideas about passive resistance before reading Thoreau, even though Thoreau’s essay contributed later to his thinking.

4. The point is not whether Thoreau was consistent in any of his political thinking. His ideas influenced, and continue to influence, countless individuals and numerous historically significant political thinkers.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What did Thoreau’s two years at Walden Pond have to do with his politics as we have come to understand them?

2. Why have Thoreau’s political ideas proven so attractive to so many contemporary individuals?
Lecture Nine
William Ellery Channing and Unitarianism

Scope: Now we step backward in time to consider William Ellery Channing, a member of a prominent New England family that produced numerous individuals with important ties to Transcendentalism. Known as Dr. Channing, this theologian and minister was a crucial forerunner of the ideas that Emerson and others would adopt. When he preached the sermon “Unitarian Christianity” in 1819, he changed the history of his denomination and provided a new version of liberal American theology. He has been called “an honorary Transcendentalist,” since he died too early to be active during the height of the movement, but his views had a direct impact on philosophers and theologians who followed. The Unitarian denomination moved to the heart of the development of Transcendentalism because it allowed for religious individualism and the free discussion of philosophical and social ideas. Indeed, the rift within the Unitarian Church, in which Channing represented the liberal response to the strict Calvinism of the past, generated a debate between conservative and liberal theologies that continues today. Channing also spoke out strongly against social evils, such as slavery and poverty, helping to focus discussions that led to positive changes as the century progressed.

Outline

I. William Ellery Channing (1780–1842) was a widely respected theologian and preacher who helped define the religious and social elements of Transcendentalism.
   A. Channing was born in 1780 to a well-known Massachusetts family.
      1. One grandfather signed the Declaration of Independence, while his lawyer father defended the first slave-trader to be convicted in America.
      2. Channing settled into one position, as minister of the Federal Street Church, Boston, from 1803 until his death in 1842.
      3. He began as a Congregationalist, grudgingly accepted the title of Unitarian, came to be known as the “apostle” or “bishop” of Unitarianism, and eventually helped to found the circle known as the Transcendental Club.
      4. Unitarianism had a long history in England, but it first came into widespread favor in America among this group of Boston preachers.
   B. Channing avoided abstract aspects of doctrine or dogma; instead, he emphasized social responsibility, charity, and moral action in his sermons and writings.
      1. He was a widely popular speaker who wrote for numerous periodicals.
      2. He was denounced as a non-Christian Unitarian by the editor of a strongly conservative Calvinist journal as early as 1815. Channing then went on to defend his ideas, his most famous sermon being “Unitarian Christianity,” delivered in Baltimore in 1819.
      3. He slowly accepted the term Unitarian, first used by his enemies, and he described his faith as “a rational and amiable system, against which no man’s understanding, or conscience, or charity, or piety revolts.”
      4. Channing never wanted to be seen as the founder of a denomination, because he believed that any new orthodoxy would be as oppressive as earlier ones. He did, however, join a conference of liberal Congregational ministers, and by 1825, he had agreed to help organize the American Unitarian Association.
   C. For Channing, the defining concept was a form of personal development, an idea that extended over the course of each person’s lifetime. Each person’s life, like Channing’s, could become a model for others.
      1. This idea contributed directly to Emersonian self-reliance.
      2. Channing defined what he called “self-culture” in the following way: “To cultivate any thing, be it a plant, an animal, a mind, is to make it grow.”
      3. He defined the successful thinker as the person who “does what he can to unfold all his powers of capacities, especially his nobler ones, so as to become a well-proportioned, vigorous, excellent, happy being.”
4. He established a metaphoric link between organic and human development, especially development of the human mind, much as the British Romantics had.

5. His life and opinions had a direct impact on Theodore Parker, another liberal clergyman and influential social reformer whose life and work we will examine in a subsequent lecture.

II. Channing’s theology helped others to break from the strict Calvinism of many Congregationalist churches.

A. Unitarianism began in America as it had in England, as a reaction against the doctrines of sin and predestination. It offered emphasis on the divinity and social message of Jesus but a strong denial of the Trinity.

1. Even though Unitarians saw themselves as Christians, it became clear that Unitarians would have to separate from Congregationalists, because many orthodox ministers would not share their pulpits with Unitarians.

2. In his groundbreaking sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” Channing said the Bible was “a book written for men, in the language of men” whose “meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books.” This view stressed the need for rational and empirical thought in theology.

3. Channing further said that predestination made human beings into nothing more than “machines” and that the New Testament description of God was never meant to include three distinct entities or “persons.”

4. “I call that mind free, which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come.” Claims such as this embodied the precise impulse behind Emerson’s later “Divinity School Address” and Transcendentalism in general.

B. The religious debates of the early 19th century were linked to a wider movement toward theological questioning and the idea of personal spirituality.

1. Emerson’s departure from the pulpit embodied just such freedom of thought.

2. Channing participated in some of the earliest meetings of the Transcendental discussion group that included Emerson, Alcott, and others, but he eventually decided that their views were too extreme for him.

3. Channing’s theology evolved into Unitarian Universalism, still active today.

4. His books were widely translated and carefully read internationally by the likes of Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and even Queen Victoria.

C. The central issues of Transcendentalism were soon linked to this liberal form of Unitarianism and its connection to social reform movements.

1. Many Transcendentalists developed an even more liberal version of Unitarianism that led to later ideas of secular individualism.

2. Eventually, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such thinking emerged as agnosticism.

3. Among New England Unitarians, Channing was accepted and debated by radical Transcendentalists and their conservative critics. Some even came to refer to themselves as “Channing” Unitarians. His influence continues in the modern denomination, as is evident on the Unitarian Universalist Web site.

III. Channing’s work as a social reformer had important consequences.

A. He became an early and widely influential abolitionist.

1. He presented a picture of Christ as a social reformer, a “Son of Liberty” who could help to “overturn the strongholds of spiritual usurpation.”

2. In 1842, in The Duty of the Free States, Channing offered one of his most forceful attacks on slavery in words that directly anticipated Thoreau: “No decision of the state absolves us from the moral law.” He added, “It is no excuse for our wrong-doing that the artificial organization called society has done wrong.”

3. In August of that same year, in his final public speech, he acknowledged the anniversary of British West Indian slave emancipation and demanded a similarly peaceful cessation of slavery in America. His moderate position influenced many people.

B. Channing also spoke out forcefully against poverty and its related social ills.

1. He expressed an abiding and early concern for low-wage workers and socially displaced people of all kinds.
2. He helped to found the Wednesday Evening Association, which ministered to the destitute around Boston’s docks. Then, in 1834, the Benevolent Fraternity of Churches in Boston formed to support this and other socially conscious ministries, part of the beginning of social service organizations.

3. Channing linked poverty to other social ills, such as drunkenness and disease, blaming economic conditions, rather than moral weakness.

C. He was an early antiwar activist.
   1. He delivered his first antirwar address in 1816.
   2. He argued that war corrupts the entire warring society, that it allows for “criminal modes of subsistence”; it gives too much power to the central government.
   3. Channing stressed his fear of false patriotism that elevates the value of one nation over another. He decried any form of education that celebrated military exploits and the heroism of warriors. Elsewhere, he cited the wider danger of celebrating soldiers, such as Napoleon, as national heroes.
   4. Channing distrusted government in general and claimed that its only function was to ensure public order. Governments had no role in, nor could they help to improve, the moral behavior of individuals.

D. Finally, Channing was deeply concerned about the spiritual education of children and about education in general.
   1. One of his first clerical innovations was to invite young children to meet and talk with him after religious services.
   2. He created a number of discussion groups tied to church services. These groups became part of the first Sunday school movement.
   3. “The Duties of Children” (1807) was Channing’s first published sermon. Then, in 1813, he developed a separate children’s catechism.
   4. In “Remarks on Education,” he noted, “There is no office higher than that of a teacher of youth, for there is nothing on earth so precious as the mind, soul, character of the child.” He went on to assist and influence educational reformers, such as Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody.
   5. Channing’s initial impact in this and other areas was weakened because most of his manuscripts were destroyed by a devastating fire. Renewed interest in his life and work has emerged in recent years.

Essential Reading:
Mendelsohn, Jack. _Channing, the Reluctant Radical: A Biography_.

“William Ellery Channing.” _The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography_.


Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What was it about Unitarian theology that made it so attractive to Channing and to his Transcendentalist followers?
2. In a country that advocates absolute freedom of religion, how have religious ideas come into conflict with politics and social justice?
Lecture Ten
Theodore Parker—Social Reform in the Pulpit

Scope: In Theodore Parker, we find another religious figure, like Channing, who played a crucial role in the development of central ideas of his time. He was one of the most practical and active of the Transcendentalist group in causes ranging from the reform of parish ministry to widespread social activism. At a time when many divinity students were leaving the ministry because of the restrictive nature of orthodoxy, Parker remained in the pulpit, arguing for the necessity of a close connection between religious belief and daily life. Although he was much more interested in human nature than in Thoreau’s “wild” nature, he contributed directly to the social aspect of Transcendentalist thinking. Parker’s activism took numerous forms, from hostility to the Mexican War to the hiding of fugitive slaves. His speeches and sermons railed against the poverty and crime he saw around him, as well as the apathy of wealthy New Englanders. Like so many individuals in the 19th century, he died of incurable tuberculosis while a relatively young man.

Outline

I. Theodore Parker (1810–1860) embodied the biography of a Transcendentalist as a lifelong member of the preaching clergy during a time of intense sectarian conflict.
   A. Parker’s own theological evolution paralleled that of many Transcendentalists.
      1. He helped turn Unitarianism away from its strict Calvinist origins toward a liberal theology that encouraged social activism.
      2. For him, the Bible was an ethical guide, rather than a source of metaphysical dogma. He set forth four principles of scriptural interpretation: “to read with reason,” “with a consciousness of its antiquity,” “with an awareness of the varying authors,” and “with a feeling and sympathy for the nature of the work.”
      3. In an often-quoted journal entry, Parker said:
         I felt early that the liberal ministers did not do justice to simple religious feeling […] Most powerfully preaching to the Understanding, the Conscience, and the Will, the cry was ever, “Duty, Duty!” “Work, Work!” They failed to address with equal power the Soul, and did not also shout, “Joy, Joy!” “Delight, Delight!”
   B. Parker’s own religious thinking was affected by personal tragedy.
      1. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was 12. Before he was 30, his father and seven of his siblings had also succumbed.
      2. The initial faith that emerged from this sadness stressed an absolute belief in the necessity of an afterlife as a sign of God’s goodness.
      3. Like so many Unitarians in the New England congregations of the time, Parker’s unorthodox views were a response to Calvinist ideas about predestination, the ultimate sinfulness, and likely damnation of most human beings.
   C. Parker’s religious history paralleled Emerson’s.
      1. Unlike Parker, Emerson found it necessary to leave the pulpit.
      2. Parker had been in the audience for Emerson’s thundering “Divinity School Address” of 1838, a lecture that emphasized the humanity of Jesus, attacked the hollowness of the church’s ritual and much of its preaching, and denied the idea of a distant yet still somehow personal deity.
      3. Emerson’s radical ideas terrified most of the Unitarian clergy of the day but encouraged several younger ministers, including Parker.
      4. Although Parker is often ranked among the most influential Unitarian ministers of his century, he was a controversial figure in his own day and his legacy among Unitarian Universalists remains contested.
   II. Parker’s life echoed the struggle within the Unitarian denomination of trying to replace strict Calvinist doctrine with Transcendentalist ideas. The same struggle was also evident in the trend toward ever-more-inclusive forms of democracy.
      A. Unitarians at the time believed in “supernatural” rationalism.
1. On this view, human reason became an essential guide to religious truth, and the nature around us could reveal a world beyond nature.

2. Such natural theology argued that we could understand God based on evidence drawn from the natural world. However, it still demanded varying levels of direct revelation from such sources as the Bible or God himself.

3. Anyone who broke with the idea of the miraculous in revealed religion was called a Deist and was no longer seen as Christian.

4. Parker agreed with Emerson, who argued against miracles, although Parker still claimed to be a devout Christian. Who could still be called a Christian?

B. The so-called “higher criticism,” the attempt to understand religion in historical and rational terms, arrived from Germany and England and had a powerful impact on such thinkers as Parker and Emerson.

1. Its basic tenet was that the Bible was a historical document. The details of Judeo-Christian history could be understood in the same way as other historical events.

2. Perhaps Moses parted the Red Sea; perhaps the tide went out.

3. W. M. L. De Wette’s Critical and Historical Introduction to the Old Testament (1817), for example, claimed that Old Testament miracles were “myths,” full of figurative and spiritual meaning but not literally true.

4. In 1840, Parker published a favorable review of the Life of Jesus by D. F. Strauss, another work that argued that miracles need not be factually true in order to have spiritual value. By this time, Parker had noted numerous factual problems with the Bible: translation, varying versions, apocrypha.

C. Parker’s theology did fit well with ideas of early Transcendentalist thinkers.

1. Most of them had begun as Unitarians in the 1820s and 1830s.

2. Parker was included in the first gatherings held by the Transcendental Club, and he contributed regularly to The Dial, a journal that began in large measure, to expand such ideas as these to a wider readership.

3. Periodicals, read in the comfort of the parlor, became a way of promulgating ideas that might be too controversial for the pulpit, in a private, personal way.

4. By 1841, Parker had delivered “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in which his doubts extended to all miracles, those of the Old Testament and of Jesus.

5. By now, most people were forced to agree that such a theology could no longer be considered Christian. Today, we might ask whether one needs to believe that a snake spoke or that Jonah was literally swallowed by a whale.

6. A contrast begins between religion as belief and religion as social action.

III. Parker added an early version of the social gospel and activism from the pulpit.

A. By the early 1840s, Parker was no longer welcome even in Unitarian pulpits. As a result, he began preaching in public halls with ever-larger audiences.

1. The movement was known as a “free church,” and its members were sometimes referred to as “Parkerites.”

2. Attendance at services, often more like public rallies than church services, swelled from 1,000 in 1846 to 2,000 by 1852. As a result, the “congregation” moved from the Melodeon Theater to the Boston Music Hall.

3. Huge audiences, including the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Julia Ward Howe, and Louisa May Alcott, came to listen when Parker “preached” on matters of public concern or pressing political events.

4. In this role as a secular preacher, Parker almost founded his own denomination, although he always said he was still a Unitarian. He delivered 98 lectures in one winter (1855), and he served as editor of the Massachusetts Quarterly Review, another periodical that included many of his liberal ideas.

B. Parker lamented the class system, and he criticized the aristocratic tone of American education and most American literature up until that time.

1. He called for an educational system and a body of literature by and for all the people. His lectures on Franklin, Washington, John Adams, and Jefferson sought to reveal what was greatest about the early ideals of America.

2. He attacked urban poverty as a source of misery and crime.
3. He sought a justice system that would reform criminals.
4. He criticized capitalists for hypocritical morality and self-serving ethics.
5. In his sermon “On the Public Function of Woman” in 1853, Parker argued that women deserved the vote and should no longer be forced to live under a system that led to their “degradation.”

C. The abolition of slavery, however, became Parker’s most insistent cause.
1. Parker described slavery as a politically approved crime that prevented full democracy in America.
2. He saw the Mexican War (1846–1848), which led directly to Thoreau’s refusal to pay his poll tax, as a disguised effort to expand slavery.
3. Parker’s sermons, among others, led Bostonians to oppose the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a law that allowed for the capture of slaves who had escaped north of the Mason-Dixon Line.
4. Many Unitarian ministers refused to oppose the law or openly defended it as a way to preserve the Union. Some argued from their pulpits that the Bible itself defended the capture of runaway slaves.
5. Parker, meanwhile, took fugitive slaves into his church and his own home for hiding. He was said to preach with a revolver in the pulpit in case of slave-catchers. He was tried, and eventually acquitted, for obstructing the recapture of the slave Anthony Burns. Burns was returned to his master, and his freedom was bought by abolitionists.
6. Parker likewise raised money to support armed militias in free states, and he later joined the secret committee that helped arm John Brown’s raid. When Brown was captured and executed in 1859, Parker, like Thoreau, spoke out, defending not only Brown’s actions but also the general right of slaves to kill their masters. By now, he was clearly seen as an extremist by many.

D. Parker showed how a leading intellectual might evolve during a single lifetime.
1. The Calvinism of his youth was abandoned for increasingly liberal stages of Unitarianism and then a faith that was so liberal it was hard to define.
2. The most liberal version of his Unitarianism was almost synonymous with Transcendentalism.
3. His final position was a very modern humanistic faith. He ultimately substituted a pragmatic social good for abstruse debates about absolute religious truth.
4. His intellectual and theological evolution paralleled that of Emerson and many Americans who have followed, down to the present day.

Essential Reading:
Grodzins, Dean. American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism.
Albrecht, Robert C. Theodore Parker.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Why was the pulpit such a valuable place for the dissemination of ideas in the 19th century?
2. Were there any limitations placed on the sorts of ideas that might emerge from a church sermon on Sunday? How did people react to these limitations?
Lecture Eleven
Amos Bronson Alcott

Scope: Amos Bronson Alcott was the father of his now better-known daughter, Louisa May, an important figure in her own right, as we shall see in a subsequent lecture. We begin with Louisa May’s father, however, given that he was another of the philosophical and religious founders of Transcendentalism. As one recent writer has said, he may be the “most transcendent transcendentalist of them all.” Alcott is primarily recalled today as an educational reformer, but his contributions to his era were extensive. His Temple School was a forerunner of countless educational systems that gave credit to students for their ability to be involved in their own educations. His Fruitlands community was an early attempt at a humanist utopia. Alcott saw language as a philosophical tool for linking the physical and the spiritual worlds. He also helped Emerson shape many of his most “Emersonian” ideas. Alcott was considered a wide-eyed dreamer by many, but his introduction of class discussions, field work, and nature study, as well as art, music, and physical education, into the classroom continues to influence countless educators.

Outline

I. Like Thoreau, Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888) was one of the Transcendentalists who never became a minister.
   A. Instead, he was a self-taught teacher.
      1. His father was an illiterate farmer. Family stories said that he taught himself to read and write with a piece of charcoal on the floorboards.
      2. From an early age, he was known for his boundless enthusiasm and optimistic spirit but also for his impracticality.
      3. Alcott set off from home to the South as a teenager and became a wandering peddler. He later said that the elegance and style of the aristocratic southern families inspired his own values for the rest of his life. He was one of the few Transcendentalists with direct connections to life in the antebellum South.
      4. After five years of wandering, he returned to Connecticut. Determined to become an educator, he was attracted to the revolutionary and innovative child-centered ideas of the Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi.
      5. He came home and started several experimental schools in rural Connecticut, finally opening the Temple School near Boston Common in 1834.
   B. Alcott’s educational ideas and their underpinnings were challenging and ahead of their time.
      1. He said, for example, “truth is spherical,” by which he meant that truth will appear differently when seen from different points of view.
      2. Boston’s influential Educational Institute at this time said that the success of teaching was in “breaking the will” and “subduing the spirit” of the pupils.
      3. Alcott did away with corporal punishment of any kind. He put his own hand out for students to hit, claiming that classroom confusion was always the teacher’s fault.
      4. He said that the “child should be approached with reverence” and argued that his pupils always helped him to learn.
      5. He advocated field trips and other forms of experiential education, at the time almost unheard of. He also demanded physical education and organized play time for girls and for boys.
      6. When Emerson visited the school in 1836, he wrote: “I felt strongly, as I watched the gradual dawn of thought upon the minds of all, that to truth is no age or season. It appears, or it does not appear; and when the child perceives it he is no more a child. Age, sex, are nothing” (Journal).
      7. Alcott’s teaching assistants included Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody.
   C. He did not join any formal religious denomination, and his ideas were even further from organized religion than those of many of his liberal Unitarian neighbors.
      1. Of religious dogma, he said, “It is not my duty […] my own spirit preaches sounder doctrine.”
      2. He did not believe that Jesus was divine.
      3. He did use the Christian gospels as central texts for students.
4. He got into serious trouble when he published *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*, because the book was seen as blasphemous for its agnostic and skeptical attitude toward religion. It was also scandalous for its open discussions of human reproduction. Alcott said, for example, “love forms babies,” which seems tame to us but was scandalous then and one of the first attempts at formal sex education in America.

II. The Temple School, which lasted only until 1839, became the most well known of Alcott’s educational experiments and the source of his widest public influence.

A. Emerson convinced him to move to Concord and became a consistent supporter.
   1. The Transcendental Club had its first meetings in Alcott’s parlor in 1836.
   2. Alcott gave the title to the Transcendental Club’s journal, *The Dial*, as well as contributing his “Orphic Sayings” and other writings.
   3. Alcott’s ideas made their way directly into Emerson’s seminal essay, *Nature*; here is Alcott: “Infinitude is too wide for man to take in. He is therefore permitted to take in portions and spread his vision over the wide circumference by little and little; and in these portions doth the Infinite shadow forth itself, God in all and all in God” (*Journal*, 1835).

B. Alcott was always true to his forward-looking ideals.
   1. He enrolled an African-American female student in 1839, even though he knew the act would drive away some of the few students who remained. The Temple School closed that same year after Alcott had to move his few remaining students into his own home.
   2. After the school failed, he traveled to England to meet supporters there and returned home to found Fruitlands, a vegetarian and socialist community that set out to embody Transcendentalist ideals. Fruitlands did not last long, but it had a direct influence on other utopian thinkers.
   3. Throughout his life, Alcott plowed and planted his own land, cut firewood, and mowed fields for himself and others. His belief in the value of physical labor led William Ellery Channing to label him “Orpheus at the plow.”
   4. His effort to be true to his principles left him relying on his successful daughter, Louisa May, for financial support. He was impractical to a fault, seen by many as a starry-eyed dreamer with unrealistic ideas.
   5. Many made fun of the extremes of his views: Wool was for sheep—we should not cut it; milk was for cows—we should not drink it or make cheese.

C. Alcott was a close friend of Thoreau, as well as of Emerson.
   1. He described Thoreau: “The most welcome of companions was this plain countryman. One seldom meets with thoughts like his, coming so scented of mountain and field breezes and rippling springs, so like a luxuriant clod from under forest leaves, moist and mossy with earth-spirits.”
   2. Alcott and Thoreau participated in a typical Transcendentalist debate at the Concord Lyceum in 1841. The question being debated was “Is it ever proper to offer forcible resistance?” but the true subject was slavery and how to end it. Alcott, like Thoreau, helped fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad and supported John Brown, at least in principle.
   3. Alcott was arrested for not paying his taxes in 1843, in protest against slavery and northern acceptance of economic exchange with slave states. Thoreau told Emerson he admired Alcott’s action and said he would imitate it, but Thoreau’s own arrest took several more years.

III. Alcott’s Transcendentalism included teaching methods that have had far-reaching influence on educational theory. His utopianism was less influential but came to be seen as very American.

A. Alcott’s students avoided all rote learning and repeated recitation from standardized textbooks.
   1. Alcott encouraged his students to contribute to lesson plans and to share their thoughts in class discussion and journals. Such ideas were unheard of at the time.
   2. The philosophical underpinnings of Alcott’s method were quite sophisticated; he believed that language was not a practical skill but a metaphysical link between individual souls and the material world. The teaching of writing, grammar, and vocabulary were spiritual activities.
   3. His emphasis on learning by doing has become a mainstay in one strain of educational theory.
   4. A recent Web site on the principles of teaching quotes Alcott: “The true teacher defends his pupils against his own personal influence.”
B. Alcott often depended on the kindness of strangers. Emerson, for example, paid to send the often-impoverished Alcott to England to meet his British supporters.

1. Charles Lane, one of these British admirers, then paid for the land that became the Fruitlands property, which although a failure, set forth a unique set of utopian ideals: vegetarian, socialist, pastoral.

2. After Fruitlands came the family home that Louisa May would describe in *Little Women*, another American dream-house with a somewhat detached father based on her own father.

3. In the 1840s, Alcott physically helped Thoreau to construct the one-room cabin by Walden Pond, another American utopia.

4. He later built Emerson a summer home by hand and thus contributed to the American ideal of the summer escape from the demands of regular work.

5. Later in life, he converted a barn on his property at Orchard House into the Concord Summer School of Philosophy, a well-known *chautauqua*-style gathering place. The later Chautauqua movement was thus also linked to Transcendentalism.

6. Alcott outlived many of his contemporaries, dying in March of 1888, two days before his much more successful daughter, Louisa May, to whom we shall now turn.

**Essential Reading:**
Dahlstrand, Frederick C. *Amos Bronson Alcott: An Intellectual Biography.*
Brooks, Geraldine. ‘Orpheus at the Plow: The Father of ‘Little Women.’’’

**Supplementary Reading:**
De Puy, Harry. “Amos Bronson Alcott: Natural Resource, or ‘Consecrated Crank?’”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Why were educational reforms, such as those fostered by Alcott, so central to the ideas of Transcendentalists?
2. Which aspects of Alcott’s ideas, especially about students and teachers, are still with us today?
Lecture Twelve
Louisa May Alcott

Scope: Louisa May Alcott reminds us that Transcendentalism was often a family affair. Today, we usually think of her as the author of *Little Women* and the less-often-read *Little Men*. She was, however, an influential member of the circle of people who contributed to the ideas of the leading Transcendentalists. After spending her childhood in numerous visits to Emerson’s library and on woodland walks with Thoreau, she lived with her family at her father’s short-lived experimental community at Fruitlands. She worked as a Civil War nurse in Washington, D.C., a powerfully emotion-charged experience that led to the publication of *Hospital Sketches*. She went on to become the remarkably prolific author of dozens of books and story collections, and she made enough money from her writing to help support her family. Later, she was the first woman registered to vote in local elections in Concord, Massachusetts. Her death came at the relatively young age of 56, most likely as a result of mercury poisoning she had suffered as part of the treatment for the typhoid fever she had contracted while serving as an army nurse.

Outline

I. Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) was the daughter of our previous lecture’s subject, Amos Bronson Alcott, idealistic educational reformer and friend to many Transcendentalists.
   A. Her upbringing was as unconventional as it was intellectual.
      1. The Temple School had failed while Louisa May was still a young girl, but she recounted the tutoring she received from her father in very positive terms: “My father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child’s nature as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it, like a Strasburg goose, with more than it could digest.” There was no force-feeding of ideas.
      2. Even as a young child, Louisa admired her father, whom she called “the modern Plato,” and his friends: Theodore Parker, Emerson, and Thoreau.
      3. She wrote from an early age, partly under the encouragement that her father gave for all his students to keep personal journals, another new idea.
      4. Like many in her neighborhood, by 1847, Louisa’s family housed a fugitive slave.
   B. After the failure of his school, her idealistic father planned his next scheme, the model community called Fruitlands, so named because fruit was to be the major source of sustenance.
      1. The community members made use of no animal products or labor. According to Louisa’s mother, Abigail Alcott, the only working animals were the women on the farm.
      2. Indeed, the image that the daughter would later paint was of women working relentlessly so that these impractical men could wander the landscape deep in profound thought.
      3. One member of the Fruitlands community insisted on remaining naked as an “Adamite.” Another, who had fled from the equally utopian community at Brook Farm, ate crackers and then apples and nothing else.
      4. Quarrels ensued among this ragtag group, and the first winter brought an end to the community. One lasting product was Louisa’s own satirical reminiscence, later published as “Transcendental Wild Oats.”
   C. Significantly, Alcott never joined an organized church.
      1. Instead, she practiced a Romanticized, or perhaps Transcendental, form of personal religion, especially unusual for a woman at the time.
      2. She could, however, describe a spiritual morning in Thoreau’s woods near Concord: “A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there,” she wrote in her journal, “with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before.”
      3. She also went to hear Theodore Parker preach his secular sermons. He would eventually appear as a fictional character in her novel *Work: A Story of Experience*. 

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II. Alcott’s career as a writer made her influential among her Transcendentalist friends and a woman with widespread public influence.

A. Her closeness to the Emerson family led to her first book, *Flower Fables* (1854), written for Emerson’s daughter Ellen.

1. Earlier, the publisher James T. Fields had received a sample of her work and advised her: “Stick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can’t write.”
2. She also drafted her strong satire based on Fruitlands; in it, she portrays the father figure as an intellectual, if abstract, dreamer and the mother as the one who has to provide any semblance of sustenance for the family.
3. After her health had been compromised by work in a Civil War hospital, she prepared *Hospital Sketches*, which was first serialized in the *Boston Commonwealth*, then appeared as a book by 1863.

B. It was the publisher Thomas Niles who first requested a book “for girls,” and Alcott waited the better part of a year to begin.

1. The initial installment of *Little Women* flew off the shelves in 1868, and the reading public demanded a sequel, which appeared within another year.
2. At this point, Alcott became one of those writers who suffered from her success and from being “typecast” to writing in a single genre.
3. The main character in *Little Women*, Jo March, was obviously based on Alcott’s life. As numerous critics have noted, she is a more individualized and developed character, even in a children’s book, than most other characters in early American fiction.
4. Alcott also presents a strong sense of the importance of the lives of children and the value of free will and choice in the process of maturing.
5. Alcott valued her work as a writer, but she also wrote: “Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters, but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it.”
6. *Little Women* (1868) tells the story of a family of four sisters, one of whom died young. It became a sentimental classic for its depiction of life in America during and after the Civil War and its depiction of the socialization of these young women.
7. The tone comes through even in a brief example, from the opening page:
   
   “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.
   “It’s so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.
   “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff.
   “We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other,” said Beth contentedly from her corner.

C. Alcott’s success included royalties that would impress any contemporary author.

1. She surged quickly past her father in fame and material wealth. At the height of the popularity of *Little Women*, her royalties totaled $33,000 over four years.
2. She never married and, in an interview, once said of herself: “I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.”
3. Her most famous work was perhaps sentimental, but it also presented a new version of the American family and a new set of American family values linked to Transcendentalist ideals: self-awareness, resourcefulness, and resilience.
4. Alcott longed to write more adult fiction, but she had to keep churning out book after book for children to keep the royalties coming. Her unusual books for adults, such as *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877), include surprising themes ranging from insanity to drug addiction.

III. Alcott also gave much of her energy to practical social reforms: nursing, women’s rights, and temperance.

A. Her contribution during the Civil War was her service as an army nurse.

1. She worked during the winter of 1862–1863 at the Union Hospital in Georgetown, near Washington, D.C.
2. Typhoid fever was widespread in these hospitals. She caught it and was soon required to leave for her home in Boston.
3. The illness permanently affected Alcott and, no doubt, contributed to her early death because of the calomel (mercury-laced chloride) that was used to treat the disease in the era before antibiotics.
B. Alcott’s social conscience was also evident when she attended the 1875 Women’s Congress in Syracuse, New York.
   1. She said that she was “the first woman to register my name as a voter” while encouraging the women of Concord to cast school election ballots.
   2. “Drove about and drummed up women to my suffrage meeting. So hard to move people out of the old ruts” (Journal).
   3. In addition, her journal notes that she “Helped start a temperance society much needed in C[oncord]. I was secretary, and wrote records, letters, and sent pledges, etc.”
   4. Like many women of the time, she helped to establish the value of community activism.

C. Only a follower of Transcendentalist principles was likely to be a famous writer, a social activist, the sole supporter of her family, and also a woman in the second half of the 19th century.
   1. It is very appropriate that a Civil War veteran’s marker was placed on her grave beside so many famous graves in Concord’s Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.
   2. It is for her writing that Louisa May Alcott will be chiefly remembered by children and adult readers. The importance of her fiction has been noted by writers ranging from Simone de Beauvoir and Gertrude Stein to Joyce Carol Oates in our own era.
   3. Little Women is still read by countless young girls or, as was in the case in our household, to young girls by their fathers and mothers.

Essential Reading:
Bedell, Madelon. The Alcotts: Biography of a Family.
Saxton, Martha. Louisa May Alcott: A Modern Biography.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Louisa May Alcott is a household name for her authorship of Little Women; what is it about her wider and deeper philosophical views that led her to be connected with the likes of Emerson and Thoreau?
2. How did Alcott’s life experiences directly influence her work? Is it fair to read her fiction as a form of autobiography? Is it fair to do so for any author?
Timeline

1780................................................ William Ellery Channing born in Newport, Rhode Island (died 1842).
1798................................................ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lyrical Ballads.
1799 ................................................ Amos Bronson Alcott born (died 1888); Rosetta Stone discovered in Egypt.
1802................................................ William Paley, Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature.
1803................................................ Ralph Waldo Emerson born in Boston (died 1882).
1804................................................ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody born in Massachusetts (died 1894).
1807................................................ Lord Byron, Hours of Idleness; Wordsworth “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.”
1810................................................ Margaret Fuller (died 1850) and Theodore Parker (died 1860) both born in Massachusetts.
1812................................................ Henry David Thoreau born in Concord (died 1862).
1818................................................ Byron, Don Juan; Keats, Endymion; Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Frankenstein.
1819................................................ William Ellery Channing preaches “Unitarian Christianity”; Walt Whitman born on Long Island (died 1892).
1820................................................ Emily Dickinson born in Amherst, Massachusetts (died 1886); Charles Lyell, Principles of Geology.
1821................................................ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody publishes First Steps to the Study of History; Emerson preaches the “Lord’s Supper” sermon and resigns his pastorate.
1832................................................ Charles Babbage invents first computer (“analytical engine”), assisted by Byron’s daughter, Ada Lovelace.
1835................................................ Wordsworth, Poems; Record of a School published anonymously by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody about Bronson Alcott’s Temple School.
1836................................................ Transcendental Club formed; Emerson’s Nature published anonymously.
1837................................................ Emerson delivers “The American Scholar” address at Harvard.
1838................................................ Emerson’s “Divinity School Address”; Frederick Douglass escapes from slavery.
1839................................................ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody opens West Street Bookstore.
1840................................................ The Dial magazine begins publication, lasting until 1844.
1841................................................ Brook Farm founded; Emerson’s Essays: First Series published.
1842................................................ Emerson’s son Waldo dies, “Threnody”; William Ellery Channing dies.
1844................................................ Robert Chambers, Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.
1845................................................ Margaret Fuller publishes Woman in the Nineteenth Century; Thoreau at Walden.
1846................................................ Thoreau jailed for failure to pay tax; Emerson’s poems published.
1847................................................ Thoreau leaves Walden; Margaret Fuller settles in Italy.
1849................................................ Thoreau publishes “Resistance to Civil Government,” later called “Civil Disobedience.”
1850................................. Margaret Fuller, her husband, and their son, Angelo, drown off Fire Island, New York; her manuscript history of the Italian revolution is lost; Tennyson, *In Memoriam*; Wordsworth dies.


1854................................. Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* published; Anthony Burns convicted of being a fugitive slave; 50,000 in Boston watch him taken in shackles to a ship; Henry David Thoreau delivers his address known as “Slavery in Massachusetts” in Framingham; Emerson and Thoreau meet Walt Whitman.

1855................................. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* published; Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*.

1859................................. John Brown leads a raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry; hanged in Charles Town (now West Virginia); Henry David Thoreau delivers “A Plea for Captain John Brown” in Concord; Elizabeth Palmer Peabody develops interest in kindergartens; Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, which concludes “There is grandeur in this view of life.”


1880................................. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody publishes *Reminiscences of Rev. Wm. Ellery Channing*.

1882................................. Emerson dies and is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord.
Glossary

**Abolitionist**: A person who is strongly committed to the unjustness of and need to end human slavery, generally by nonviolent means, although sometimes resorting to violence.

**American Renaissance**: A movement in the arts and society, from roughly 1830–1880, which saw a flowering of creative activity throughout the country. Melville, Whitman, Hawthorne, Poe, Stowe, Thoreau, and Emerson are all considered representative of the period, but the phrase also refers to important developments in the visual arts and architecture up to the end of the 19th century.

**Calvinism**: A set of theological beliefs and practices deriving from the life and teachings of John Calvin. Calvinists emphasize predestination, the omnipotent power of God, salvation by grace, and the sinfulness of mankind.

**Congregationalist**: Any one of a number of churches that based their governance solely around each congregation; not so much a specific denomination as a way of describing the organizational structure of the church.

**The Dial**: A magazine that was the first formal publication of the Transcendentalist Club (1840–1844), edited first by Margaret Fuller and later by Emerson; it later reappeared as an important literary magazine of the Modernists, edited by Marianne Moore from 1925–1929.

**Fugitive Slave Act**: A law passed by Congress in 1850 that made it illegal for law enforcement officials to fail to arrest runaway slaves. The act became a rallying cry for abolitionists and led to greatly increased activity on the Underground Railroad.

**German Idealism**: A school of philosophy deriving primarily from Immanuel Kant’s response to the skeptical materialism of David Hume. The movement became linked to Romanticism and to revolutionary political ideas. Its leading practitioners included Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In literature, this form of idealism is often connected to Goethe.

**Higher criticism**: A movement, primarily in Germany and England, that argued that religions should be studied from a historical perspective and that the Bible and the life of Jesus needed to be examined as historical events. Higher critics sought to interpret the Bible as a literary work and to investigate its claims objectively or scientifically.

**Idealism**: The philosophical position that gives ideas supremacy over material things. Philosophical idealism sees the mind, the spirit, and the realm of ideas as fundamental; ethical idealism places moral values above all others.

**Immanence**: In theology, the belief that the divine is contained within reality, either in the totality of reality or in some significant portion. An immanent God can be found within people, places, or things; a transcendent God lies somehow above or beyond us and our sensory perceptions. This distinction became important to 19th-century liberal theology.

**Individualism**: A view that emphasizes the importance of individuals over societal groups and stresses human freedom and the role of the individual in determining moral value. A specifically naturalistic version of individualism in the minds of many Transcendentalists suggested that individuals could find many of the truths they needed in the natural world.

**Materialism**: In philosophy, the idea that matter is all that finally exists or that material substance comprises the fundamental reality. In social discourse, materialism suggests overemphasis on the value of wealth and material objects.

**Mythology**: The body of stories, ideas, and beliefs produced, usually by primitive cultures, to explain inexplicable aspects of nature or human life. Mythology stresses the symbolic aspect of reality through which one thing can stand in for another.

**Natural theology**: The belief that characteristics of divinity can be perceived within or through the natural world. Negative aspects of nature—death, disease, destruction—pose particular problems for this view of divinity.

**Noumena**: A term coined by the philosopher Immanuel Kant to describe the unknowable aspect of reality which nevertheless provides the basis for all that we can understand. In Kant’s system, the human mind provides innate
concepts (like space and time) through which noumena appear to us as sensory phenomena—the objects and events around us.

**Pantheism:** The theological belief that God resides in everything, sometimes identified mistakenly with paganism, although many pagan religions are pantheistic.

**Pragmatism:** The idea that the standard for value is usefulness. A pragmatist believes, broadly, that ideas that lead to useful, practical results are good ideas. Pragmatists tend to prefer applied ethical rules—which produce positive results in specific cases—to abstract ethical concepts.

**Puritanism:** The body of beliefs that grew up around a group of radical Protestant reformers in England after the Reformation. Puritans were, for the most part, Calvinists who emphasized austere ways of life and strict adherence to religious rules.

**Romanticism:** The broad cultural movement that arose, especially in Germany and England, at the close of the 18th century and into the early 19th century. Romantics emphasized the value of emotions, the importance of human connections to the natural world, and a willingness to question all forms of social, political, and religious authority. American Romanticism emerged slightly later and overlapped in important ways with Transcendentalism and the American Renaissance.

**Scientific rationalism:** The belief that the only valid form of knowledge is produced by science—direct observation of physical phenomena—combined with the operations of the rational mind. On this view, such categories as human emotions or aesthetics (judgments about beauty) have no use, because they are based on subjective claims that can never be verified. Likewise, spirituality is a meaningless realm for scientific rationalists, because spiritual claims are based on subjective beliefs that can never be observed or measured.

**Transcendentalism:** A term derived from the “transcendental” philosophy of Immanuel Kant that characterizes a broadly related cluster of ideas that emerged as a part of the American Renaissance. Proponents of this way of thinking emphasized the divine in nature, the value of the individual and of human intuition, and an ideal spiritual reality that “transcends” sensory experience and provides a better guide for life than narrowly empirical or logical reasoning. The term refers to a cluster of concepts set forth by a number of individuals, rather than a fixed or formal philosophy.

**Unitarianism:** A liberal religious denomination that emerged out of Congregationalist churches in New England in response to the strict Calvinism of the Puritan settlers. Joseph Priestley was instrumental in bringing Unitarianism to America from England. Unitarians argued against the idea of the Trinity, and they became a more liberal denomination as the 19th century progressed.

**Utopia:** Literally “nowhere.” The idea of a perfect society, sometimes imagined as achievable on Earth, more often seen as purely literary or fantastic. Ideas of utopias range from the Garden of Eden to Star Trek.
Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalist Movement
Part II
Professor Ashton Nichols
Ashton Nichols, Ph.D.
John and Ann Conser Curley Professor of English, Dickinson College

Professor Ashton Nichols was born in Washington, D.C.; grew up in Baltimore, Maryland; and graduated in 1975 from the University of Virginia with a Bachelor of Arts degree with high honors in philosophy. As an undergraduate, he was a DuPont Scholar and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He pursued a career in journalism, first at the Free-Lance Star in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he received awards from the Associated Press and the Virginia Press Association, and later, at the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C. In 1978, he returned to the University of Virginia, receiving his M.A. in English in 1979 and his Ph.D. in English in 1984.

In 1988, after four years of teaching at Auburn University, Dr. Nichols was appointed assistant professor of English at Dickinson College. His first book appeared that year, The Poetics of Epiphany: 19th-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment (University of Alabama). He was promoted to associate professor in 1992 and to full professor in 1998. In 2003, he was named the John J. Curley ’60 and Ann Conser Curley ’63 Faculty Professor of Language and Literature in the English Department at Dickinson. His research and teaching focus on the relationship between 19th- and 20th-century literature and, more recently, on connections between literature, particularly poetry, and science during the century before Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species.

Dr. Nichols published The Revolutionary “I”: Wordsworth and the Politics of Self-Presentation (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin’s) in 1998, and most recently, he has edited a teaching anthology, Romantic Natural Histories: William Wordsworth, Charles Darwin, and Others, for Houghton Mifflin in Boston (2004). He has also produced A Romantic Natural History: 1750–1859, a hypertext scholarly project that has been recognized for excellence by The New York Times and the BBC in London. His scholarly publications cover a wide range of topics: Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Thomas Pynchon, Seamus Heaney, African exploration narratives, Victorian poetry, and travel writing. Dr. Nichols has also published nature writing essays, numerous poems, and several short stories. His awards include the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching and the Ganoe Award for Inspirational Teaching. In recent years, he has delivered keynote addresses and invited lectures in China, England, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Cameroon, and Morocco.

Grants to support Dr. Nichols’s scholarship and teaching have been provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Mellon Foundation. He is listed in Who’s Who in America for 2000 and Who’s Who in the World for 2001. Dr. Nichols is a member of the Modern Language Association, the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, the William Morris Society, the 19th-Century Studies Association, and the American Conference on Romanticism. He lives in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with his wife Kimberley, with whom he has four grown daughters.
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Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalist Movement

Scope:

Few movements in American social and intellectual history have been as influential as the cluster of ideas we have come to call Transcendentalism. From Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “self-reliant soul” and Henry David Thoreau’s “different drummer” to modern ideas about individualism and democracy, Transcendentalism has had a powerful impact on central aspects of American life. In addition to familiar names, such as Emily Dickinson and Frederick Douglass, this series of lectures will examine a number of less well-known American originals: Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing, A. Bronson Alcott, and Jones Very. After exploring the religious dimensions of this wide-ranging movement, as well as its contributions to American politics and society, these lectures will end with reflections on the impact of Transcendentalism on contemporary American and world culture.

Our course will begin with the life and career of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the single most important figure behind American Transcendentalism. We will then move to a careful examination of Henry David Thoreau, Emerson’s most influential disciple. From Emerson’s contention that divinity resides in every person to Thoreau’s defense of civil disobedience, we will examine the details of Transcendentalism, the powerful intellectual movement these two helped to found and foster. After our study of the two figures at the heart of the movement, we will explore a wide range of engaging individuals: educational activists, such as Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody; literary figures, including Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson; and social reformers, such as Theodore Parker and Moncure Conway. Many of these teachers, writers, and thinkers were calling for nothing less than a remaking of society: the abolition of slavery, equal rights for women, freedom of religious thought and practice, educational reform, and attention to those aspects of experience that were essential to a good life. It is hard for us now to appreciate how radical and revolutionary Transcendentalism seemed in the decades leading up to the Civil War. These ideas, however, contributed to reforms and ways of thinking that are still with us today.

By tracing these wide-ranging currents of thought, we will come to understand ideas that led to other social changes, such as the development of liberal theologies, the rise of the periodical press, and numerous utopian and religious experiments. Our lectures will engage major texts, including Emerson’s Nature and “Self-Reliance,” Thoreau’s Walden, Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. We will also confront crucial historical events: John Brown’s raid, the Civil War, the rise of industrial New England, and the decline of the agricultural South. Our concluding lectures will identify Transcendentalism as a movement that not only shaped the 19th century but also continues to have a powerful influence on our own era. From the passive resistance of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., to increased gender equality, from the role of liberal denominations in American religion to emphasis on global understanding and cooperation, Transcendentalism continues to shape a uniquely American way of viewing ourselves and our place in the wider world.
Lecture Thirteen
Margaret Fuller and Rights for Women

Scope: From Louisa May Alcott, we turn to another woman whose name became synonymous with several of the main currents of Transcendentalism. Margaret Fuller learned Latin and Greek at an early age and was translating Goethe by the time she took over the education of her siblings upon their father’s early death. She served as a teacher at Bronson Alcott’s Temple School, then as a magazine writer and as the first editor of The Dial magazine. After Horace Greeley asked her to work as a reviewer for the New York Tribune, she became a foreign correspondent. Her groundbreaking publications included “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women,” which was revised as Woman in the Nineteenth Century, the major work in which she argued unequivocally for equal rights for women. Tragically, she drowned, along with her Italian husband and their son, in sight of Fire Island, New York, upon her return to America at the age of 40. Thoreau was dispatched to find her manuscript writings, but he reported finding only unidentifiable human remains on the beach.

Outline

I. Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) was a pioneer of women’s rights in thought and practice.

A. Consider first the position of women in the middle of 19th-century America.
   1. They could not vote and had no significant political rights or role of any kind.
   2. A woman in Massachusetts could not own private property distinct from her husband until 1854.
   3. Divorce was almost unheard of, and in the very few cases where a divorce was granted, men usually kept rights over property and children.
   4. Women had virtually no access to higher education or advanced professional education.
   5. Manual factory labor, domestic work, and teaching were their only acceptable occupations.
   6. A woman, regardless of her position in society, was expected to have her life determined solely by her children.
4. Emerson’s lecture entitled “Woman,” which he delivered to the Women’s Rights Convention in Boston in 1855, is clearly a result of her influence on him. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* had been published a decade earlier.

D. Fuller was sufficiently forward looking, and frank enough, to link the topic of sexuality to women’s rights but also to men’s rights.

1. She argued for the need to re-imagine what we would now call gender roles; she argued, “there is no wholly masculine man,” but also, “no purely feminine woman.”

2. She was influenced by the Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz, a poet of romantic, if sometimes illicit, love.

3. She met and admired George Sand, the cross-dressing female novelist, notorious for her combination of social activism and sexual promiscuity.

4. Fuller was, to some, also a version of the scandalous scarlet woman, whose sexual freedom led to an illegitimate child and a Fourierist, or “natural,” marriage to her Italian lover, d’Ossoli, then 10 years her junior.

5. She alienated some people because of a personality that was variously described as strident, energetic, and intense. Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Russell Lowell both caricatured her in print, while Sophia Peabody Hawthorne referred to her as “Queen Margaret.”

II. Fuller’s life consistently embodied her ideals.

A. She was extremely precocious as a child, learning Latin and many other subjects from her demanding father.

1. She began her career as a schoolteacher at Bronson Alcott’s Temple School and the Green Street School in Providence, Rhode Island.

2. After two years, uncharacteristically for women of her time, she quit teaching, claiming that she needed more time for her own writing.

B. Fuller’s most original and influential professional activities were her organized “Conversations” for women.

1. From 1839 to 1844, she held her series of these “Conversations” in Boston, where she encouraged women to gather to think and talk about ideas. It is now hard for us to appreciate the radical nature of this idea.

2. She was, however, following in the footsteps of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s “reading parties” and was influenced by Bronson Alcott’s idea for similar coed conversations.

3. Fuller’s friend Sophia Dana Ripley, wife of George Ripley and cofounder with him of Brook Farm, helped to gather together women for conversation around such topics as “What were we born to do? How shall we do it?”

4. The actual meeting place was the parlor of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s home. Approximately two dozen women appeared for the first meeting, and many other women soon found a new intellectual outlet here.

C. These dialogues led Fuller directly to her most influential work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

1. Fuller published “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men and Woman versus Women” in *The Dial* in July of 1843, shortly after Emerson had replaced her as editor.

2. The essay was revised and appeared as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in February 1845, a volume that argued for the end of women’s subordination and a new view of their lives as free individuals.

3. Her logic is clear and concise: Even liberal men are often hypocrites because they advocate racial freedom while still restricting women’s rights; likewise, these same men say that women are physically and emotionally unable to assume responsible positions in civic life, but they are appropriate for rigorous farm work, as well as the most important task in any society, the raising and educating of young children.

4. Fuller linked “the woman question,” then being hotly debated in England as well as America, directly to Emersonian self-reliance: “What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule,” she wrote, “but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home.”

5. She did not ignore men. In fact, she praised earlier writers, such as Shelley, Wordsworth, and Byron, for their understanding and sympathetic depictions of women and women’s situation in their works.
D. Fuller traveled on a tour of the Great Lakes with her friend Sarah Freeman Clarke and produced *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*.

1. The book was so well written and offered such an insightful analysis of the American Midwest at the time, that the famous newspaper editor Horace Greeley invited Fuller to begin work as a book reviewer and review editor for the *New York Tribune*. She flourished in this task and soon moved into an expanded role as a commentator on art and the wider culture.

2. By 1846, Greeley had invited Fuller to become a foreign correspondent, one of the first such journalists in America and certainly one of the first women. In Europe, she soon met and befriended the likes of Thomas Carlyle, George Sand, and numerous artists, intellectuals, and politicians.

3. She arrived in Italy in 1847, where she met and fell in love with the Marquis Giovanni Angelo d’Ossoli and gave birth to an illegitimate son; the two may have married later.

4. During the siege of Rome by the French in 1849, Fuller showed her practical side by assuming a leadership role in a Roman hospital. Meanwhile, her husband was fighting actively as an Italian partisan.

5. She also met Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian patriot whose socialism resonated with her own political ideals. When the Italian cause collapsed, however, she decided to return to America.

E. Fuller became as famous in death as in life because of the circumstances of her drowning at age 40.

1. She sailed from Europe to America with d’Ossoli and their son in May 1850.

2. The ship’s captain died on the journey; an inexperienced sailor took over.


4. Emerson sent Thoreau to recover her manuscripts from the wreckage, but he reported finding only unidentifiable human remains on the beach.

III. Fuller’s influence has been variable over time but extensive.

A. By 1881, suffragettes Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton could claim that Fuller “possessed more influence on the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time.”

1. She contributed significantly to the American Renaissance in literature and to various 19th-century reform movements.

2. She was described as brilliant. She intellectually challenged the likes of Emerson and other male thinkers.

3. Women who attended her conversations, like many men of the time, described her influence as life-altering, rather like modern consciousness-raising or self-help sessions.

B. Fuller’s major work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, had a direct influence on the women’s rights movement.

1. “I think women need, especially at this juncture, a much greater range of occupation than they have, to rouse their latent powers.”

2. The book is now considered a classic of feminist thought in America. Its influence was powerfully felt as early as the gathering of women’s rights advocates in Seneca Falls, New York, only three years after its publication.

3. By putting her principles into action in her own life in what were seen as extreme ways, however, Fuller alienated many.

C. Her influence was affected by those who sought to criticize her, as well as by those who tried to protect her reputation.

1. Hawthorne described her as a “great humbug.” His character Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, his satirical novel about Brook Farm, is based on Fuller.

2. Later editors, such as William Henry Channing and James Freeman Clarke, worked to soften the intensity of Fuller’s thought. In *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1852), they rewrote passages from her correspondence and struck offensive sections from her journals.

3. By the 1960s, the modern women’s movement had revived intense interest in Fuller’s life and work; a great deal of scholarship has appeared since then.

4. She is now taught in many college and university classes, and there is an active scholarly society dedicated to the study of her work and influence.
**Essential Reading:**
Fuller, Margaret. *The Essential Margaret Fuller*. Ed. Jeffrey Steele.
Dickenson, Donna. *Margaret Fuller: Writing a Woman’s Life*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Zwarg, Christina. *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading*.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Why were women central to American Transcendentalism from its earliest beginnings?
2. How does Margaret Fuller’s career parallel the aspirations of many women from her own time to the present day?
Lecture Fourteen
Transcendental Women

Scope: Transcendentalist thinking was not only a family affair, but it was also a women’s movement, at least in the minds of many of its practitioners. Men in the movement supported women, worked side by side with them, and argued for their rights. Women, just as importantly, seized the mantle of their own authority and argued strongly for their own causes: religious freedom, the abolition of slavery, and women’s personal rights to own property, cast votes, and control their destinies. This lecture will explore a group of women who had a direct and powerful impact on Transcendentalist ways of thinking, from the three remarkable Peabody sisters to less well-known women, including the radical abolitionist Lydia Child and the indefatigable Caroline Dall. Even more famous social crusaders, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, although not directly connected to members of the Transcendentalist circle, deserve mention among the women who were inspired by or helped to inspire American Transcendentalism.

Outline

I. Women were central to the Transcendentalist movement from its earliest beginnings.
   A. Many of the leading New England families produced women of note.
      1. Emerson’s family had several important women: Mary Moody Emerson, his intellectual and Puritanical aunt; his wife, Lidian (formerly Lydia); and his daughter, who inspired Alcott to write her first book.
      2. The Alcott family produced not only Louisa May but also May, who was a well-known artist, and two other sisters who figured in *Little Women*.
      3. Reverend Channing’s daughter attended the Peabody sisters’ school and helped to bring Channing and Elizabeth Peabody together.
      4. Margaret Fuller’s volume *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), as we have seen, emphasized the role of women throughout history and called on women to seize their legitimate power.
   B. Transcendentalism emphasized the value of women to their families and society.
      1. Education had been the province of women as mothers, sisters, and teachers.
      2. Many women were drawn to activism by social causes: abolition, the right to vote, nursing and health, poverty and inequality.
      3. The inherent equality of people logically had to include half the human race.
      4. Women’s traditional roles as wives and mothers were seen as hindering but also advancing their cause.

II. The Peabody parents, a doctor and a teacher, produced a powerful group of daughters.
   A. Elizabeth Peabody (1804–1894) was the eldest and attended a school run by her mother that encouraged girls in literate skills and the fulfillment of their potential.
      1. Emerson was Elizabeth’s private Greek tutor. She went on to establish her own school and to serve as a teacher in Bronson Alcott’s Temple School and as an amanuensis for Dr. William Ellery Channing, her preacher.
      2. By 1839, Elizabeth published Jones Very’s *Poems and Essays* and, thus, became one of the first woman publishers in America. In the coming years, she would publish, in order, Dr. Channing’s *Emancipation* (1840), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Liberty Tree* (1841), two volumes of *The Dial* (1842–1843), and *Aesthetic Papers* (1849), in which Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government” appeared for the first time.
      3. In 1840 Elizabeth opened the West Street Bookstore at the front of her house, which became a central gathering place for Transcendentalists for more than a decade. Margaret Fuller’s “Conversations” for women began here, and the Brook Farm commune was planned here.
      4. By 1859, Elizabeth adapted the ideas of Friedrich Froebel, a German educator, into the beginnings of the kindergarten movement in America. She rejected discipline based on fear, as Alcott had done, but she argued, against Alcott, that too much introspection was a bad thing for children.
      5. Together, Elizabeth and her sister Mary wrote *Moral Culture of Infancy and Kindergarten Guide* (1863) and supported the idea of public kindergarten, especially in impoverished neighborhoods.
Theodore Parker, the activist abolitionist minister, praised Elizabeth as “a woman of most astonishing powers [...] rare qualities of head and heart [...] A good analyst of character, a free spirit, kind, generous, noble.” The novelist Henry James, on the other hand, caricatured her as the absent-minded and somewhat nosey Miss Birdseye in *The Bostonians*.

By the end of her long life, Elizabeth had also been an advocate for rights for Native Americans and the vote for women, had supported political refugees from overseas, and had fought for world peace. All this activity was pervaded by a Transcendentalist sense that a spiritual unity of God, man, and nature might transform individuals and the wider society.

Her sister Mary (1807–1887), like Elizabeth, was an influential schoolteacher and one of the founders of the kindergarten movement in America.

1. In early life, the two sisters began a girl’s school in Brookline.
2. Mary later married the educational reformer Horace Mann and went on, with Elizabeth, to import educational ideas for the very young.
3. Mary wrote *Christianity in the Kitchen* (1858), which argued that healthy nutrition had a moral basis. The cookbook also contributed to the later fame of the Boston School of Cooking.
4. Mary went on to be coauthor of Elizabeth’s major work on the kindergarten movement and to advocate for a sensitive approach to early education.
5. Throughout adult life, she supported her husband’s career as a public school advocate, a reformist congressman, and later, president of Antioch College.

The third sister, Sophia (1809–1871), is best known as the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

1. Sophia had watched Nathaniel as a boy in their Salem neighborhood.
2. After their marriage, they lived in the Old Manse until forced out because they could not pay the rent. Hawthorne’s career did not take off until the success of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).
3. Hawthorne often depicted her as frail, sickly, and ethereal, his “angel-in-the-house,” his “Dove,” but recent scholarship sees these descriptions as inaccurate.
4. In fact, Sophia was a successful painter and illustrator and a well-traveled woman before her marriage. Later, she was a supporter of Hawthorne’s career as a writer and diplomat, as well as mother to his three children.
5. Her insights and Transcendental ethos are clearly evident in a quote from her journal; describing a morning in the forest, she recalled: “I held my breath to hear the breathing of the spirit around me […] Man has a universe within him as well as without.” Two decades later, Thoreau would say the same.

Numerous other women warrant emphasis because they influenced or were influenced by the Transcendentalist circle, even when they were not directly linked to its members or activities.

Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880) was another remarkably active woman.

1. From her birth in Wayland, Massachusetts, she went on to have an influence as an outspoken and influential abolitionist, a women’s rights advocate, a supporter of Native American rights, a novelist, and journalist.
2. Child is best remembered for “Over the River and Through the Woods.”
3. Her 1833 book, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, was a very early work by a white person in support of abolition.
4. Child noted that slavery went directly against Christian doctrine and degraded not only slaves but slave owners, as well. She did not exempt the North from her criticisms: “I am fully aware of the unpopularity of the task I have undertaken,” she wrote in the introduction, “but though I expect ridicule and censure, it is not in my nature to fear them.”

Caroline Dall (1822–1912) was a child prodigy who attended a series of Emerson’s lectures at the age of 12.

1. Her father, responding to those who said that he was wasting a ticket, said, “I shall expect her to write abstracts of them.”
2. Her most important publication was the sweeping volume, *The College, the Market, and the Court; Or, Woman’s Relation to Education, Labor, and Law* (1867); as a long-time activist in the American Social Science Association, she advocated for improved prison conditions, treatments for the insane, and public health.
3. Dall’s journal, which she compiled for almost 75 years, has been called one of the most complete records of a woman’s life in the 19th century.

C. Numerous suffragettes, along with other important women of the era, while not always a direct part of Transcendentalist circles, drew ideas and inspiration from the movement.

1. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) organized the first women’s rights convention in the United States in Seneca Falls, New York (1848). Out of this meeting came resolutions demanding rights for women, including better educational and employment opportunities and the right to vote.

2. Lucretia Mott (1793–1880) attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 in London, where she met Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The men in charge of this convention refused to seat her and the other women delegates. Partly as a result of this treatment, she became a co-organizer of the Seneca Falls Convention.

3. Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910) wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic after a visit to a Union Army camp on the banks of the Potomac River near Washington, D.C., in 1861. There, she heard the song “John Brown’s Body” sung by soldiers, and in her own words, she acted on an idea of direct inspiration that goes back to the Romantics: “I sprang out of bed and in the dimness found an old stump of a pen, which I remembered using the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper.”

4. “His truth is marching on,” is a quintessentially Transcendentalist idea. A divine spirituality is embodied in a religious and social action designed to “make men free” but also to make women free.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Deese, Helen R. “Emerson from a Feminist Perspective: The Caroline H. Dall Journals.”
Karcher, Caroline L. *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child.*

Questions to Consider:
1. How did both men and women contribute to the important roles played by women in the 19th century?
2. What connections, if any, can be drawn between the role of women in American Transcendentalism and the feminist movement from the 1960s to the present?
Lecture Fifteen
Moncure Conway—Southern Transcendentalist

Scope: Moncure Conway’s life unfolded in ways that proved indicative of the history of Transcendentalism. His life also reveals why Transcendentalism was primarily a northern movement. Conway was a Virginian, born to a wealthy family near Fredericksburg, a town that took on crucial significance during the Civil War. He attended Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, where he read Emerson for the first time. While studying at Harvard Divinity School, he met Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott. He became an avid abolitionist under the influence of Theodore Parker, much to the astonishment of his aristocratic southern family. Conway’s own influence grew in England, where he moved to live, preach, and finally, to become famous as a public lecturer. In England, he befriended Carlyle, Dickens, and Darwin, among many other leading lights. He evolved from the idealism of Emerson, through the applied activism of Parker, toward a very modern liberal humanism. Unable to retain the consistent optimism he attributed to Emerson, he eventually abandoned the organized church altogether. To this day, Conway Hall in London’s Red Lion Square stands as a memorial to his influence.

Outline

I. Moncure Conway (1832–1907) was one of the few southerners whose life was transformed by his encounter with Transcendentalism. Why was the movement restricted to New England?
   A. Conway was born in 1832 to a wealthy Virginia family in Falmouth, near Fredericksburg, a city that would change hands many times during the Civil War.
      1. His father and brothers were slaveholders and southern sympathizers.
      2. His mother was more liberal in her thinking, as Moncure also became.
      3. Transcendentalism was little known and less of an influence in the southern states at this time, partly because agriculture so dominated industry and because conservative denominations still dominated liberal ones.
   B. Conway attended Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, at that time a Methodist school.
      1. He was first exposed to the ideals of Emerson at Dickinson (1847).
      2. At this time, the South was suspicious of Transcendentalism and especially of Emerson, because his egalitarian ideas were a direct threat to an aristocratic, slave-holding society. The pastoral myth could never be fully democratic.
      3. Conway wrote a youthful letter to Emerson, in which he claimed to be “a Natural Radical—to whose soul Radicalism is as air to a bird,” and he lamented his upbringing among conservative southerners.
   C. Conway went north to enter Harvard Divinity School and graduated in 1854. He became a circuit-riding Methodist minister after graduation, but his own religious doubts caused him to become a Unitarian within a year.
      1. He soon met Emerson and became close friends with the person he described as his “spiritual father.”
      2. He also met Alcott and Thoreau and became an abolitionist under the influence of Theodore Parker and William Lloyd Garrison, among others.
      3. Here is his description of Thoreau, whom he came to know quite well: “Like the pious Yogi, so long motionless whilst gazing on the sun that knotty plants encircled his neck and the cast snake-skin his loins, and the birds built their nests on his shoulders, this poet and naturalist, by equal consecration a part of the field and the forest.”
      4. Conway became minister of First Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., but he was soon dismissed for preaching against slavery as immoral.
      5. He took his new wife to Virginia, but she scandalized the family when she embraced and then kissed a young female slave.
      6. Conway was well enough known by the Civil War to visit the White House in an effort to convince Lincoln to free all slaves. He failed at the time but then led his own family’s escaped slaves to freedom in Ohio.

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II. Because of his dissatisfaction with life in America during this time, he moved to England after the Civil War had ended.

A. In London, Conway continued his career as a social activist and public speaker.
   1. He soon came to know a wide range of England’s most influential people: Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, and Charles Darwin.
   2. He wrote, after a visit to Down House, that Darwin “expressed satisfaction that I had been able to derive from evolution the hopeful religion set forth in my discourse, but I remember that he did not express agreement with it.”
   3. Conway was able to continue his freethinking ideals (abolition, women’s suffrage, complete religious freedom or freedom from religion) in the more conducive and accepting climate in England.
   4. He wrote influential biographies of Emerson (in which he discussed his own disagreements with the master), Hawthorne, and Thomas Paine, all of which contributed to the Transcendentalist cult of the individual.

B. Conway traveled back and forth between England and America, never feeling quite at home in either place.
   1. After the end of the Civil War, he had not felt comfortable in either the South or North. His ideas were simply too liberal and forward-looking.
   2. He ended up in Paris, where he died in 1907.
   3. Like Emerson and Fuller, he thus contributed to the internationalization of Transcendentalist ideas by traveling overseas and publishing works that were widely read throughout Europe: Testimonies Concerning Slavery (1864), The Sacred Anthology: A Book of Ethical Scriptures (1874), and an autobiography that appeared three years before his death.

III. Conway, like Emerson before him, eventually left organized religion altogether in favor of a secular and scientific version of spirituality.

A. As he wrote after giving up on the idea of a personal God: “Eyes turned from phantom gods have caught glimpses of a divine life in the evolution of nature, and the mystical movement at the heart of man” (“Christianity,” 1876).
   1. His abandonment of religion was spurred in part by the death of his young son, named Emerson, as Darwin’s disillusionment was also brought about by his 10-year-old daughter’s death.
   2. Conway ended up believing that Emerson was overly optimistic and that hard-nosed materialistic rationalism was the only mode of thought that might approach the truth about the universe.
   3. Not many individuals at this time were willing to push the logic of their skepticism as far as Conway, but such freethinking became a model for many 20th-century intellectuals.

B. Conway’s influence remained widespread even after he came to be acknowledged as a radical freethinker.
   1. Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Andrew Carnegie all contributed funds to a Dickinson College building named after him.
   2. Andrew Carnegie, among many notables, attended his memorial service in New York City in 1907.
   3. Conway Hall in Red Lion Square, in London, founded by the South Place Ethical Society, remains a tribute to his memory. Here, such authors as Salman Rushdie help to continue the sorts of “free speech and progressive thought” once advocated by Conway.

Essential Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Why did a thinker like Conway eventually feel forced to give up on religion altogether?
2. What aspects of life in the American South made it less likely that the ideas of Transcendentalism would take hold there?
Lecture Sixteen
Transcendental Eccentrics

Scope: Transcendentalism produced more than its share of eccentrics, and some of their viewpoints helped to create a uniquely American version of eccentricity. Thoreau himself seemed very eccentric to many of those in and around Concord. The younger William Ellery Channing, nephew of Dr. Channing, was perhaps most famous for his important friendships: Emerson, the Alcott patriarch, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Thoreau all counted him as a boon companion and sparkling conversationalist. Channing lived in a rustic cottage in the woods 10 years before his more illustrious friend Thoreau did so at Walden. The younger Channing married Margaret Fuller’s sister, but he was unable to remain married to her or to raise his five children by her. He went on to write one of the first biographies of Thoreau. Our final eccentric, Jones Very, was a curious but impassioned zealot. Some said that he was chosen by God (especially Very himself); others said that he was insane. What cannot be doubted is that Very produced poems and other writings that helped to solidify a link between independent or artistic thinking and eccentric behavior.

Outline

I. A certain idea of freedom linked to Transcendentalism brought with it the freedom to act in ways that others might not find normal or socially acceptable.
   A. Thoreau was no doubt the most well known of the Transcendentalist eccentrics and was often described that way by others.
      1. What people seemed to mean by eccentric was that Thoreau was not fit for a normal life in polite society, as we have already noted.
      2. The Boston Atlas and Daily Bee described him as follows: “Mr. Thoreau is an eccentric individual, having lived until within a short time, in a hut, in the woods, between Concord and Lincoln.” Thoreau himself addressed this view of his life when he wrote in a letter: “You must not blame me if I do talk to the clouds.”
      3. Such behavior may be good in cases where it produces original ideas or new ways of solving old or intractable problems.
      4. The same tendency creates problems when it leads to antisocial, anti-familial actions or a way of life that ultimately does harm to the individual or those around them: criminals, vagrants, the mentally ill.
   B. Beyond Thoreau, one recent critic has noted that Alcott and the less well-known Orestes Brownson eventually “mortgaged their reputations to a succession of eccentric causes.”
   C. This is part of a tradition that goes back as far as Socrates’s notion of the “divine madness” of the poet, an idea that includes thinkers and writers ranging from St. Francis of Assisi and William Blake to Albert Einstein and Andy Warhol.

II. William Channing (1817–1901) was the nephew of his more famous namesake, Dr. William Ellery Channing, the former usually called “Doctor” Channing; the latter, simply “Ellery.”
   A. His mother died when he was five. The scholar Ann Woodlief has suggested that this loss may be the source of the depression, melancholy, and loneliness that affected him in later years; we should recall the number of orphans and widowed individuals of this era.
      1. Channing was undisciplined from childhood, and he dropped out of Harvard and then failed once again as a law student.
      2. From an early age, however, he pointed out each flower, bird, or insect that he observed in the natural world around him. Everyone from Thoreau to the elder Henry James commented on the precise care and attentiveness of his observations. He examined objects with an almost childlike intensity.
      3. He was unable to provide, financially or emotionally, for his wife (the sister of Margaret Fuller) or their five children. She left him and sent the children to relatives at a time when such a marital separation was almost unheard of among members of polite society.
   B. Channing sent many of his curious poems to Emerson to publish in The Dial. Emerson did so and consistently defended Channing’s strange poetry against the criticism of others.
1. Thoreau called the lyric poems “sublime-slipshod,” by which he seems to have meant vaguely abstract and technically careless.

2. Edgar Allan Poe was even harsher in his review: “His book contains about sixty-three things, which he calls poems, and which he no doubt seriously supposes them to be. They are full of all kinds of mistakes, of which the most important is that of their having been printed at all.”

3. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of some of his poems can sound very modern, almost an anticipation of the conversational and direct diction of Ezra Pound or the young T. S. Eliot. Here is a quote from “Gifts”:

   A dropping show of spray,
   Filled with a beam of light,—
   The breath of some soft day,—
   The groves by wan moonlight,—
   Some rivers flow,
   Some falling snow,
   Some bird’s swift flight.

4. There are techniques here that remind us of the French Symbolists, the Modernists, and even the voice of a great deal of contemporary poetry: compressed, personal, meditative.

C. In 1839, Channing traveled to Illinois, where he lived in a tiny dirt-floored hut and farmed a small plot with his own hands. This effort to get back to the land would later inspire his more famous friend.

1. Ten years after this time as a hermit, Thoreau and Channing took a trip to Cape Cod, the first of a number of such trips. He was probably Thoreau’s best friend.

2. In fact, Channing later wrote a letter to Thoreau in which he said: “I see nothing for you on this earth but that field which I once christened ‘Briars’; go out upon that, build yourself a hut, and there begin the grand process of devouring yourself alive. I see no alternative, no other hope for you.”

3. When Thoreau uses the anonymous initial C. in his Journal he is apparently referring to Channing, who is also likely to be part of the composite figure of “the Poet” referred to in Walden: an idealistic, otherworldly, starry-eyed dreamer.

4. Channing was not widely known for his poetry, then or now, but he was significantly the first person to write a book-length biography of Thoreau; Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist (1873) became his most important and widely read work and inspired interest in, and subsequent writing about, his more famous eccentric friend.

5. Channing lived on until 1901, like Conway, bringing the direct influence of New England Transcendentalism into the dawn of the 20th century.

III. Our final eccentric, Jones Very (1813–1880), was one of those divinely inspired religious madmen who appear at certain points in history and produce a powerful affect on people around them.

A. Very moved early in life into the circle of New England intellectuals of the period.

1. He was born in Salem to first cousins who never married. His mother was an outspoken atheist.

2. He went to Harvard, where he won the Bowdoin Prize two years in a row and drew praise for his work as a classicist and for his essays on poetry and religious topics.

3. He was powerfully influenced by European Romantic writers and by Shakespeare and, soon after his first reading of Nature, by Emerson.

4. Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” set forth ideas Very took to heart: “The man who renounces himself, comes to himself,” and the poet should make himself into “a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost,—cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity”; this kind of direct witness and mystical nonconformity became Very’s goal.

B. In 1838, Very underwent his powerful spiritual rebirth: “In my senior year in college I experienced what is commonly called a change of heart, which tells us that all we have belongs to God and that we ought to have no will of our own.”

1. His crisis and resulting move toward an otherworldly mysticism was so extreme that he was committed for a month to the McLean Asylum for the mentally ill. He said that he had been personally chosen by God.

2. He had stayed on after graduation at Harvard as a divinity student and tutor of Greek, but by the autumn of 1838, he was encouraging his students that they should “Flee to the mountains, for the end of all things is at hand.”
3. His writings indicate that at times he clearly saw himself as a sort of second coming of a Christ-like divinity:

I saw on earth another light
Than that which lit my eye
Come forth as from my soul within,
And from a higher sky. (“The Light from Within”)

C. He published a book of essays and poems with the encouragement and editorial guidance of Emerson, who supported Very’s literary talent, as he did the younger Channing’s.

1. Emerson personally reviewed Very’s poems and essays in 1841 in The Dial: “The author, plainly a man of a pure and kindly temper, casts himself into the state of the high and transcendental obedience to the inward Spirit. He has apparently made up his mind to follow all its leadings, though he should be taxed with absurdity or even with insanity.”

2. Very also was linked to a strain in Protestant mysticism known as Quietism: “The hand and foot that stir not, they shall find/Sooner than all the rightful place to go.”

3. In his best works, he achieves an almost Eastern annihilation of the personal will that would be echoed in Emerson and Thoreau; his spiritual life required that the individual will be swallowed up by the will of God, an idea that links a kind of ecstatic intensity with Quietist mysticism:

I saw the spot where our first parents dwelt;
And yet it wore to me no face of change,
For while amid its fields and groves I felt
As if I had not sinned, nor thought it strange. (“The Garden”)

4. As a writer, he had what many saw as the audacity to assume God’s voice or point of view. He wrote hundreds of poems in total, many surrounding his intense conversion or “new birth” but also many after he received permission to preach as a Unitarian in 1843.

5. This form of religious eccentricity remains with us when we think about religious individuals who seem somehow beyond ordinary life. This is a positive idea in the case of John the Baptist or Julian of Norwich, but it is clearly negative in the case of Jim Jones or David Koresh.

6. The general mood of Transcendentalist inquiry often produced this type of intensely personal questioning or transformation of belief. The residual cultural notion is the idea that it is generally acceptable to go your own way as long as your actions do not harm yourself or others.

7. We still debate what constitutes acceptable social behavior, especially when the actions are linked to religious observance or a belief system.

Essential Reading:
McGill, Frederick T., Jr. Channing of Concord: A Life of William Ellery Channing II.

Questions to Consider:
1. What was it about the views of Transcendentalists that led them to attract the attention of people we might think of as eccentrics?

2. Consider the conflict between conformity and nonconformity in American culture; what is it that often draws us to nonconformists?
Lecture Seventeen
Transcendental Utopias—Living Experiments

Scope: Transcendentalism was not simply about those major and minor figures who developed and promulgated its doctrines. It was also about a series of attempts at new ways of living that had a powerful impact on 19th-century thinking. Social instability, as well as the gradual move from agrarian to urban life, led numerous individuals to consider alternative modes of family and social organization. Brook Farm, perhaps the most well known of these experiments, was founded by George Ripley. Bronson Alcott founded Fruitlands and the Temple School, itself a sort of idealized educational plan for living. Of course, Walden Pond is also a new version of a kind of utopia, if we can imagine a utopia of a single individual. But the social experiments of the period also included religious communities and loose linkages of like-minded individuals. The goal was often to find smaller social groupings within the wider society that could produce better methods for sharing property, educating the young, and producing a unified vision of social life. Of course, the idea of utopia goes back to Thomas More and Plato, but 19th-century America contributed its own Transcendentalist versions.

Outline
I. America has been a land of experimental communities, especially during the 19th century. Some background will help make sense of the Transcendentalist versions of this phenomenon.
   A. In England, in 1772, “Mother” Ann Lee was told by God that “a place had been prepared” for her followers in America.
      1. Nine believers broke with the Quakers and founded the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearance, linking such utopian movements historically with the founding of America itself as a new “promised” land.
      2. Mother Ann and her followers built the original Shaker community in America in the rugged wilds of New York State, in which ecstatic visions led to religious ceremonies of “shaking.” We know the Shakers now primarily for their furniture.
      3. Celibacy and simplicity of life were the Shakers’ foundational beliefs. Many believed that Mother Ann was the female aspect of Christ’s bisexual spirit and that, in this sense, Christ had already returned, leading believers to claim that all people were equal, regardless of sex or race.
      4. Shakers believed in a universal equality that included non-Christians, African-Americans, and Native Americans, some of whom joined these communities.
      5. The Shakers would go on to become one of the most durable communal sects in America, establishing almost 20 communities that included nearly 4,000 members by 1850. Up to 20,000 Americans may have lived in Shaker communities for some period of time.
   B. Oneida, founded by John H. Noyes, was another of the most well-known utopian communes in American history.
      1. Noyes and his followers shared land and property for approximately three decades, and they lived in a single group marriage that included up to 200 individuals, variously called “free love” or “complex marriage.”
      2. Resistant to turning former city dwellers into successful agrarian farmers, they established a number of business concerns, the most famous of which evolved eventually into the Oneida flatware company.
   C. New Harmony, in both Indiana and Pennsylvania, became another widely influential communal experiment.
      1. The community was founded as early as 1804 by George Rapp and later sold to Robert Owen.
      2. Owen was a visionary Welsh reformer who thought that society might be perfected on the basis of free public education and the abolition of social classes and personal wealth; the community eventually introduced kindergartens and vocational education.
      3. Its members included a wide range of scientists (especially geologists), artists, authors, and teachers. Noted theologian Paul Tillich is buried there.
   D. The Nashoba community was perhaps the most directly socialist model for subsequent Transcendentalist experiments at Brook Farm and Fruitlands.
1. Frances Wright came from a prosperous Scots family and became well known for her essays on social ethics.
2. While at New Harmony, Wright conceived of a community that might address the wrongs of the slave system. She imagined an environment in which former slaves could become self-reliant through education and so-called “schools of industry” designed to produce funds that could buy freedom and return those who wished to Africa, as Marcus Garvey would advocate later.
3. In 1826, Wright founded Nashoba, which lasted for four years, in Tennessee, with a handful of whites and 15 free blacks.
4. The community failed in part because whites remained in control through a system of overseers. Reality did not always live up to such ideals.

II. George Ripley’s Brook Farm and Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands became the two most successful Transcendentalist attempts at communal living.

A. Brook Farm was established by former Unitarian minister George Ripley in 1841 in an effort to create a classless society. The goal was to reduce physical labor through shared activity and thereby advance intellectual and spiritual growth.
   1. It began with only 20 members in 1841 but had close to 200 followers by the time it collapsed.
   2. The community succeeded well for a time based on a rational sharing of labor and a link between manual and mental labor.
   3. Members worked in return for food and lodging on the farm; additional income was derived from the well-respected school on site.
   4. Tension emerged by 1844 when the freeform Transcendentalist model clashed with the ideas of Charles Fourier, a French utopian thinker. Ripley had been attracted to Fourier’s elaborate organizational structure, based on “phalanxes,” by a need for financial support and structured reforms.
   5. The uninsured property succumbed to a disastrous fire in 1846 but not before it had become widely known and well respected.
   6. Charles Dana, a Brook Farm resident who later became famous as a newspaper editor and secretary of war during the Civil War, said, “In the first place we have abolished domestic servitude. In the second place we have secured thorough education for all. And in the third place we have established justice to the laborer.”

B. Brook Farm, more than any other utopian experiment in American history, made an impression on social thinkers and intellectuals.
   1. Nathaniel Hawthorne described his experiences there in The Blithedale Romance, a novel that satirized the possibility for the success of such communities. He did, however, describe the farm in West Roxbury, just 10 miles from Boston, as “one of the most beautiful places I ever saw in my life, and as secluded as if it were a hundred miles from any city or village,” echoing again the American longing for the pastoral.
   2. Other notable visitors included Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry James, each of whom was impressed.
   3. As Transcendentalists, Ripley and his followers believed deeply in the power of each individual to contribute to creating a better world.
   4. Brook Farm, unlike many such communes, preserved a belief in private ownership that did not threaten earlier American ideas about property, the nuclear family, and church or state authority.

C. Fruitlands was Bronson Alcott’s idea, an outgrowth of his Temple School.
   1. Like Brook Farm, Fruitlands sought a rural retreat that would challenge industrial capitalism, but this dream lasted less than a year, from 1843–1844.
   2. Fruitlands turned out to be even less practical than Ripley’s experiment: no animal food or animal labor, only the Alcott and Lane families and a handful of eccentrics (a nudist, a cracker-eater), as Louisa May later recorded in her punning essay, “Transcendental Wild Oats.”
   3. When the impractical male idealists would travel to spread the word about their utopian dreams, only the women and children were left behind to work. “They look well in July,” Emerson himself said after a visit there: “We shall see them in December.”
III. Of course, Thoreau’s Walden was also a version of a utopian community, albeit a community of one.

A. “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.”

1. For Thoreau, the ideal world is a world in which he is in complete control.
2. He takes his anti-materialism and his antisocial impulses to the extreme.
3. Something is attractive about this ideal, but when he leaves after two years, Thoreau reminds us that he has many more “lives to lead.”
4. There is a sense in which all utopian communities are experiments, not intended to last forever but, rather, to explore new possibilities for interactions among humans: an America that is not Europe, a new chance.
5. The sense of a life of limitless possibilities is strong in all these people. When Thoreau said, in *Walden*, “I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear,” he was expanding on an idea put forth earlier by Emerson: “I had fancied that the value of life lay in its inscrutable possibilities […] The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable” (“Experience,” 1844).

B. These reflections on Walden remind us of why so many Americans have been drawn to the ideal of utopian communities, which may not last but have a powerful impact nonetheless.

1. They often emerge out of the powerful vision of a single individual. They can sometimes be compared to cults.
2. Many humans have a dream of a perfect world or, at least, a better one.
3. The ideals set forth by one or shared by some are not shared by all.
4. Over time, such experiments are split apart by jealousy, greed, sexual tensions, or changing priorities.
5. Our own cultural experiments, from the communes of the 1960s to current efforts to define new adult communities, and even revised definitions of the family, are legacies of these idealistic experiments.

**Essential Reading:**

Francis, Richard. *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden.*


**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why have so many people throughout history been drawn to the ideal of utopias or communal living?
2. Why do communal living projects, from the Shakers to Brook Farm to the hippie communes of the 1960s, inevitably fail over time?
Lecture Eighteen
Transcendentalism and Education

Scope: As we have already seen, the link between Transcendentalism and education was a close one. As one scholar has noted, “All of the major transcendentalists—Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Palmer, Alcott, Brownson, Very and more—spent years in the classroom as teachers, and all had found traditional education to be inadequate and stultifying.” A number of the leading Transcendentalists were teachers or educators, either briefly or for most of their careers. Others, such as Emerson, had a direct influence on important educational reformers. The very notion of education, not only of children but of all the masses of undereducated Americans in the 19th century, was at the heart of one strain of Transcendentalism.

Education at this time was not just a function of public or private schools but also of the pulpit, the public lecture hall, the experimental community, and private tutors. Indeed, the transmission of ideas from one mind to another was at the center of a range of revolutionary ideas from Brook Farm to Alcott’s Temple School and down to current ideas about the need for ongoing educational reform and lifelong learning.

Outline

I. Education was central to Transcendentalism for numerous reasons.
   
   A. Education was fundamentally about the way ideas came into, and remained active within, the mind.
      
      1. Was the mind passive, a mirror on reality, as most of history had assumed?
      2. Or was the mind active, Romantic, organic, a part of the actual process of understanding, as Kant had argued?
      3. For Transcendentalists, all minds were active creators of their experience; this idea contributed to a democracy of thought in which each person was a potential creative artist or social reformer.

   B. Education was always a social issue, linked directly to the organization of groups of humans into a society.
      
      1. Who was entitled to receive an education? Who decided? Public or private? Church supported or state supported?
      2. Who provided the education, and what qualifications were required for teachers?
      3. Was the purpose of education liberal, or practical, or both?
      4. Even in Europe, the idea of general public education for the masses was still new in the 19th century.

   C. Transcendentalist ideas about education were always progressive.
      
      1. Emerson and Thoreau, like Alcott and Peabody, gave credit to the young for the value of their innocence, their intuitive insights, and their inherent wisdom, unlike almost all earlier views of children.
      2. A key source for Transcendentalist ideas about education was the Swiss humanitarian and educator Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827), who followed Rousseau and believed in the “inner dignity of each child.”
      3. Important educators subsequently influenced by Transcendentalist ideals included Francis Parker (1837–1902), who developed the primary school and the P.T.A. and whom John Dewey (1859–1952) called the “father of progressive education,” and Dewey himself, as well as additional pioneers, including Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and Maria Montessori (1870–1952), all of whom agreed that education needed to focus on the inner dimensions of the growing child.

II. Transcendentalist educators were philosophical idealists whose ideas flowed out into other social reforms that could be broadly linked to education.

   A. Such idealism derives from the Platonic notion that knowledge already exists in the mind, as in the story of Socrates teaching the slave-boy geometry.
      
      1. The Latin root word *educere* means to draw out what already lies within.
      2. This Neo-Platonic and Wordsworthian view is threatening to traditional ideas because, by granting wisdom to children, it reverses the normal structures of authority: adult over child, clergy over laity, institution over individual. This shift would lead such liberal educators as Alcott into trouble with the public.
3. Elizabeth Peabody argued that children’s educational levels should be linked to their emerging innate abilities, emphasizing a Platonic, Kantian, and Transcendentalist belief in intuitive knowledge.

4. Approached from this point of view, education was a matter of drawing out, not imposing ideas on the young.

5. For Alcott, Peabody, Thoreau, and even Emerson, education was not about accumulating facts; it was about the moral and spiritual development of a complete person throughout an entire life.

6. Discussion and interactive conversation were always central to this process.

B. In addition to Pestalozzi, educational theorists who contributed to these ways of thinking included Joseph Marie de Gerando, along with Richard Lovell and Maria Edgeworth, the English father and daughter.

1. Elizabeth Peabody published *First Lessons in Grammar on the Plan of Pestalozzi* and jointly translated de Gerando’s *Self-Education; or, The Means and Art of Moral Progress* with Dr. Channing; both books appeared anonymously in 1830.

2. Thoreau, Fuller, Emerson, Alcott, and Ripley were all directly influenced by aspects of the Frenchman de Gerando’s work in the history of philosophy and educational theory.

3. The Edgeworths’ *Practical Education* (1798) advocated learning through play and what we would now call the discovery method.

4. Such progressive ideas could lead to problems, as when Alcott, in 1836–1837, published two volumes of *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* under his own name. The work included skeptical questions about religion, as well as frank discussions of human anatomy and the physical details of birth.

5. Although tame to us now, Alcott’s version of religious inquiry, and of the birds-and-bees, was described by a critic at the time as “one-third absurd, one-third blasphemous, and one-third obscene.” Such free thought challenged public morality and the authority of the church and family.

6. Emerson hurried to defend Alcott in the press, but public outcry against this work and such actions as enrolling a black child in the Temple School caused the student body to shrink to the point where the school had to close.

C. In addition to specific education reforms, another important legacy of these thinkers was the idea that the human mind is constantly engaged in the process of learning, from birth until death.

1. Thoreau and Emerson, among others, claimed that they remained open to new ideas throughout adult life. As Emerson puts it in “The American Scholar,” “Is not, indeed, every man a student […]?”

2. The larger implication of this way of thinking was the view that a person’s understanding of the world might change and, along with it, one’s beliefs and allegiances; this presents a dynamic, rather than a static, model of learning and its impact.

3. Adult education and continuing education emerge directly from this idea.

III. Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, and Bronson Alcott all contributed to another new and Transcendentalist form of education, the collective conversation.

A. The idea of children or adults gathered in a circle in conversation with an enthusiastic teacher has become a mainstay of modern education.

1. Such a model clearly emphasizes process over product; the interaction among the minds of the learners is seen as superior to any ideology, data, dogma, or doctrine.

2. We owe to those idealistic Transcendentalists the roots of our own ideas about a wide range of educational ideas: kindergarten, less formal classes, mandatory public schools, adult book groups, and lifelong learning.

3. Now, of course, cognitive researchers and doctors tell us that the best way to keep the mind healthy is to keep it active throughout adult life.

B. It therefore goes without saying that The Teaching Company’s Great Courses embody a series of ideas about education that trace their origins directly to the New England Transcendentalists.

1. Education should be available to all—the more widely accessible and distributed, the better.

2. The classic works of all cultures remain significant in all eras.

3. The more we learn, the more we see important connections between and among ideas.
Essential Reading:
Tozer, Steven E., Paul C. Violas, and Guy B. Senese. School and Society: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.

Supplementary Reading:
Rosa, Alfred F. “Alcott and Montessori.”

Questions to Consider:
1. What were the obvious connections between the thoughts of early Transcendentalists and educational theory?
2. Do you see strains of Transcendentalist thinking still evident in our current ideas about the education of the young?
Scope: From education, we move to the question of social activism. The trial and execution of John Brown after his slave revolt and raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), produced extensive commentary and debate in abolitionist and Transcendentalist circles. John Brown was at once celebrated as a divinely inspired individual and reviled as a bloodthirsty lunatic. Thoreau, who had met Brown long before the raid, weighed in as a supporter of Brown’s ideals, if not his actions, even though this view seemed to complicate Thoreau’s earlier ideas about civil disobedience. Brown’s actions were important not only because they galvanized issues that had been lurking just below the surface of American thought and political action, but also because they brought to light central questions about violent versus nonviolent action, the power of the individual, and the historical reality of change that might not always occur gradually. Numerous historians have suggested that Brown’s actions and the powerful responses they provoked, such as Thoreau’s, helped to hasten the onset of the American Civil War.

Outline

I. John Brown’s (1800–1859) raid on Harpers Ferry was one of the most galvanizing public events in the years leading up to the Civil War. Brown’s early life helps to explain why.
   
   A. Brown’s hatred of slavery began very early and increased steadily into adulthood.
      1. His father and extended family were profoundly religious and committed abolitionists. They moved from his Connecticut birthplace to a powerfully free-state area of northern Ohio when John was still a boy.
      2. His education was cut short by eye problems, and he went on to a variety of unsuccessful careers: farmer, land speculator, wool dealer, hide tanner.
      3. He engaged in many peaceful abolitionist activities as a younger man.
      4. Even in strained financial circumstances, Brown fathered 20 children by two wives, and he gave land to fugitive slaves. He and his second wife agreed to raise a black child as one of their own.
      5. He contributed to the formation of the League of Gileadites, an organization that protected escaped slaves.
      6. By 1849, Brown was living in a philanthropic black community in the isolated Adirondack Mountain region of New York. He offered to serve as a father figure to freed blacks and establish his own family there.
   
   B. The mood changed, however, when Brown moved to Kansas in the 1850s.
      1. By this time, he was a virulent abolitionist, and his career turned violent after following a number of his sons to the Kansas territory.
      2. Once there, he led a group of antislavery guerillas in repelling a proslavery assault on the town of Lawrence.
      3. A year later, in May of 1856, seeking direct revenge for another attack, Brown and half a dozen followers, including four of his own sons, dragged five unarmed people from their homes and hacked them to death.
      4. More than 50 people were killed in “Bleeding Kansas” between 1854 and 1856.

II. The Harpers Ferry raid was the culmination of Brown’s violent activism.
   
   A. In his public defense, he would say he never intended violence or insurrection, but it is clear that the attack was designed to incite a full-scale slave revolt.
      1. On October 16, 1859, Brown led 21 black and white men on a raid of the federal arsenal at the junction of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.
      2. After deaths on both sides, he was stopped by local farmers, militiamen, and regular soldiers led by Robert E. Lee.
      3. Both John Wilkes Booth and J. E. B. Stuart served with this military force; two of Brown’s own sons were killed during the raid.
4. Brown was tried for treason in nearby Charles Town, found guilty, and hanged on December 2, 1859; on his execution day, he wrote, with his characteristically non-grammatical punctuation, “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty, land: will never be purged away; but with Blood.”

B. The immediate reaction of most Americans was to see Brown as a lunatic or a fanatic, but many northern abolitionists, including some in Concord, Massachusetts, came to see him as almost a saint or, at least, as a martyr to the cause.
   1. Lucretia Mott in 1860 said, “[…] it is not John Brown the soldier that we praise; it is John Brown the moral hero; John Brown the noble confessor and martyr whom we honor.”
   2. By the time of the Civil War, thousands of Union soldiers were singing his anthem: “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave./But his truth is marching on.”
   3. More recently, historian David S. Reynolds has said that John Brown, although a “terrorist,” was also a liberator who “Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights,” quoting the subtitle of his 2005 book.

III. Countless responses to the raid and its aftermath were impassioned, nationwide, and long-lasting in their effects.

A. William Lloyd Garrison described Brown’s attack as “well-intended but sadly misguided” and “wild and futile” in an article entitled “The Tragedy at Harper’s Ferry” in the abolitionist newspaper The Liberator.
   1. Although an advocate of nonviolence, Garrison defended Brown from journalistic attacks in the North and South. He claimed that American revolutionaries who had taken up arms against the unjust laws of Britain might be compared to the violent agitation of Brown, at least in principle.
   2. The link between Brown and Transcendentalism is obvious. Brown implicitly and in his writings and speeches appealed to a higher law than the law of the state.
   3. To some, belief in the then-illegal right of a slave to be free was a perfect example of what Thoreau and Emerson meant by a “transcendent” truth.

B. The Concord circle of Transcendentalists had known Brown well since 1857.
   1. Thoreau, among others, first met Brown when he traveled to the East Coast to raise money for what he called his “Holy War.”
   2. Brown had a meal with Thoreau at the family boarding house, and the two talked at length.
   3. Brown delivered a rousing abolitionist lecture to citizens gathered in Concord Town Hall. Of the 100 in attendance, Emerson donated $25 and Thoreau, in his own words, “submitted a trifle.”

C. As news of the Harpers Ferry raid and Brown’s execution six weeks later spread, the zealot was remembered by most of the citizens of Concord.
   1. Thoreau, at a memorial service for Brown, delivered a eulogy in which he claimed that Brown had “a spark of divinity in him” and was “a transcendentalist above all.”
   2. Shortly after the Harpers Ferry attack, Theodore Parker wrote, “One held against his will as a slave has a natural right to kill everyone who seeks to prevent his enjoyment of liberty,” a view shared by many northerners.
   3. Bronson Alcott could even claim that Brown was “worthy of the glories of the cross.”
   4. Thoreau summed up by saying that Brown “did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid.”
   5. Of course, not everyone in Concord agreed. Thoreau’s friend Minott Pratt wrote that Henry David was “a little extravagant” in his praise.
   6. Edward Emerson’s (son of Ralph Waldo) journal recorded that numerous Concord residents scoffed at Thoreau’s “Plea for Captain John Brown.”

D. This split in local and national sentiment was dramatized by the fact that while Thoreau and Alcott were singing Brown’s praises inside First Parish Church, Brown was being hanged and burned in effigy by their neighbors.
   1. Of course, political violence and bloodshed almost always produce powerfully opposed feelings on either side of an issue.
   2. Brown’s words about national bloodshed, however, were prophetic; the Civil War began in less than a year and a half, and many have said it was hastened by Brown’s violent actions and death.
3. Some historians have seen him as a madman, but Union soldiers by the thousands sang his anthem as they marched to their own deaths.
4. Thoreau's words still tell us something significant: “No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature.” John Brown, he concluded, was “the most American of us all.”
5. To make such a claim about a man who was a thief and murderer is to begin a conversation that continues today about resistance to unjust laws, preemptive armed conflict, and even the death penalty.

Essential Reading:
Peterson, Merrill D. *John Brown: The Legend Revisited.*

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Why would an apparent pacifist such as Thoreau support the cause and actions of John Brown?
2. Do you think John Brown was insane? If so, why has he assumed such a central role in American historical memory? If not, why have so many people doubted his sanity?
Lecture Twenty
Frederick Douglass

Scope: Now we will begin an examination of several figures who, although they might not have identified themselves with the label Transcendentalist, nevertheless were sufficiently influenced by, or so influential within, the movement that they deserve to be discussed in these lectures. The first such individual is Frederick Douglass: fugitive slave, abolitionist, freethinker, eventual advisor to presidents. Douglass met many leading Transcendentalist figures during the time that he lectured in Boston and Concord. More important, Douglass’s life was seen as a perfect embodiment of Transcendentalist ideals. A runaway slave and leader of the Underground Railroad, he was largely self-educated yet became a bestselling author and counselor to Abraham Lincoln. He began publishing *The North Star*, a widely circulated abolitionist periodical, during the same year that the first women’s rights convention was held at Seneca Falls. As a lecturer, editor, campaigner for women’s rights, and political appointee, Douglass revealed that the power of one person’s ideas might become the embodied truth of an entire social movement.

Outline

I. Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was a sort of Martin Luther King, Jr., for the 19th century: public speaker, author, editor, activist, and civil-rights campaigner.
   A. Douglass’s life and words have often been seen as a living example of the ideals of the New England Transcendentalists.
      1. As a runaway slave, he was virtually self-educated.
      2. His journalism and lecturing connected him to important developing media of the time, giving him a platform and a public.
      3. His life and work as an abolitionist came to stand for the moralist as an individual above all else. He broke with both William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown, for example, in favor of the power of his own vision.
      4. By the time of his death at the end of the century, he had come to represent the authority of a single soul trying to bring about sweeping social change.
   B. In the course of his long career, Douglass lectured in both Boston and Concord and met Emerson, Thoreau, Dr. Channing, and Theodore Parker.
      1. Emerson had spoken out in public against slavery for the first time in 1844; by 1851, he attacked the Fugitive Slave Law in front of the people of Concord: “An immoral law makes it a man’s duty to break it […] Let us respect the Union to all honest ends. But also respect an older and wider union, the law of Nature and rectitude.”
      2. Emerson concluded, and many abolitionists came to agree, that the law that would lead to the recapture of runaway slaves needed to be “wiped out of the statute-book; but whilst it stands there, it must be disobeyed.”
      3. Douglass initially joined these Concordians in support of John Brown; in fact, he became a confidante of Brown up until the time of the Harpers Ferry raid.
   C. His great public power derived initially from the effect of his oratory.
      1. Douglass’s early speeches dealt mainly with his own experiences; some refused to believe that he had been a slave.
      2. Those who heard him speak reported the dramatic power of the oratory. He described slave-owners beating slaves of every sort, a young girl’s head “covered with festering sores,” and the practice of breeding slaves like prized animals. Some of these details were news at the time to northerners.
      3. “I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom [Mr. Plummer] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin” (*Narrative*, 1845).
4. He even used humor to good effect, as in his retelling of the moment when he “broke the slave breaker” named Edward Covey by fighting back, an-unheard-of response at the time. Likewise, he offered a laughable imitation of clergy in their pulpits promising slaves that God would be angered if they dared disobey their owners and masters.

II. From his birth into slavery until his death as an international figure, Douglass fought tirelessly for the rights of black Americans, and he linked those rights to the rights of all human beings.

A. Born a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland in 1818, he was the son of a white man and a slave woman whom he saw only several times in his life.
   1. He escaped once and was recaptured, an event he recorded as one of his most terrible experiences: freedom achieved, then taken away.
   2. He escaped for good when he was 20 by impersonating a sailor, but in certain places, he was still a fugitive for decades until the Civil War ended.
   3. He had met the free black woman Anna Murray while he was still enslaved; they married and moved north to Massachusetts to begin a family.

B. Douglass soon lectured for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and met William Lloyd Garrison.
   1. His career as a public speaker and writer flourished; who but a former slave could speak or write with this accuracy and conviction?
   2. Douglass began a related career in 1847 with the first publication of The North Star, a weekly to rival Garrison’s Liberator; Douglass’s masthead motto was: “Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren.”
   3. In 1848 he attended the first convention for women’s rights held at Seneca Falls, where he linked the struggles of slaves with the struggles of oppressed women.
   4. Douglass traveled to England, where he claimed to have felt fully free for the first time and where he came to link the rights of slaves to the rights of oppressed people of all kinds. His lectures supported women, Irish home rule, and the temperance movement. He returned to England later, when he was worried about being linked to Brown’s raid and execution.

C. By the time of the Civil War, Douglass was enough of a public figure to be called to the White House for meetings with Lincoln.
   1. Lincoln called him “my friend Douglass.”
   2. Douglass’s influence also helped him to become a recruiter for black soldiers, eventually totaling two companies, including two sons of Douglass.
   3. He went on to meet with Andrew Johnson after the war to discuss the rights of former slaves and the complex issues surrounding Reconstruction.

D. After the end of the Civil War, Douglass actively supported the constitutional amendments that made equal rights a matter of law.
   1. The issue was by no means settled, however. Douglass consistently lamented the lack of real opportunity for black people and the continuing separation of the races.
   2. He claimed that racism was not merely “a southern problem.”
   3. After the Civil War, he wrote, “Did John Brown fail? […] John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. […] His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine.”
   4. Late in life, and after the death of his first wife, Douglass married his white former secretary. He silenced critics of this marriage by saying that his mother’s race was honored by his first marriage, his father’s race by his second marriage.

III. The legacy of Douglass was widespread and powerful in America and beyond.

A. His writings were bestsellers, and he spoke out publicly until the end of his life.
   1. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845) was his first book.
   2. My Bondage, My Freedom (1855) described his first trip to England and added, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”:
      The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This
Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.

3. In 1881, he published the third of his autobiographical volumes, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Each subsequent volume added more details and more candor.

B. Many, including the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, celebrated Douglass: “To sin and crime he gave their proper hue,/And hurled at evil what was evil’s due.”

1. Douglass’s “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” has been compared to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, not in terms of optimism, but rather, in recognition of, in King’s words, the “withering injustice” at the heart of American democracy and a continuing “lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

2. Douglass, finally, wanted to make the grand promises of America available to all of America’s citizens. The work of his legacy clearly continues.

**Essential Reading:**

Douglass, Frederick. *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates.

Martin, Waldo E., Jr. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass.*

**Supplementary Reading:**

DeLombard, Jeannine. “‘Eye-Witness to the Cruelty’: Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative.”

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why was it so difficult for a black man to get his ideas taken seriously in the middle of the 19th century?

2. How was Douglass able to break down the barriers that separated him from white society and become such a powerful and influential individual?
Lecture Twenty-One

Emily Dickinson

Scope: Emily Dickinson is a figure who, like Frederick Douglass, might not have called herself a Transcendentalist, but her work cannot be fully understood without reference to the circle of people who surrounded her in Transcendentalist literary circles and in Massachusetts. She read Emerson’s poems and often noted their influence on her thinking. She admired Thoreau throughout her life. Her literary work, like theirs, consistently relies on an emphasis on the contents of individual consciousness. Language in her poems is a tool for direct understanding of reality via sensuous perception of the physical world. Of course, Dickinson was also one of those figures who sought a new version of spirituality, one that linked the material world closely to the immaterial and one that credited human psychology with the origin of our individualized human views of the world. In her wrenching of language into new symbolic meanings and her reliance on her own ideas as keys to understanding, Dickinson embodies central tenets of the Transcendentalists that surrounded her.

Outline

I. Emily Dickinson’s (1830–1886) poetry intersects at important points with numerous ideas linked to New England Transcendentalism.
   A. Her individualism is her own, but it also owes much—especially early on—to the influence of Emerson.
      1. In 1850, Dickinson received Emerson’s first collection of Poems from a friend, including the bardic voice of “Give All to Love” (“When half-gods go,/The gods arrive”) and naturalistic poems, such as “The Humblebee” (“Wiser far than human seer,/Yellow-breeched philosopher!”).
      2. Many of her later poems echo his themes directly: nature, death, knowledge, selfhood.
      3. In 1857 Emerson visited Amherst for a lecture and stayed with Dickinson’s brother and sister-in-law, although Dickinson proved too shy and retiring to venture out to meet him.
      4. She often stressed an Emersonian emphasis on nonconformity, as in her famous “Much Madness is Divinest Sense”: “Assent, and you are Sane;/Demur,—you’re straightway dangerous,/And handled with a Chain.”
   B. Many critics have also noted Dickinson’s connection to the ideas of Thoreau.
      1. Her recent biographer, Alfred Habegger, notes that Thoreau may have been the subject of “Twas fighting for his Life he was—”:
         I dwell in Possibility—
         A fairer House than Prose—
         More numerous of Windows—
         Superior—for Doors—
         Of Chambers as the Cedars—
         Impregnable of Eye—
         And for an Everlasting Roof
         The Gambrels of the Sky—
         Of Visitors—the fairest
         For Occupation—This—
         The spreading wide my narrow Hands
         To gather Paradise— (c. 1862)
      2. Her religious skepticism, even more thoroughgoing than that of most Transcendentalists, can also be compared to Thoreau’s, whose church was always described as out of doors, as in,
         Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—
         I keep it, staying at Home—
         With a Bobolink for a Chorister—
         And an Orchard, for a Dome—
C. Dickinson’s preoccupation with death links her more closely to Herman Melville, usually a critic of Transcendentalism.
1. “Because I could not stop for Death/He kindly stopped for me.”
2. Her life and her work can been linked to the Romantic ideas that the good are too good for this world, the artist is a hermit, and the good die young.
3. Her own life provides a model of the Romantic artist, isolated and separated from society, almost “dead” to the world, but nevertheless producing lasting works of art that have a direct impact on society at large.

II. Dickinson’s literary work, like that of almost all of the greatest authors, is significant for its revolutionary style, as well as its remarkable substance.
A. On the surface, she often seems more Puritanical than the reform-minded Transcendentalists.
1. The structure and meter of hymns is one of the only obvious traditional sources for her lyrics.
2. She was clearly influenced by English Metaphysical poets of the 1600s.
3. More important, perhaps, emotions as strong as Emily Bronte’s or Emerson’s linked her to the struggle to break away from Puritanical, Calvinist New England.
4. Once we get below the surface of many of her poems, we see a robust vitality, a sensuous apprehension of the physical world, and an almost Modernist attention to personal experience:

   A bird came down the walk:
   He did not know I saw;
   He bit an angle-worm in halves
   And ate the fellow, raw.

   And then he drank a dew
   From a convenient grass,
   And then hopped sidewise to the wall
   To let a beetle pass.

B. Dickinson also invents new forms of language for the expression of her ideas.
1. Her grammar is often strained, stretched, and forced into new structures.
2. She uses dashes, rhetorical ellipses, and breaks to suggest the immediacy of mental activity.
3. Her vocabulary and rhetoric are often marshaled like ammunition for a literary weapon that is poetry.
C. Her poems develop a psychological approach to reality that anticipates modern developments in the study of language and literary theory.
1. The use of nature in Dickinson’s poems derives not only from Emerson but from her personal fascination with botany, geology, and astronomy, as well as the influence of Darwin after 1859.
2. Her strange, reclusive life has made her the subject of extensive speculation about her love life, her sexuality, and her precise feelings for those around her.
3. Dickinson’s determined individualism was tied to her private but prodigious literary life. She wrote roughly 1,800 poems but published only seven during her lifetime. As a result, dating the poems precisely is almost impossible, since editors have had to rely solely on the small bundles, often called “fascicles,” into which Dickinson collected her undated groups of poems.
4. Her lyrics remind us that each of us can be a maker of the language we use, rather than merely a passive recipient of the language around us.

III. Dickinson’s influence has made her a cultural icon as much for her way of life as for the literary masterpieces she produced.
A. Her first-person, relentlessly autobiographical speaker is a very modern poetic voice, poised in the present moment and almost preternaturally sensitive to the nuances of surrounding sensations.
1. She has been compared, for example, to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.
2. Sylvia Plath, in the 20th century, has had a similar influence on female poets and literary feminism in America.
3. The struggle in Dickinson between Puritanism and Transcendentalism echoes a wider struggle in the American psyche. Today, we might see this as the debate between fundamentalism and liberalism, which is not merely a religious issue.
B. We now think of the “Belle of Amherst” as a much more complex person than earlier descriptions of her suggested.
   1. The housebound spinster has been replaced by a person vividly alive with an inner life and frustrated by the hypocrisy and triviality of most of what passed for meaningful life in the public world.
   2. The modern artist is often, like Dickinson, an inner seer, one who offers a poetics of identity by combining self-denial with self-assertion.
   3. Dickinson’s version of Transcendentalism offers a unified vision that is not part of a system but, rather, immediate personal experience transformed into meaningful art. She is a quintessentially American artist.

Essential Reading:
Buell, Lawrence. “Emersonian Anti-Mentoring: From Thoreau to Dickinson and Beyond.”

Supplementary Reading:
Diehl, Joanne Feit. “Emerson, Dickinson, and the Abyss.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Emily Dickinson would probably never have called herself a Transcendentalist; why then is it appropriate to study her in a series of lectures like this one?
2. What do you find to be uniquely American about the form and content of Dickinson’s poems?
Lecture Twenty-Two
Walt Whitman

Scope: We will end our discussion of significant figures with Walt Whitman, a poet and thinker whose works reveal direct links to ideas that were flying from brain to brain in Concord and elsewhere during this era. Whitman’s poetry is, like Dickinson’s, a poetry of the individual, yet Whitman’s individual is very different from Dickinson’s. Whitman clearly believed that he was “The Poet” described by and hoped for by Emerson in his essay of the same name. Whitman says as much in the preface to Leaves of Grass, his greatest single volume of poetry. While Dickinson was willing to remain cloistered and publicly silent in her home in Amherst (her poems were scarcely known until after her death), Whitman insisted that he was a prophetic voice of, by, and for the “People.” Even Whitman’s poetic practice bears comparison with the Transcendentalists. He would write short snippets of immediate inspiration on slips of printer’s paper, the so-called “leaves” of Leaves of Grass. He collected them only later and worked to organize them into a unified whole. Emerson and Thoreau both visited Whitman in New York.

Outline

I. Walt Whitman (1819–1892) saw himself as the “The Poet” described by Emerson in his 1844 essay.
   A. Emerson called for a poet who could speak for the people and who would also be a public figure in the life of the nation.
      1. Emerson lamented, “Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung.”
      2. Whitman echoed this sentiment by saying, in the 1855 preface to Leaves of Grass, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.”
      3. Emerson responded with a letter Whitman then quoted in the preface: “I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well […] I greet you at the beginning of a great career.”
   B. Whitman has the kind of expansiveness and inclusiveness that appealed to many Transcendentalists.
      1. Whitman’s career as a printer was central to his art. He personally set the type for parts of the first edition; in fact, grass is a term that printers use to refer to preliminary or experimental typesetting, drafts, less than final work.
      2. Transcendentalists would have applauded this link between the practical and the artistic, as well as this open-ended aesthetic.
      3. The Civil War was a shaping influence on a great deal of Whitman’s verse, culminating in his elegiac masterpiece for Lincoln, “When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom’d”:
         When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom’d,
         And the great star early droop’d in the western sky in the night,
         I mourn’d—and y et shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
         O ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring;
         Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,
         And thought of him I love.
      4. Leaves of Grass, as a number of critics have noted, brought two new subjects into American poetry, the importance of sexuality and the value of human labor. Sex was part of nature, as the more liberal Transcendentalists had taught, and all employment was potentially noble, whether that of the lawyer, the seamstress, the ditch digger, or even the prostitute.
      5. As the critic Jerome Loving has noted:
         The poet reasoned that if—according to transcendentalist doctrine—everyone was divine because nature was emblematic of God, then all were equal, politically equal, including women, whom Whitman treated equally with men […] This idea of equality and self-divinity also meant that one could celebrate himself or herself. And so the first poem of the first edition of Leaves of Grass
began: “I celebrate myself [and sing myself]/And what I assume you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

6. In that sense, he is—above all—our poet of democracy.

C. Whitman’s sensuousness caused him problems throughout his career.
   1. He wrote about the human body, and about sexual desire, in ways that had rarely been attempted:
      Examine these limbs, red, black, or white—they are so cunning in tendon and nerve;
      They shall be stript, that you may see them.
      Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
      Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant back-bone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-sized arms and legs,
      And wonders within there yet. ("I Sing the Body Electric")
   2. Whitman offended many, including many Transcendentalists, with his open and frank approach to sexuality: “Have you ever loved the Body of a woman?/Have you ever loved the Body of a Man?”
   3. His homosexual desire was implicit rather than explicit, but it was evident to many readers.
   4. Emerson tried to present Whitman to the respectable Saturday Club in Boston, but after such sexually explicit poems as “Enfans d’Adam” appeared in the 1860 edition of Leaves, Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and others refused.
   5. Emerson, on a famous walk around Boston Common, tried to convince Whitman to tone down his overt sexuality, but even after the poet refused, Emerson remained his defender. As Whitman wrote, “I could never hear the point better put—and then I felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable conviction to disobey all, and pursue my own way.”

D. Whitman relished the role of eccentric outsider, but he linked that role with a very American view of the individual.
   1. As Emerson had requested, Whitman clearly saw himself as a spokesman for America and for all Americans, from women to Indians to freed slaves.
   2. He knew that some of the positions he adopted would set him against culturally accepted ways of thinking and acting.
   3. Romanticism had sometimes depicted the poet as an outsider, almost too good for society, but Wordsworth, among others, had written passionately about the lives of ordinary people.
   4. Whitman may have solved the dilemma by saying, “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (“Song of Myself”).
   5. He called himself “a cosmos” but also “a loafer.”
   6. Emerson had solved this problem earlier by saying, once again in “The Poet”: “The poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth.”

II. Whitman’s life came to be seen as “Romantic” as his art.
   A. He was self-taught after being apprenticed to a printer at age 14; his rough-and-tumble career as a journalist prepared him for the poetry that was to come.
      1. On Long Island, he worked as an innovative schoolteacher who told his students to call him “Walt” and used games to help teach math and spelling.
      2. He traveled widely in the North and South and experienced slavery firsthand in New Orleans.
      3. His career as a journalist and editor included working for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, the New Orleans Crescent, and a “free soil” abolitionist paper back in Brooklyn.
   B. Emerson and Thoreau visited Whitman in New York and found him a uniquely remarkable figure.
      1. Emerson visited in 1855, but when the two went to Emerson’s hotel, the elegant Astor, Whitman’s shabby clothes denied him entrance to Emerson’s room. They met many times in the next three decades, and their relationship mixed respect with an element of suspicion.
      2. Thoreau and Bronson Alcott visited Whitman a year after Emerson. Alcott recorded that each man was “surveying the other curiously, like two beasts, each wondering what the other would do.”
      3. Thoreau soon described him:
         That Walt Whitman, of whom I wrote to you, is the most interesting fact to me at present. […] There are two or three pieces in the book which are disagreeable, to say the least; simply sensual.
[... But even on this side he has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know. I have found his poem exhilarating, encouraging [...]. On the whole, it sounds to me very brave and American [...]. He is awfully good.

4. By the time of Leaves of Grass (1855), Whitman’s unique style was fully formed: experimental, the long line, unrhymed, no consistent meter, journalistic, biblical, prophetic, mundane, democratic, dispersed but unifying, like America itself.

5. “Do I contradict myself?” Whitman snapped in “Song of Myself”: “Very well then [...]. I contradict myself/I am large [...]. I contain multitudes”; we again can compare Emerson: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

III. Whitman’s unconventionality of style and substance can be linked to a Romantic and to a more specifically American view of the artist.

A. The idea of the unconventionality of the artist goes back at least to the Romantics, to such figures as Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, but extends in the 19th century to include such figures as Vincent van Gogh and the French Symbolists.
   1. Such artistic eccentricity or excess is often seen as a sign of genius.
   2. The artist is unable to fit into polite society or accepted standards of behavior.
   3. Transcendentalists believe that any idea is worth scrutiny if it leads to a vision of the truth.
   4. As Whitman, like many with Romantic sensibilities, might say, the divine can appear in even the most unlikely places; the ordinary is extraordinary.

B. Whitman’s influence extends to us through many artists and ideas.
   1. Ezra Pound, as early as 1915, declared Whitman to be a father figure of Modernism.
   2. Poets from T. S. Eliot to William Carlos Williams to Robert Frost have agreed with Pound’s high praise and have cited Whitman’s influence.
   3. With his screaming poem Howl, Allen Ginsberg, like other Beat poets, delivered the “barbaric yawp” (“I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world,” “Song of Myself”) of Whitman into the voice of postwar poetry.
   4. Even today, we draw a similar link to rock stars and visual artists, whose life and works often leave them at the edge of polite society.
   5. More significant than the personality of the artist, however, and like many Transcendentalists, Whitman gave voice to early versions of America’s gradual progress toward racial, social, and sexual freedom.

Essential Reading:
Kaplan, Justin. Walt Whitman: A Life.

Supplementary Reading:
Loving, Jerome. Walt Whitman: Song of Himself.

Questions to Consider:
1. Whitman calls his own poetry a “barbaric yawp.” Does he mean that as a compliment to himself or an insult? Why?
2. America has arguably produced more individualistic writers than England or perhaps even Europe. Why is this the case?
Lecture Twenty-Three
Transcendentalism’s 19th-Century Legacy

Scope: The significance of Transcendentalism, as we have seen, reached much wider than its impact on literary figures. Ideas about education, many of which influenced public education and experimental forms of private education, helped to change the intellectual lives of many Americans. Educational institutions, while not all equally advanced or revolutionary, tended to move toward the acknowledgment that student-centered education might have advantages over the strict authoritarianism of the past. While votes for women would await the 20th century, the expansion of their rights began in earnest during these years. Periodical journalism underwent important changes because of such publications as The Dial, The Western Messenger, and The North Star. Religious denominations grew, in general, to be more expansive and tolerant. American pragmatism and modern psychology emerged in different ways from a belief in the power of the individual intellect and its connection to a wider social reality. In short, the abstract ideas of Transcendentalism often made their way directly into practical solutions to social problems ranging from religious institutions to school classrooms.

Outline
I. The initial and often-noticed legacy of Transcendentalism was its immediate impact on the liberalization of American theology.
   A. Most Transcendentalists questioned traditional religious dogma and ritual, as well as the details of Christian theology.
      1. They generally accepted the idea that there might be many ways to practice faith, and they especially worried over the fear-based restrictiveness of puritanical Calvinists and conservative Congregationalists.
      2. They argued over specifics but agreed that Christianity wanted reformation.
      3. At one extreme, such thinkers as Emerson and Thoreau left the organized church altogether; at the other, they found their way back to orthodox denominations.
   B. There were a number of religious figures we have not discussed in detail, each of whom reminds us of the range and reach of Transcendentalist ideas and actions.
      1. Frederick Henry Hedge (1805–1890) was a Unitarian minister who helped to introduce others to the ideas of Coleridge and German philosophers. For a time, the Transcendentalist Club was known as “Hedge’s Club,” but by the 1840s, he fell out with members over their increasing liberalism.
      2. Orestes Brownson (1803–1876) was a philosopher and minister who disappointed many of his Unitarian friends when he converted to Catholicism.
      3. Christopher Cranch (1813–1892), like Emerson, left the Unitarian ministry to pursue a career as a poet; when that did not succeed, he became a well-known landscape painter.
      4. George Ripley (1802–1880), founder of Brook Farm, was also a widely respected preacher who refused to believe that heaven and hell were physical locations. His wife, Sarah, described herself as a scientific Deist who believed that Jesus was an outstanding human being but nevertheless just a human.
   C. The mood of many at the time suggested that a robust democracy should be able to accommodate these many different religious practices or lack of any practice.
      1. The precise meaning of freedom of religion had not been clearly articulated by the Declaration or the Constitution.
      2. New England had begun as, and remained, the site of more religious experiments than any other region of the United States.
      3. Such theological disagreements were linked to wider social issues, such as slavery, poverty, and women’s rights.
      4. The significance of these debates is indicated by the fact that the meanings of Christianity and church-state separation are still hotly debated today.
II. In time, many of the social and educational ideals of the Transcendentalists spread out into wider currents of American thought.

A. The Transcendentalists were a part of the wider American Renaissance, that period from about 1830 to 1880 when the arts flourished in America as never before: literature (the essay, fiction, and poetry), painting, music, sculpture, and architecture.

1. Even those, such as Melville and Hawthorne, who could not agree with what they saw as the unalloyed optimism of the Transcendentalists, nevertheless responded to the movement and confronted its ideals in their work.

2. Others, including painters, architects, and designers, while not engaged in the intellectual debates of the movement, still managed to reflect its energy, enthusiasm, and boldness in aspects of 19th-century artistry.

3. Hudson River landscape painting, for example, embodied a similar attention to naturalistic surroundings and the sublime in nature.

4. Victorian Gothic architecture, likewise, embodied a link among the craftsman’s head, hand, and heart that traces back to A. W. Pugin and John Ruskin in England but also echoed the ideals of Emerson and Thoreau.

B. American journalism owes a similar debt to the group of prolific authors that emerged around Concord and Boston in the 1830s and 1840s.

1. *The Dial* (1840–1844), the most well known of these periodicals, originated in the Transcendental Club itself, with Margaret Fuller as its first editor, followed by Emerson.

2. *The Dial* published, for example, Emerson’s poetry and prose, Margaret Fuller’s “The Great Lawsuit” (later expanded to become *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*), and the earliest published works of Thoreau.

3. “Ethical Scriptures,” a series of translations from the traditions of Asia, appeared once Emerson became the editor (1842).

4. *The Western Messenger* emerged as a Unitarian monthly in St. Louis in 1835; its goal was to bring the American West to readers in the East and to bring the ideas of New England Transcendentalism to Western readers. Its authors included Emerson, Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, and Jones Very.

5. Other important publications of the time included *The Christian Examiner*, *the Boston Quarterly Review*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, which has published consistently from 1857 to the present day.

6. Frederick Douglass began publishing *The North Star*, suggesting a beacon, in 1847. Its denunciations of slavery, as well as articles in support of the rights of women and other oppressed peoples, made it the most important abolitionist paper in the years before the war, read by more than 4,000 people in America, the West Indies, and Europe.

7. In all these cases, periodical journalism became a way of expanding religious and social debate beyond the pulpit and the lecture hall and a way of moving education toward an increasingly mass audience.

C. As we have noted, student-centered educational theories were put into practice.

1. Children were not seen merely as small adults but as individuals with their own innate ideas.

2. Learning was an active, engaged process, not the rote memorization of the past. Conversation and discussion were essential to the process.

3. If the divine could be found in each individual, then freedom of inquiry and action would need to be cultivated in order to reveal it. Education thus had a political dimension as well, because everyone deserved it by natural right.

III. By the end of the 19th century, many of the specific practical experiments of Transcendentalists had ended, but ideas they had promulgated made their way firmly into the American mainstream and various subcultures.

A. Social causes championed by Transcendentalists often succeeded indirectly.

1. Rights for women, which began during these years, were not completely secured even in the 20th century.

2. The abolition of slavery was complete, but equal rights under law would await the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and beyond.

3. Poverty, disease, and other forms of social suffering remain on the national agenda to this day, in our own country and around the world.

B. Widespread literacy and public education became goals of the expanding nation.
1. Journalism began to reach a much wider segment of the population.
2. The idea of the popular press became widespread, and the nonfiction essay, especially the nature essay, developed as a uniquely American form.
3. Novels that described (Margaret: A Tale of the Real and Ideal by Sylvester Judd, 1851), critiqued (Moby Dick, 1851), or satirized (The Blithedale Romance, 1852) Transcendentalist concerns eventually led toward increased literary realism and naturalism.
4. American poetry evolved as a more personal and expressive genre under the influence of numerous poets and their imitators: Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, Very, Whitman, Dickinson.
5. Public education began to spread by the 1840s with the rise of property taxes; by the end of the century, it was the expectation of every community.

C. Nineteenth-century materialism gradually overwhelmed the often elusive idealism of these New England thinkers.
   1. Industrialism moved many agrarians away from the pastoral possibility, first in the North, even if the pastoral dream had been an illusion. Most people left the farm. Industry then extended to the South soon after the Civil War.
   2. Even in literature and the arts, the idealism, philosophical and ethical, of such figures as Thoreau and Emerson gave way to increasing realism and naturalism by the end of the century. Practicality replaced possibility.
   3. Unfettered capitalism led to the triumph of numerous robber-barons by the end of the century and prepared the way for the war machines of World War I and beyond.
   4. Materialism, both matter and money, became the order of the day by 1900.
   5. Transcendentalism lasted as a sort of dream or a set of ideals, but these ideals would go on to have a direct impact on the 20th century, as we shall see in our final lecture.

**Essential Reading:**
Albanese, Catherine L. Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America.

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. How were 19th-century political and social movements directly affected by the ideas of the Transcendentalists?
2. The end of slavery, the Civil War, industrialization, women’s rights: How might we link each of these historical developments to the ideas of the Transcendentalists?
Lecture Twenty-Four
The Legacy in the 20th Century and Beyond

Scope: Although few, if any, individuals would claim to be Transcendentalists today, the movement has had a direct influence on a wide range of literary, social, and political movements. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., are direct philosophical descendents of Thoreau. Ecumenicism, women’s rights, and environmental awareness are modern ways of thinking that owe a direct debt to the remarkable individuals whose lives we have been examining in these lectures. The Unitarian Universalist Church still acknowledges the crucial role played by Transcendentalism in the development of its individualized and humanistic theology. John Dewey and countless other educational reformers have adopted broadly student-centered pedagogies. Like Romanticism in Britain and Germany, Transcendentalism in America was initially a movement of younger people whose ideas were passed on to young and old alike. Although many of its immediately practical ideas were short-lived, its value as an idealistic movement continues even into our own culture. Modern America still owes a great debt to such thinkers as Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, and Fuller, whose ideas lasted throughout their own lives and beyond.

Outline

I. Central ideas of the New England Transcendentalists have made their way into the modern world.
   A. The Transcendentalist approach to spirituality has been especially important to the development of the Unitarian Universalists and to other liberal ways of thinking.
      1. A sermon entitled “Transcendentalism for a New Age” was delivered at a Unitarian Church in Virginia in 2005.
      2. In it, Jane E. Rosencrans quotes the Emerson scholar David Robinson, who has claimed that Unitarians in America stand “upon the richest theological legacy of any American denomination,” even though they do not always recognize this heritage. That legacy is New England Transcendentalism.
      3. Likewise, numerous secular, agnostic, and nonreligious Americans draw on ideas first put forth by lecturers and authors in Concord and Boston to support their own modern views of spirituality: the figurative truth of sacred writings, historical approaches to religion, spiritual lives not tied to dogma or traditional ritual.
      4. Current emphasis on the practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, like various forms of secular humanism, can be traced back to the method and liberalism of many Transcendentalist thinkers.
   B. Emerson is considered by many to be one of the greatest thinkers, if not the most systematic, that America has produced.
      1. Philosophers ranging from John Dewey to Stanley Cavell to Richard Rorty have all written or relied on the ideas of Emerson.
      2. Dewey called Emerson “the philosopher of democracy.”
      3. Cavell, in the prestigious Carus Lectures in 1988, said that his goal was “to recommend Emerson, despite all, to the closer attention of the American philosophical community.”
      4. Rorty, more recently, has lamented the confusing and contradictory aspects of Emerson but adds that Emerson clearly had a powerful and direct influence on thinkers as different as Nietzsche and William James.
      5. One strain of modern pragmatism owes its origins to Emerson’s willingness to investigate any idea without prejudice or unnecessary reliance on the limitations of earlier ways of thinking.
      6. In this sense, he is more important for his method than his conclusion: commitment to the idea of a unifying principle, direct observation, dialogue, and often open-ended conclusion.
   C. Thoreau has likewise been quoted and discussed in a wide range of intellectual and literary contexts.
      1. When Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” he was almost quoting Thoreau: “Nothing is so much to be feared as fear” (Journal, 1851).
      2. Gandhi said that Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” had “left a deep impression” on him.
      3. Martin Luther King, Jr., said:
The teachings of Thoreau are alive today, indeed, they are more alive today than ever before. Whether expressed in a sit-in at lunch counters, a freedom ride into Mississippi, a peaceful protest in Albany, Georgia, a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, it is an outgrowth of Thoreau’s insistence that evil must be resisted and no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice.

4. The tradition of nonviolent resistance, from Gandhi to King to Lech Walesa, has drawn directly on the powerful argument of the work Thoreau first called “Resistance to Civil Government.”

5. Countless contemporary nature writers have cited Thoreau, critiqued Thoreau, or used him as a touchstone for their work: Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams, among others.

II. American literature was shaped by and continues to respond to the ideas and spirit of the Transcendentalists.

A. Emerson and Thoreau each brought new voices into American letters.

1. Emerson was seen, then and now, as the prophetic bard of American idealism. His value was his spirit; his limitation, as Thoreau came to see, was his abstractness.

2. Nevertheless, his language was sweeping, swelling, and metaphysical, and it brought something new in its optimistic enthusiasm.

3. Thoreau, meanwhile, brought a meditative, ruminating, more concrete voice into the national literature; he became a spokesperson for nature and for the natural selfhood of each person.

4. Whitman almost invented modern American poetry, partly under the pressure of Emerson’s desire for a “Poet” of the entire nation.

B. Even those who had satirized or critiqued the limits of Transcendentalism often did so in recognition of the lasting impact of the movement.

1. Hawthorne had a close personal relationship with many members, even while he often mocked their impracticality and lack of a sense of evil; he was really an anti-Transcendentalist, a proto-existentialist.

2. Likewise, Melville simply could not accept the idea that “the universe is benevolent and human nature good” (The Confidence-Man). Melville’s wild nature is more modern than Wordsworth’s, more like Thoreau’s on Mount Katahdin: indifferent, unforgiving, ultimately unknowable, like the great white whale, Moby Dick.

3. Poe, while not as anti-transcendental as Melville, nevertheless depicts a more modern world of spirit than his colleagues in Concord, much darker and more psychological.

C. More recent authors have explored or embodied this debt in poetry, fiction, and the essay.

1. Poets from Wallace Stevens to Robert Frost voiced this influence and gave it shape in their works.

2. Emphasis on the value of nonconformity, derived directly from Emerson and Thoreau, plays out in work by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner. To conform or not to conform; that becomes the American question.

3. Thoreau and Emerson, especially, are directly responsible for the modern literary genre know as ecocriticism, a mixed genre of interpretation that links writing about place with an understanding of the natural world and an emphasis on ecological awareness.

4. Emerson is regularly invoked or discussed in recent critical commentary on such living writers as Thomas Pynchon and Jorie Graham.

5. The nonfiction essay as an American literary genre, as well as the tradition of American nature writing, emerged directly from the authors we have been studying.

III. Often, these ideas are transformed or adapted in important ways.

A. The social and political movements of the 1960s drew strength from ideas related to Transcendentalism even when they did not acknowledge these debts directly.

1. Race relations in our own era still owe a debt to the abolitionist enthusiasm of Thoreau, Channing, Douglass, and Conway.

2. Arguments for women’s rights trace to Fuller, Peabody, and their supporters, including many men.

3. Communal living remains an ideal for social movements ranging from hippies to religious cults.

4. Even current emphasis on globalism links to Transcendentalist ideas about the unity of all people and the value of cross-cultural communication.
5. The environmental movement, whether it draws on scientific, Native American, Christian, Judaic, or Eastern ways of thinking, links to an anti-materialism at the heart of Transcendentalism.

6. When people attack the pervasive materialism of our own culture, they often use Thoreau to do so: “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone,” and “Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul” (Walden).

B. The institutions they produced may have been short-lived, but their books and ideas are still with us.

1. Idealism like that of the Transcendentalists is sometimes hard to sustain past youthful enthusiasm, yet today, they continue to inspire young and old alike. As Thoreau said, “In proportion as [a person] simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness”; or as Emerson noted, “The only reward of virtue is virtue,” and “What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us.”

2. The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society was not founded until 1989 as a literary and scholarly site dedicated to the study of the life and work of the “Sage of Concord.”

3. In 1990, rock musician Don Henley of the Eagles began the Walden Woods project, an organization established to preserve Walden Pond and the landscape surrounding it. The Thoreau Institute has now been added as an educational program to assist these efforts; its members include Meryl Streep, Annie Dillard, Michael Douglas, and the rock star Sting.

4. Massachusetts author Jane Langton has described the way these figures still haunt our imaginations: Today I can’t cross Boston Common without thinking of Emerson walking there with Walt Whitman—or can I walk up Tremont Street without remembering the Saturday Club at the Parker House. I wish I knew in which Cambridgeport house Emily Dickinson spent many a homesick month while consulting a doctor about her eyes […] Have you ever felt something tickle your cheek as you walk down Brattle Street? I’ll tell you what that is—it’s the ghostly whiskers of some long-dead transcendentalist.

5. Even a series of lectures like this one links us back to the Transcendentalists’ belief in the value of lifelong self-education. The growth of each human mind expands a self-reliant person who is of value to the entire universe.

Essential Reading:

Gura, Philip F., and Joel Myerson, eds. Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Pragmatism, democracy, globalism, environmentalism: How can movements of thought and ideas like these be connected to the influence of Transcendentalism?

2. What would you say is the greatest single impact of Transcendentalism on current ways of thinking in America or around the world?
Biographical Notes

Alcott, Amos Bronson (1799–1888). The father of Louisa May Alcott, A. Bronson Alcott was one of the foremost Transcendentalists in the years leading up to the Civil War. Alcott was best known in his own era as an educator and as founder of the Temple School and the short-lived Fruitlands community.

Alcott, Louisa May (1832–1888). The daughter of A. Bronson Alcott, Louisa May went on to become more famous than her father as the author of Little Women and other widely read novels. Although now considered a children’s author, in her lifetime, Alcott wrote works for adults and was an active abolitionist and supporter of women’s rights.

Brown, John (1800–1859). An abolitionist and social reformer, Brown’s violent methods emerged in Bleeding Kansas and culminated in the raid on Harpers Ferry. Brown’s execution by hanging led him to be seen as a lunatic traitor by some and as an abolitionist martyr by others.

Carlyle, Thomas (1795–1881). Carlyle was an English author and social critic who had a powerful impact on the founders of New England Transcendentalism. Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus advocated a secular spirituality and his On Heroes and Hero Worship set forth the idea of the importance of powerful personalities to history.

Channing, William Ellery (1780–1842). Dr. Channing, as he came to be known, was an honorary founder of New England Transcendentalism. A Unitarian minister who became widely influential for his liberal theology and his social activism, he was a moderate thinker who disagreed with all forms of extremism.

Channing, W. Ellery (1817–1901). The younger Channing was the eccentric nephew of the more famous Dr. Channing. Ellery (as he came to be known) had close connections to Emerson and, especially, Thoreau. Emerson published his abstract poems, and Channing visited Thoreau at Walden often, later writing the first biography of his friend.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1772–1834). An English poet and philosopher who, along with Wordsworth, was one of the first-generation founders of British Romanticism; Coleridge’s ideas were extremely important to Transcendentalist thinkers. His idealism emphasized a link between the material and the spiritual realms, and he distinguished between our understanding, which results from rational thinking, and our reason, a higher form of thinking that puts us in touch, via intuition, with a realm of pure ideas.

Conway, Moncure (1832–1907). Conway was a Unitarian preacher and, later, a lecturer who eventually left his denomination over his increasingly humanistic thinking. He was one of the few Transcendentalists who came from the American South, and he eventually moved to England, where his freethinking ideas were more widely accepted than anywhere in America.

Dickinson, Emily (1830–1886). She was the reclusive poet of Amherst, Massachusetts, who penned roughly 1,800 lyrics, almost all of which are distinguished by remarkable uses of language, but only a handful of which were published during her lifetime. Known for the dense and psychologically astute content of her poems, she has become a subject of intense biographical speculation in recent years.

Douglass, Frederick (1818–1895). A former slave, he was an abolitionist and reformer who advocated a transformation of America’s racial and social ideals. Douglass was best known in his lifetime for the power of his oratory and the impact of his autobiographical writings. He advised Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and attended the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1803–1882). Seen by many as the philosophical founder of New England Transcendentalism, Emerson was surely its most influential spokesperson and a thinker who had a widespread impact on 19th-century culture. Emerson broke with the organized church early in adult life. He went on to use his oratory and essays to advocate a wide range of ideas about “Nature,” “Self-Reliance,” “The American Scholar,” “The Over-Soul,” and “The Poet,” ideas that have helped to shape theological, social, and literary developments to the present day.

Fuller, Margaret (1810–1850). The most influential of the female Transcendentalists, Fuller was the first editor of the journal The Dial and the author of Woman in the Nineteenth Century. She served as one of the first female journalists and foreign correspondents, working for Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune. After living in Europe for a number of years, she died tragically by drowning, along with her husband and son, in sight of Fire Island.
Hawthorne, Nathaniel (1804–1864). Perhaps best described as an anti-Transcendentalist, Hawthorne found ideas like those of Emerson far too optimistic for his liking. Hawthorne nevertheless lived in one of the Emerson family houses in Concord, married the sister of Elizabeth Peabody, and spent time on the Brook Farm community, which he satirized in *The Blithedale Romance*.

Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804). Kant was a German philosopher who advocated a middle ground between the pure idealism of Plato and the reductive empiricism of Locke. According to Kant, we can know the phenomena that surround us via our senses, but we can never know the underlying *noumena* on which phenomena are based. Kant’s version of such a mediated idealism became the basis of Emerson’s philosophy and subsequently crucial for many American Transcendentalists.

Melville, Herman (1819–1891). An American author who dealt with Transcendentalist thinking in his masterpiece, *Moby Dick*, Melville also satirized Transcendentalists, especially Emerson, for what he took to be their overly optimistic outlook. Melville is a key figure in the American Renaissance, and his literary works, including such masterpieces as *Billy Budd*, *The Confidence-Man*, and *Typee*, have had a powerful influence on subsequent fiction.

Parker, Theodore (1810–60). Parker was a liberal Unitarian whose hostility to the idea of miracles, and whose emphasis on the historical basis of all religious truth, caused many people to break with his humanistic outlook. He spoke out powerfully in favor of women’s rights and the abolition of slavery, and he came to see his ministry primarily as a way of striving to bring about social justice.

Peabody, Elizabeth Palmer (1804–1894). She was an educational reformer and an associate of many members of the Transcendentalist circle. Along with her less famous sisters, Sophia (1809–1871), an artist who married Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mary (1807–1887), one of the cofounders with her eldest sister of the kindergarten movement in America, Elizabeth became one of the most influential women of her era.

Pestalozzi, Johann H. (1746–1827). The most well-known European educational reformer was a Swiss follower of Rousseau who emphasized the crucial link between freedom and responsibility in the development of the child. His educational methods stressed the inner dignity of each individual, the need for kindness and encouragement on the part of teachers, and the link among “head, hands, and heart” in all pedagogy.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1712–1778). Rousseau was the source of many of the ideas adopted by British and Continental Romantic poets, philosophers, and artists. He claimed that human beings were essentially good and were corrupted by the selfish, materialistic interests of social organizations. He argued that society was a contract between its members that was always subject to revision, and he advocated a return to nature as a response to the complexities of modern life. His ideas of the noble savage, the freedom of the individual, and the importance of human emotions have proven as widely influential as his autobiographical *Confessions* (1783).

Thoreau, Henry David (1817–1862). Thoreau was a naturalist, author, and social reformer whose two years at Walden Pond became the model for a new kind of connection between humans and the natural world. He eventually became as well known for his idea that “civil disobedience” was a legitimate response to unjust laws. Although he never set forth a consistent philosophy, Thoreau’s voluminous writings helped to define the role of wild nature and independent thinking in the development of the individual.

Very, Jones (1813–1880). Transcendentalist poet and mystic remembered for the vagueness but also the intense emotion of his lyric poems. Very described himself as one of God’s chosen, and his religious enthusiasm and sensitivity to the world around him helped define one strain of New England Transcendentalism.

Whitman, Walt (1819–1892). Nineteenth-century American poet extraordinaire, Whitman brought a new voice and subject matter into American verse. A largely self-educated laborer and journalist, Whitman virtually invented a loose, free-flowing poetic form that has had a profound influence on subsequent poetry. His *Leaves of Grass* is the often-revised (by Whitman) and, perhaps, single most important volume of poetry in 19th-century America.

Wordsworth, William (1770–1850). Wordsworth was the coauthor, along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a volume of poetry that literally changed the course of English literary history. Wordsworth advocated a return to the language really spoken by human beings and to simple and rustic life in the natural world and the events of ordinary experience as the proper subjects for poetry. He became well known as the best exemplar of Romantic nature poetry in the English language and had a powerful influence on Emerson, Thoreau, and their followers.
Bibliography

Essential Reading:


Dickenson, Donna. Margaret Fuller: Writing a Woman’s Life. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993. A thoroughly researched feminist biography that sees Fuller as “the intellectual superstar of her sex.”

Douglass, Frederick. Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Ed. Henry Louis Gates. New York: Library of America, 1994. Part of the carefully produced Library of America series of America’s most important authors, this volume includes all three of Douglass’s autobiographical volumes in one.


Gura, Philip F., and Joel Myerson, eds. *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. From the Transcendentalists to their modern critics, this volume offers a thorough review of the ideas and reception of these thinkers.


Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. This wonderful biography provides one of the most complete pictures of Thoreau that we have: the author, natural historian, social critic, teacher, disciple of Emerson, the truly self-reliant individual.


Mendelsohn, Jack. *Channing, the Reluctant Radical: A Biography*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1971 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980). As the title suggests, Rev. Channing did not relish every aspect of the role he assumed; Mendelsohn makes effective use of Channing’s own works, as well as the 1848 *Memoir* by his nephew William E. Channing.


Richardson, Robert D. *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. Superbly detailed and wonderfully written, Richardson’s is the best recent biography. It offers vivid descriptions of events themselves, from days by the pond to a night in jail, but it also provides rich insights into the intellect as the key to understanding the man.

———. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Richardson makes excellent use of Emerson’s letters and notebooks to flesh out the link between the public and the private man. He balances the cool detachment of Emerson’s public persona with the warm family man and friend.


www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/williamellerychanning.html. Like many of the useful biographies on this extensive Web site of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Association, this brief survey sets out the essential details of Channing’s rich life.

Woodlief, Ann. *The Web of American Transcendentalism.* Virginia Commonwealth University. www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/. By far the best single Internet or hypertext resource for the study of the entire movement. Essays by Woodlief and her students (not always as effective), as well as links to a remarkable range of primary and secondary sources, make this an indispensable resource for beginners and more advanced researchers.

**Supplementary Reading:**


———. *Literary Transcendentalism; Style and Vision in the American Renaissance.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973. Buell carefully analyzes the difficulty of traditional genre criticism in relation to these authors, because they so often broke the boundaries between art and criticism, literature and history, religion and politics.


———, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995. Part of an excellent series, Myerson’s volume includes wide-ranging essays by Richardson, Gura, Buell, and others, as well as a useful chronology and bibliography.


