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Transcendentalism : A Reader

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**Review Essay: *Transcendentalism:
A Reader*. Edited by Joel Myerson. Oxford
University Press, 2000. Pp. xxxvii + 712.
\$29.95 paper.**

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One of the leading critics on the literature of American Renaissance, Professor Joel Myerson has recently compiled a new anthology of American Transcendentalism. Doubtlessly the project is a daring challenge as it has attempted to revise radically the legacy of the foregoing anthology, *The Transcendentalists* by Perry Miller, which, published from Harvard in 1950, has almost for fifty years been regarded as the definitive text of the movement. While admitting justly his indebtedness to the former anthology, however, Professor Myerson reacts, rather bluntly, to the predecessor: Perry Miller's volume is exclusively focused on the religious aspects, fragmentary, and a "documentary history of the movement." Professor Myerson, in his efforts, has attempted to be more comprehensive and inclusive, aiming, as he says in the introduction, "to introduce a new generation of readers to the Transcendentalists' ideas on religion, philosophy, literature, democracy, and the cultivation of the self" (xxvi). In this review essay, I would like to draw upon some of the editorial differences between Miller's and Myerson's volumes, hopefully elucidating the merits and also the drawbacks of the new anthology.

First of all, there seems to be an essential difference between the two volumes in terms of marketing targets and strategies. Myerson's anthology is subtitled "A Reader," indicating that the book is meant for a wider reading public, and not just for scholars and graduate students

learning about the intellectual community of early nineteenth century. As a reader, the new volume naturally has to be selective, complete, and representative. To make it "user-friendly," moreover, Myerson has selected some well-known essays by the major writers, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, with essential and informative annotations and the well-selected bibliographies for further reading. Among the writers selected, the presence of Ralph Waldo Emerson is predominant, with a probable conviction that he was the leading voice of the movement. In clear contrast to Perry Miller's volume, which included only four pieces from Emerson, with "Divinity School Address" reduced to a half-page excerpt, Professor Myerson has compiled fourteen titles, including seven complete essays such as "Nature," "The American Scholar," "Self-Reliance," "Divinity School Address," and "Thoreau."

Emerson's expanded presence, on the other hand, inevitably overshadows lesser known writers of the movement: Orestes Brownson, which Miller quoted fifteen times, is admitted no space in the new volume; George Ripley's fourteen titles are reduced to two letters and a preface; and James Freeman Clarke and Christopher Cranch, regular contributors to *The Dial*, are reduced to a few poems. It may be said rather safely that Professor Myerson's volume is complementary, if not supplementary, to Perry Miller's foregoing anthology, as Miller states in his "Introduction" that he has "sacrificed Emerson and Thoreau to make room for Brownson and Ripley" (4). Professor Myerson, on the other hand, has sacrificed Brownson and Ripley to make room for Emerson and Thoreau.

The editorial differences of the two volumes are more distinctly seen in the organizing principles of the selected texts. In Miller's volume, the selections are rigidly organized and divided into 10 chapters with headlines such as "Forerunners," "Impact," "Emergence," "Annus Mirabilis," "Miracles," and "Manifestoes." It is apparent that Miller traces the historical development of the movement with an assumption that the movement had a unified core of dynamics. The controversies over the biblical miracles, whose section is placed in the middle of the

book and occupies the largest portions of the chapters, may be regarded as the navel or the central issue of the movement.

On the other hand, Myerson's anthology is less rigidly structured. There are two tables of contents: chronological and topical. The topical contents are divided into 6 sections with such headlines as "The Beginning," "The Movement," "The Dial," "Reform," "Poetry," and "Recollections." Myerson's concern is not so much upon structured sequence of the movement as upon its characteristic topics and themes. Attempts are more or less given up to define and pin down the movement historically ("the looser the definition, the more appropriate it is," xxv), as Myerson believes that the Transcendentalist movement is essentially "syncretic," borrowing from various philosophies, literatures, and religions. In this sense, too, Myerson's volume is complimentary to Perry Miller's focused and rather narrowed selections.

Myerson's editing strategy is, of course, not solely a result of educational consideration, still less of commercial calculation. It is more directly concerned with the definition thing, the manner of how to conceptualize the Transcendentalist movement in America in the 1830s and 40s. Myerson is correct in pointing out that Perry Miller's volume is exclusively focused upon the religious aspects of the movement. Miller himself says that it essentially and historically was, and goes on to explain four moral implications of the movement. First, the movement finds a new medium of expression in the form of literature and philosophy rather than theology. Second, it highlights the emergence of new American intellectuals and also their dependence upon the cultural heritage of Europe. Third, it is a youthful revolt against the teachings of Unitarianism from which it has originated. Fourth, it embraces the wider social and political dimensions, although its real impact is nowhere to be seen. What Miller finds intriguing in the youthful gatherings of eccentrics is, obviously, the dialectical confrontations of ideas, which demonstrate the rise of the moral and intellectual history of America in the nineteenth century.

If Perry Miller has sketched the framework of the movement by

placing it in the religious and intellectual history of America, Myerson approaches more directly to the content and arguments of the major proponents. Miller's method is historical and dialectical, whereas Myerson's approach can be said topical and social. What particularly engaged Myerson's attention is the shift of viewpoint with which people began to see the world, a hermeneutical change in the way of interpreting the texts of nature, society, and men themselves. Perhaps "self" and "democracy" are the two of the key notions from which Myerson reviews the whole movement. He contends that the Transcendentalist movement has acquired social and philosophical impetus to democratize religion with a strong emphasis upon men's immediate relationship with God, bringing the possibility of knowledge back to the individual from the hands of authority, such as teachers and ministers. The change is brought up to a large extent by the paradigm shift in epistemology, with Lockian empiricism being replaced by Kantian idealism with a crucial focus on men's intuitive faculty; and it is reinforced further by the rise of political democracy, market economy, and the strong liberalist sentiment that has brought about various reform activities. The movement is syncretic and centrifugal, as in ceaseless emanation and expansion, whether its core be religious or philosophical.

It is one of Perry Miller's key assertions, as we have seen, that the transcendentalists find a new medium of expression in literature and philosophy rather than in theology. Consequently, there is a rich array of literary and art criticism included in Miller's anthology, ranging from essays on Greek sculptures to the one on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The aesthetic emphasis is also probably due to the fact that the anthology was completed in 1950 when the aesthetic orientation and new critical approaches were prevailingly dominant in the practice of literary criticism as well as in college classrooms. Professor Myerson, as if to reflect the contemporary shift in critical fashion, reduces aesthetic elements to the minimum, and places the transcendentalist philosophy in the wider context of social and political discourses, specifically, in the context of the contemporary reformist activities. Myerson, it seems,

focuses particularly upon the two crucial social issues: anti-slavery and woman's rights movements. As for the woman's rights movement, not only is the text of Margaret Fuller's "Great Lawsuit" quoted in full, but also is newly included Emerson's "Address at the Woman's Rights Convention" along with Theodore Parker's powerful sermon on the "Public Function of Woman."

Nowhere is the editorial difference more distinctly seen in the treatment of Sophia Dana Ripley, wife to George Ripley and one of the staunchest voices in the contemporary feminist movement. In both Myerson's and Miller's anthologies, the short articles of Sophia's are quoted from the 1841 issues of *The Dial*. However, the contents and implications of the articles are widely and characteristically divergent. Perry Miller's volume contains "Paintings and Sculptures," demonstrating, however opaque it might be, the aesthetic aspirations and propensities of the rising generation. Whereas, in Myerson's anthology is included the essay "Woman," a succinct and straightforward manifesto of the feminist movement with a reverberating echo of Margaret Fuller. Both essays deal with women's (and men's) liberation, although their implications vary radically, spiritual and aesthetic on the one hand, and downright political on the other. It is certain that Myerson seeks to liberate the Transcendentalist texts into the social and political discourses with the shared assumption that no literary activities take place in a vacuum. Nevertheless, Myerson does not share the idea, as some Marxist critics do, that the notion of individual is deterministically shaped by the socio-political factors. He explains, instead, that many Transcendentalists were engaged in social reforms because they thought so highly of the "self" and believed that the society did not live up to the expectations and the true values of individuals. Conversely, they shared the idea that self-improvement, a macrocosmic reform of self, might bring about the true reforms of the society. In Myerson's volume, therefore, the reformist discourses are seen as an integral part or the "natural outgrowth" (xxxiv) of the Transcendentalist view of life, and as the practical manifestations of its philosophy.

If the two volumes are complimentary to each other, there is no point in arguing about the merits and drawbacks of the new anthology. However, if there is anything that the new volume misses by being comprehensive and inclusive, that certainly will be a sense of presence and immediacy, a sort of the real time feel that one is witnessing the dialectic confrontations of ideas and opinions. No doubt Professor Myerson has succeeded in liberating the Transcendentalists' texts from the chains of religious and aesthetic restrictions into the wider and more diverse social discourses, or possibly into a timeless history of ideas ("so too must we decide whether these people speak to us today, whether their message is still relevant," xxvi). However, it is also a truism that the movement was severely limited both in time and geography. The gatherings of men thinking, called Transcendentalists, are practically restricted to a small regional circle, mostly priests and ministers, in a small town of New England; and their activities are largely conducted on a communal basis. And if we lose sight of this and the immediate sense of dialectic exchanges, I am afraid, we might not only be losing something crucial, but also be running a risk of creating or, rather, reinforcing a myth that the Transcendentalist writings virtually constituted the main current of American thoughts in early nineteenth century.