

*The*  
*Transcendentalists*

# *The Transcendentalists*

AN ANTHOLOGY

PERRY MILLER

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. P. M.

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# *The Transcendentalists*

AN ANTHOLOGY

There is a small class of scholars whose aims and pursuits are of a different character. They value literature not as an end, but as an instrument to help the solution of problems, that haunt and agitate the soul. They wish to look into the truth of things. The Universe, in its mysterious and terrible grandeur, has acted on them. Life is not regarded by them as a pageant or a dream; it passes before their eye in dread and solemn beauty; thought is stirred up from its lowest depths; they become students of God unconsciously; and secret communion with the divine presence is their preparation for a knowledge of books, and the expression of their own convictions. Their writings, accordingly, whenever they appear, will be alive. They will probably offend or grieve many, who make the state of their own minds the criterion of truth; but, at the same time, they will be welcomed by others, who find in them the word which they were waiting to hear spoken.

—GEORGE RIPLEY

# INTRODUCTION

THIS volume exists primarily on the level of what the Transcendentalists called the Understanding, or what Emerson called "Commodity." It aims to make available articles and books that by now can be found only in a few special libraries. I have endeavored to arrange the selections so that they tell the story of themselves, and to include at least one example of all the major phases or concerns. I have deliberately withheld comment of my own, confining myself to essential biographical and historical annotations. My conviction, which I trust the book will confirm, is that the group who composed the "Transcendental movement" of the 1830's were writers of extraordinary abilities and of still more extraordinary intensities. They have suffered in reputation largely because, their works being locked up in rare publications, they are no longer seen in their true perspective. If they be permitted to speak for themselves, they are, I am persuaded, quite capable of holding their own.

Through the florescence of historical scholarship over the last generation, at least the names of the figures ranged around Emerson and Thoreau have gradually gained currency, but the student still has difficulty in finding out what they did, and even more what they said. Some of these—Brownson,<sup>1</sup> Margaret Fuller<sup>2</sup>, Parker, Alcott,<sup>3</sup> Very—have recently received critical re-evaluations, and biographies have been written, but the best of their creations have not been sifted out and recognized. In the schools of graduate study an increasing amount of research is being devoted to the period and the people; out of this is shaping a clearer and more accurate picture of the movement than we have hitherto possessed, but even so, the truism would still hold that the sources themselves are the fact upon which all interpretation must be founded.

As a record of the facts, this volume must confess at once to a serious incompleteness: it omits, except for a few unavoidable citations, Emerson and Thoreau. The reason is frankly utilitarian; there is not enough space. Moreover, the works of these two men are easily accessible, at least in anthologies. Were Emerson's part in the pageant to be here represented in accordance with its central importance, all his publications between 1836 and 1850 would need to be reprinted, and the volume would become unmanageable. At the

1 Schlesinger & Maynard

2 *Whetstone of Genius* by Mason Wade

3 Odell Shepherd's *Reddler's Progress*

risk of trying to construct a *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out—not only once but twice over—I have sacrificed Emerson and Thoreau to make room for Brownson and Ripley.

This rigor has been regretfully maintained even when we come to 1836 and to *Nature*. This essay is so clearly the pivotal utterance that without it the book may have no center and little coherence; however, it is so widely reprinted that any student can consult it in connection with Chapter IV. I have, however, felt obliged to find room for at least the first half of Emerson's *Historic Notes*; although it is contained in the standard edition, it is all too little known there, and to reread it against the array of its contemporaries will be, I wager, to find in it meanings that at first sight are hidden. The other extracts from Emerson, his preface for *The Dial* and his presentations of the younger Channing, are not usually included in his *Works*; their omission has been a loss.

The problem of Thoreau is somewhat different, since he published his two books after the years on which this collection is focused. To include all his earlier writings would again be to consume space needed for lesser known productions. On the other hand, in order to correct certain excesses of recent interpretation, I would like to convey some sense of how Thoreau made his bow among the Transcendental brotherhood—when it was far from evident that he was a major artist. I have tried to strike a balance by reprinting five of his verses from *The Dial* along with the other *Dial* poets. Also, I have placed the gist of his “Natural History of Massachusetts” among the philosophical selections in order deliberately to emphasize what modern criticism too often forgets, that his formative years were molded by the concepts and theories of Transcendentalism. Though from the beginning he strove for a greater concreteness than the others, his approach to the particular presumed an abstract rationale. He did not underrate the value of any fact, because any given fact *could* flower into a truth. I believe that if this, his first sustained essay, be read in the company of its fellows, it becomes the clue to a more perceptive reading of *Walden* than is normally attained even by the most ardent Thoreauvians. The omission of his “Civil Disobedience” from Chapter IX leaves that section fatally impaired, but since the essay is by now widely disseminated, I leave the reader to consult it elsewhere.

In still another respect the book belies the promise of its title and its table of contents: the articles are edited, and most of them are severely cut down. That generation was, by our standards, terribly verbose. Furthermore, writers on all sides of the Transcendental question were members of the same communion, at least at the beginning; they realized that for two hundred years