

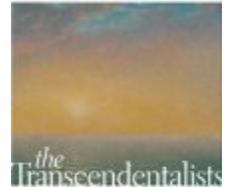
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Barbara Packer. *The Transcendentalists*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 304 pp. \$49.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-8203-2957-4; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2958-1.

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Published on H-Amstdy (May, 2008)



Upon its first publication in the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, Barbara Packer's "The Transcendentalists" (1995) was greeted with much-deserved praise. The essay offered a magisterial treatment of Transcendentalism, surveying the movement's philosophy, history, and social objectives and making sense of a barely organized group of iconoclasts. And yet, while the essay's inclusion in the *Cambridge History* made it widely available for scholarly reference, the design of the multivolume series made it difficult to teach the essay as a text on its own terms. Thus, the University of Georgia's release of the essay in this stand-alone volume marks a significant advance for the teaching of Transcendentalism, providing an opening into Transcendentalist study for current and future generations of students of American literature.

A graceful storyteller, Packer introduces her audience to major and minor figures through elegant, winsome readings of primary sources and analyses of ideas and actions. Her account is particularly well suited for pedagogical application in its breadth and in the simultaneously fine detail of its purview: it begins with a search through Congregational and Unitarian history for Transcendentalism's point of origin, traces the new movement's major players through their battles with the religious establishment and efforts toward social reform, and closes with their "diaspora" and the diffusion of their ideas into the larger antislavery movement. Providing a comprehensive sense of Transcendentalism's scale and significance, this volume would complement well for classroom use a collection of primary source materials and/or other recent compilations of scholarly essays, such as Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wright's *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Context* (1999). Capper and Wright's collection beck-

ons toward new readings of the movement; Packer's engages current questions while establishing the significance of its classic treatment.

Packer treats the movement's early years with the energy that suffused the period, writing animatedly of the conflicts between the Transcendentalists and their many opponents. She explains cogently the dominance of Lockean philosophy in New England's institutions of higher education; against this backdrop, the intellectual revolution instantiated through the young Transcendentalists' "appetite for Romantic literature" (p. 21) and critique of Locke is thrown into relief. She also describes Transcendentalism's transatlantic origins and its points of connection with British and Continental thinkers. In this discussion especially, her manner of explication is worth noting, particularly for scholars interested in using the book in the classroom: beyond simply arguing for the significance of the intellectual exchange, she accounts for how personalities and chance occurrences at meetings affected that exchange.

In her description of Ralph Waldo Emerson's European travel in 1832-33, for example, she writes of his disappointment with William Wordsworth's "striking a pose in the garden walk like a schoolboy" to recite some new sonnets, and of Emerson's determination "to track [Thomas] Carlyle down" by hiring a gig and searching the countryside for this author whose work he had so admired (pp. 39-40). These personal encounters, she suggests, shaped Emerson's response to the ideas themselves, his role in advancing Carlyle's reputation in the United States, and thus the course of the movement's intellectual history. Such encounters, of course, were not only significant in determining the resources of which the Transcendentalists availed them-

selves from abroad; Parker writes equally engagingly of the exchanges among Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and others at home, as this group of dissatisfied, creative thinkers, teachers, and writers began to discover one another and develop the dispositional affinities that would unite them more strongly than any particular creed or motto.

While she situates the movement in the context of the Transcendentalists' religious and philosophical debates and connections with outsiders, Packer also addresses the varied and shifting notions of activism held among them, identifying moments of internal conflict and transition. In her discussion of Emerson's *Essays, Second Series* (1844), for example, she writes that his "choice to place 'The Poet' first suggests how willing he had become to accept a merely symbolic transformation of his world," a shift away from his position in Nature that the world would be "actual[ly] renovat[ed]" (p. 151). This representation of Emerson's changing ideas in the mid-1840s is emblematic of Packer's treatment of Transcendentalism throughout the book as a shifting riot of ideas that nonetheless possesses a discernible critical mass at its center.

Although Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and other prominent figures take their places at that center, other Transcendentalists' experiences and writings also figure into Packer's history, especially where their concerns and activities diverge from those of the major writers. In the early 1840s, as Emerson embraced his philosophy of symbolic transformation, others' concerns over the transformation of the world became ever more insistently pragmatic. Packer describes the experiment at Brook Farm

from their perspectives, providing a sense of the scope of the movement beyond Emerson's immediate circle. The organization of Brook Farm in particular lent itself to participation by others in the region, whether they entered the community as full members in its joint-stock operations or simply as short-term visitors, and ample readings of their letters and recollections personalize and enliven Packer's account of their experiences.

In her descriptions of the Transcendental Club, the Temple School, the *Dial*, Brook Farm, and the men and women who breathed life into these institutions, Packer refutes the notion that the Transcendentalists were, collectively, impractical dreamers. Even Emerson, she observes, had by 1847 moved beyond his "otherworldly cleric" self (p. 240) and would preach vehemently against the Fugitive Slave Law in 1851 (p. 222). By identifying the Transcendentalists' strategies for social engagement as well as their ideas, Packer limns many long-standing questions in the study of Transcendentalism. She also addresses with depth and subtlety the issue she sets forth at the opening of the work, when she observes that Transcendentalism privileged the individual but emerged, somehow, from a "New England Protestantism ... [that was] practically or imaginatively social" (p. 1). This question of the contradictory impulses contained within Transcendentalism—an insistence on self-reliance and a desire for broad social reform—remains at the center of much current scholarship on Transcendentalism. Packer's history is thus pedagogically useful, critically astute, and perpetually *au courant*, and the release of this volume represents a gift to a much-broadened readership.

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**Citation:** Tara Robbins Fee. Review of Packer, Barbara, *The Transcendentalists*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14525>

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