The American Transcendentalists

The seminar will focus on the American Transcendentalists and the major social, cultural, and intellectual movements with which they interacted. Famous for producing Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, this nineteenth-century circle of writers, reformers, ministers, and teachers created America’s first distinctive literature, philosophy, and religion. It also constituted the nation’s first “counter-culture” of public intellectuals. Standing between the learned ministers and statesmen of the colonial period and the specialized academics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Orestes Brownson, George Ripley, Theodore Parker, and their colleagues connected to American society by the eloquence of their words and the power of their ideas rather than the status of their institutions. The first generation of young intellectuals to absorb the shock of European Romanticism, they imagined that within the self lay an infinity of meaning and value traditionally identified with the divine. In the age of early industrialization and western expansion, they advocated the ecological virtues of unexploited nature. In the laissez-faire and populist “Age of Jackson,” they advanced a political philosophy of individual freedom, reciprocal justice, and organic wholeness that profoundly influenced antislavery, women’s rights, and socialist movements in America. And, though deeply rooted in New England culture and highly conscious of their American nationality, they traveled further into the wider world, both intellectually and many personally, than any group of authors and thinkers before the twentieth century. Finally, the Transcendentalists were individually fascinating. Introspective, performative, heroic, and at times bizarre, they made up arguably the most colorful intellectual circle in American history.

For students wanting further background on major topics in American Transcendentalism, I recommend the *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism* (New York, 2010) edited by Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petrulonius, and Laura Dassow Walls.

**REQUIRED READING**


Joel Myerson, ed., *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (Oxford)


Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment and Other Writings* (Penguin)
Henry James, *The Bostonians* (Oxford)

**SEMINAR REQUIREMENTS**

**Discussions and Presentations (35% of Grade)**

As the classes are primarily discussions, participation is a major part of the grade. For this reason the assigned reading must be done before the date indicated. In addition each student will give two oral presentations of 10-15 minutes each based on his or her two short papers (see below). These presentations will be given at the beginning of the class on the date listing the chosen reading or article on which the report is based.

**Short Papers (25% of Grade)**

Two approximately 4-5-page papers will be required. One will be on a passage of no more than two pages contained in the reading. The object of the paper is to unpack the passage’s meaning and make an argument about how much it epitomizes (or not) the Transcendentalist movement as you understand it so far. This paper will be due on the day the seminar discusses the reading that includes the chosen passage. The second paper will be a critique of an article on a major Transcendentalism topic, which will be due in class on the day the essay is listed under “Critique” in the Topics and Reading Schedule below. Oral presentations will be based on this second paper.

**Term Paper (40% of Grade)**

The 12-15-page term paper can be one of two sorts. In one version you will compare the thought and writing of two Transcendentalist authors on a major topic or theme in American Transcendentalism. What is similar and what different in their thinking and how do these commonalities and differences help us understand the defining character of the Transcendentalist movement? Alternatively, you can compare the ideas of a major Transcendentalist with those of some thinker associated with a different intellectual or ideological movement at the time. How do their similarities and differences shed light on the boundaries of Transcendentalism—i.e., what is distinctive about it or not—vis-à-vis the larger American culture then? The research base will include both primary writings (usually a book or a set of major essays by each of your figures) as well as secondary reading. Students should consult me about what those sources might be.

Citation form should be consistent and generally follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*. If you frequently cite the same text, you can place a shortened version of its author and title in parentheses at the end of a quotation or sentence and before the period and create a bibliography of full citations at the end of the paper. The essay will be due May 4.
READING: All the required readings are available in paperbacks, which can be purchased at BU’s Barnes and Noble Bookstore and elsewhere. Documents and articles noted as “reserve” are on reserve in the Mugar Library.

LATE WORK: Late papers will not be accepted except in the case of extraordinary emergencies, such as a severe illness or the death of a family member. I need to be informed in advance unless the event’s suddenness makes that impossible.

PLAGIARISM: Plagiarism is arguably the most serious ethical violation that a student or scholar can commit. Read the Academic Conduct Code to understand the college policy on plagiarism. All cases of its suspected perpetration, as well as all other acts of suspected academic misconduct, will be referred to the Dean’s Office. If found guilty, a student will receive the maximum punishment allowed at the university.

ETIQUETTE: To preserve a classroom atmosphere conducive to discussions and collective learning, turn off cell phones and laptops.

TOPICS AND READING SCHEDULE

Sept, 3
Introduction to Seminar

Sept. 10
Origins, Anticipations, and Definitions

   Introduction, in American Transcendentalists, xi-xxviii
   Mary Moody Emerson to Ralph Waldo Emerson, in American Transcendentalists, 3-8
   William Ellery Channing, “Likeness to God,” in Transcendentalism, 3-20
   Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The ‘Lord’s Supper’ Sermon,” in Essays & Poems, 955-66
   Henry F. May, “After the Enlightenment,” in May’s The Divided Heart: Essays on Protestantism and the Enlightenment in America (1991) (reserve)

Sept. 17
Romantic Shocks and Nature’s Vision

   Jean Jacques Rousseau, [from Emile (1762)], in Romanticism and Revolution, 34-40
   Immanuel Kant, [from The Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)], in Romanticism and Revolution, 41-53
   Friedrich Schleiermacher, [from On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (1799)], Romanticism and Revolution, 114-17
   Johann Fichte, [from The Vocation of Man (1800)], Romanticism and Revolution, 117-25
   Friedrich von Schelling, [from The Relation of Plastic Art to Nature
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(1807) and System of Transcendental Idealism (1800), Romanticism and Revolution, 126-38
Thomas Carlyle, from “The Signs of the Time,” in American Transcendentalists, 16-19
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Selection from Aids to Reflection (1825), in American Transcendentalists, 9-10
Frederic Henry Hedge, “Coleridge’s Literary Character,” in Transcendentalism, 78-97
James Freeman Clarke, from “Cambridge,” Transcendentalism, 670-73
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature, in Essays & Poems, 5-49

Critique: Perry Miller, “New England’s Transcendentalism: Native or Imported?” (1964) (reserve)

Sept. 24

Fidelities and Infidelities: Religious Controversies

Orestes Brownson, from New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church, in American Transcendentalists, 76-81
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” in Essays & Poems, 73-92
Henry Ware, Jr., from The Personality of the Deity, in American Transcendentalists, 150-51
Andrews Norton, from A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity, in American Transcendentalists, 152-54
George Ripley, from “The Latest Form of Infidelity” Examined, in American Transcendentalists, 155-57
Theodore Parker, A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent, in Transcendentalism, 340-66
Henry David Thoreau, [Christianity and Hinduism Compared], in American Transcendentalists, 178-81

Unbelief: American Transcendentalists and the Challenge of Atheism (2007) (reserve)

Oct. 1  Education, Self-Culture, and Friendship

A. Bronson Alcott, The Doctrine and Discipline of Self-Culture, in Transcendentalism, 167-81
A. Bronson Alcott, from Conversations with Children on the Gospels, in Transcendentalism, 181-95
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in Essays & Poems, 51-71
Letters of Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1840-42, 1844 (reserve)
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist” and “Friendship” in Essays & Poems, 191-209, 339-54
Lidian Jackson Emerson, “Transcendental Bible,” in Transcendentalism, 381-83
Louisa May Alcott, “Reflections of my Childhood,” in American Transcendentalists, 513-19


Oct. 8  Emerson: The Central Man


Oct. 15 No class—substitute Monday

Oct. 22 Socialism and the Communitarian Moment

George Ripley and Emerson, correspondence, in Transcendentalism, 307-13
Elizabeth Peabody, “Plan of the West Roxbury Community,” in American Transcendentalists, 232-34
A. Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane, “Fruitlands,” in Transcendentalism, 428-29
Charles Lane and A. Bronson Alcott, “The Consociate Family Life,” in Transcendentalism, 435-42
Charles Lane, “Brook Farm,” in Transcendentalism, 456-61
Brook Farm Association for Industry and Education, *Constitution*, in *Transcendentalism*, 1st and 2nd Editions, 461-72
George Ripley, Prospectus and “Introductory Notice” for the *Harbinger*, in *Transcendentalism*, 478-84


**Oct. 29** Politics and Democracy

Theodore Parker, “A Sermon of Merchants,” in *American Transcendentalists*, 244-50
Margaret Fuller, Dispatches in the *New-York Tribune*, in *American Transcendentalists*, 251-56
Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, 227-46


**Nov. 5** Women’s Rights and Gender Trouble

Theodore Parker, *A Sermon of the Public Function of Woman*, in *Transcendentalism*, 566-86
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Address at the Woman’s Rights Convention,” in *Transcendentalism*, 615-28
Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, selection (reserve)

Nov. 12

Making It New: Literature and the Arts

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Editors to the Reader,” in American Transcendentalists, 383-87
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “New Poetry,” in American Transcendentalists, 388-91
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in Essays & Poems, 445-68
Margaret Fuller, from “American Literature,” in American Transcendentalists, 405-9
Walt Whitman, from Preface to Leaves of Grass, in American Transcendentalists, 416-18
Poems by William Ellery Channing II, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Frederic Henry Hedge, Ellen Sturgis Hooper, Henry David Thoreau, Jones Very, and Walt Whitman, in American Transcendentalists, 441-96

Critique: Lawrence Buell, “Transcendentalist Literary Legacies,” in Capper and Wright, Transient and Permanent, 605-19

Nov. 19

Nature, Spiritual Economy, and the Body

Henry David Thoreau, Walden, in Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings, 5-224
Charles Lane, “Life in the Woods,” 327-28, in American Transcendentalists,
Henry David Thoreau, Two Proposals for Land Preservation, in American Transcendentalists, 336-37

Critique: Leo Marx, [Walden’s Transcendental Pastoral Design], in Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings, 450-464; Stanley Cavell, [Captivity and Despair in Walden and “Civil Disobedience”], in ibid., 465-481; or Lawrence Buell, “Thoreau and the Natural Environment,” in ibid., 527-43
Nov. 26  **Nay-Sayers—Hawthorne and Melville**

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*

*Critique:* Nina Baym, *The Blithedale Romance: A Radical Reading,* in Hawthorne, *Blithedale Romance*, 351-68


Nov. 27-Dec. 1 Thanksgiving Recess

Dec. 3  **Antislavery, Race, and Civil War**

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” in *Essays & Poems*, 967-92

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” in *Essays & Poems*, 993-1008


Henry David Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” in *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, 247-59


Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fortune of the Republic” (reserve)

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment and Other Writings*, 1-206


Dec. 10  **History and Memory**

William Henry Channing, from *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli,* in *American Transcendentalists*, 526-28

Theodore Parker, from *Theodore Parker’s Experience as a Minister,* in *American Transcendentalists*, 532-37

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England,” in *American Transcendentalists*, 538-41

Caroline Wells Healey Dall, from *Transcendentalism in New England*, in *American Transcendentalists*, 546-53
Henry James, *The Bostonians* (1884)

*Critique*: George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” (1913) (reserve)
*Critique*: Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond’: The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History,” in Capper and Wright, *Transient and Permanent*, 3-45

Dec. 16  **FINAL PAPERS DUE** (by 4:30 pm in my box in the History Department)