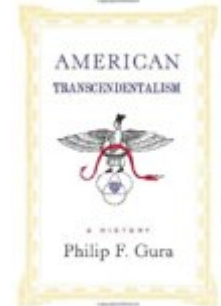


**Philip F. Gura.** *American Transcendentalism: A History.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2007. 384 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-3477-2.



**Reviewed by** David Voelker

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## **The Rise and Fall of American Transcendentalism**

It is perhaps impossible to write a definitive history of a movement as amorphous and sprawling as Transcendentalism, but Philip F. Gura comes close. *American Transcendentalism: A History* seriously (if not always explicitly) engages with several persistent questions about Transcendentalism: Was it primarily a religious movement—or something else? Intellectually speaking, was it an American original or a European offshoot? Did it support social reform, or was it merely a social circle of effete intellectuals? Was it democratic or elitist in spirit? Did the movement rapidly disintegrate, or did it continue to have a post-Civil War impact? Gura rightly declines to give simple answers to these questions. Instead, he captures Transcendentalism in its breadth and depth, as both an American intellectual movement and a vigorous social movement. He not only narrates but lucidly explains the emergence of Transcendentalism from early nineteenth-century roots, its flourishing in the 1830s and 1840s,

its gradual decline as a recognizable movement during the 1850s, and its postbellum afterlife. Although a couple of the early chapters dealing with the influence of biblical criticism and German and French philosophy on Transcendentalism might be challenging for general readers and undergraduates, the book is written for a broad audience rather than for specialists, and it deserves wide readership by students of American history. Graduate students and scholars may wish that Gura had included a bibliographic essay or additional discursive footnotes to situate the book more thoroughly in the secondary literature, but they will nevertheless recognize that this important work addresses the key historiographic debates about American Transcendentalism.

In the preface and introduction, Gura defines Transcendentalism “as a way of perceiving the world, centered on individual consciousness rather than external fact” (p. 8), and resting upon the “bedrock” belief in “universal divine inspiration—grace as the birthright of all” (p. 18). Thus the notion of “the supremacy of the individual

consciousness” (p. 67), so ably articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, also fostered for many Transcendentalists (although not always Emerson) “a profound sense of universal brotherhood” (p. 68). By defining Transcendentalism in this fashion, Gura identifies the intellectual tension between individualism and brotherhood at the heart of the movement—a tension that would ultimately be both creative and destructive. Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, popularly remembered as the key figures of the Transcendentalist movement, of course leaned strongly toward the individualist pole. When Thoreau made up his mind not to join the Brook Farm community that George Ripley was creating in 1841, he noted in his journal that he would “rather keep bachelor’s hall in hell than go to board in heaven” (p. 200). But this sort of solipsism was not the only force at work within Transcendentalism.

In fact, Gura shows how Transcendentalism emerged not as an eruption of Emersonian brilliance but rather as the gradual outgrowth of years of study, reflection, and discussion among a coterie of New England intellectuals, whose numbers included not only Unitarian clergymen but also a few conservative Christian ministers and several women. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the cutting edge of theological scholarship, led by German scholars, was the “Higher Criticism” of the Bible, which generated heated arguments about theories of knowledge and language and made some of its students susceptible to post-Kantian idealism adapted from German and French intellectuals. (Gura’s discussion of the European writers who inspired the Transcendentalists is excellent.) Unitarians including Joseph Stevens Buckminster, William Ellery Channing, and Andrews Norton did battle with orthodox scholars such as Moses Stuart and James Marsh over the fundamental principles of interpreting Christian scriptures. For the purposes of understanding the rise of Transcendentalism, what is most important about these theological disputes is the fact that some of these Christian

scholars, including especially George Ripley and Orestes Brownson (from the liberal side) and James Marsh (from the orthodox side), were trying to “bridge the divide between rational religion, championed by the Unitarians, and an affective faith with its emphasis on personal spiritual experience, advocated by Trinitarians” (p. 48)—to use language that Gura deploys specifically to describe Marsh’s project. Although no reconciliation between liberal and orthodox Christianity took place, the attempt had implications for both sides and led to interesting and unexpected cross-fertilization, as Gura insightfully shows.

In addition to paying close attention to the textual components of Transcendentalism (the translations and reviews of German and French works and the various periodical and pamphlet battles over their influence), Gura also explores the sites of social interaction that allowed Transcendentalism to ferment: the 1812 auction of Joseph Stevens Buckminster’s books, Elizabeth Peabody’s bookstore and lending library, Margaret Fuller’s “Conversations,” the meetings of the Transcendental Club, the Brook Farm and Fruitlands communities, and the many lectures and forums that brought together Transcendentalists and their admirers. Gura should be applauded for vividly depicting the social milieu of Transcendentalism.

One of Gura’s crucial narrative moves is to de-emphasize Emerson’s role as Transcendentalism’s guiding light. To be sure, Emerson became identified as the public face of the movement after he launched a highly successful career as a lecturer in the wake of his controversial Divinity School Address, and it is hard to overstate the subsequent impact and influence of the “Sage of Concord.” But Gura is right to look to other figures for the intellectual and reformist roots of Transcendentalism. For example, Gura pays close attention to Orestes Brownson, whose role has often been downplayed, due to his unusual interest in working-class issues and his eventual repudiation of

Protestantism, liberal or otherwise. (In fact, Gura considers Brownson sufficiently important that he keeps him in the narrative into the 1850s, well after the prolific critic's 1844 conversion to Roman Catholicism.) Gura likewise credits Ripley for his work as editor of a series of translations of fourteen important French and German works; Peabody for operating an extensive library and bookstore—for many years the hub of the movement; Fuller for her translations, feminist writings, and socially charged journalism; Thoreau for taking “Emerson’s Romantic individualism to new heights” and for having “integrated it practically into ethics” (p. 225); and Theodore Parker for becoming “the social conscience of the Transcendentalist movement” (p. 218). Most of these figures had substantial interactions with Emerson, but Gura shows how many of the Transcendentalists who were initially inspired by Emerson subsequently had to work their way around him—finding various routes to move past his radical individualism toward social action.

Throughout the book, Gura also pays attention to lesser-known figures. A chapter entitled “Varieties of Transcendentalism” considers the role of several relatively unknown figures who participated in the movement, which had the effect of “freeing them to work in various innovative ways” (p. 207), intellectual, religious, literary, and political. For example, Gura presents Eliza Thayer Clapp, who taught young women for free in her home and published a book called *Studies in Religion*, as “a remarkable example of lay Transcendentalism” (p. 192), and he explores three significant literary works by Sylvester Judd, who was influenced by Transcendentalism.

While Gura’s narrative arc is too subtle to trace in detail here, a basic sketch will convey the main features of his story. Like many earlier scholars, including Perry Miller and William Hutchison, Gura sees Transcendentalism beginning as a movement for religious reform. Transcendentalism emerged in the 1830s among a

group that consisted mainly of disaffected Unitarian ministers who were influenced by German biblical criticism and French and German idealist philosophy, which they began studying and even translating in earnest. Given the egalitarian implications of their universalist principles, their project soon expanded from reforming Christianity to reforming the United States. They therefore found it necessary to engage the larger public through magazines, pamphlets, books, newspaper articles, lectures, and sermons, as well as by creating new religious and reform societies and a couple of intentional communities.

By the late 1840s and early 1850s, the tension between individualism and brotherhood was overshadowed by a related disharmony between intellectual inquiry and social action. Gura argues that Transcendentalists’ growing concern with “the internal demon of slavery” (p. 266) essentially subsumed the Transcendentalist movement during the decade before the Civil War. While Gura seems more interested in social reform than Emersonian individualism, he also recognizes that a certain level of self-absorption and focus was necessary to sustain the kind of theological, philosophical, and literary production that thrived during the first couple of decades of the Transcendentalist movement. Gura notes, for example, that by 1850, “the group’s participation in transatlantic intellectual discourse had progressively contracted” (p. 240). Furthermore, by the mid-1850s, Parker, who was dedicating ever more of his attention to abolitionism, “shelved his long-anticipated work ‘The Historical Development of Religion,’ which promised to set a new standard for comparative studies, and more and more turned to the nation’s internal political problems” (p. 256). Even Emerson and Thoreau, the movement’s consummate individualists, became preoccupied with the controversy over slavery. The bottom line, in Gura’s analysis, was that because of the sectional battles the Transcendentalists’ “vision for cultural and social renewal became more nationalistic and less concerned with the univer-

sal humanitarianism that hitherto had defined the faith of so many of them” (p. 266). Ironically, then, what Gura calls “The Inward Turn” in a chapter title was not an individualistic turn but rather a redirecting of energies toward the national problem of slavery. Other scholars may fault Gura for his interpretation at this point, especially given that antislavery activists so often championed universal human rights and supported other universalist causes, such as women’s rights. Gura is provocative here, but it remains open to debate whether abolitionism was Transcendentalism’s culmination or undoing—or both.

Near the end of the book, Gura registers agreement with Unitarian minister Samuel Osgood, who declared in 1876 that Transcendentalist “light has gone everywhere,” which Gura takes to mean that “American culture had simply absorbed the group’s most distinctive thought, its deification of the individual” (p. 303). To be sure, Gura suggests that Transcendentalism had other legacies, such as its contributions to the comparative study of religion. But he says from the beginning that he believes that the story of Transcendentalism is in some sense a story of failure, because Transcendentalists “lost their battle” to realize “a fully egalitarian brotherhood” in America (p. xv). This book leaves one wondering if Transcendentalist wisdom, promulgated through Emersonian maxims, can be seen as a positive influence. Perhaps Transcendentalism’s most enduring legacy was to put a poetic sheen on the individual pursuit of happiness—an impulse that already had more than enough support within the culture at large.

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