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In September 1841 Ezra Ripley, minister to Concord’s First Unitarian Parish, died. He had served his Concord, Massachusetts, flock for sixty-three years, beginning during the American Revolution and ending his tenure as the Industrial Revolution was remaking his quiet village. For decades, Ripley had preached the need for interdependence and community spirit to his small rural town. Sunday after Sunday, year after year, Ripley climbed into the pulpit to remind the farmers and artisans of Concord that a good life was one that was deeply enmeshed in the lives of others, where church, state, schoolhouse, and voluntary associations all formed interlocking parts of one communal whole. “Who but some disgusted hermit or half crazy enthusiast,” Ripley asked his congregation, “will say to society, I have no need of thee” (p. 48)?

But as he lay on his deathbed, his step-grandson was becoming the most famous advocate of exactly that. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a man who often had stepped in as a guest preacher for Ripley and who even moved into the Manse, Ripley’s old house, was proudly announcing that a new age—one of unbridled individualism and self-reliance—was at hand. For Emerson, an individual should never live at second-hand but judge all faiths, all institutions, all traditions by the intuitions of their own soul. And, of course his younger friend, Henry David Thoreau, would go even further, living at Walden Pond to show the virtues of loudly declaring, exactly as Ripley had feared, that he had no need of society.

In Robert A. Gross’s enchanting *The Transcendentalists and Their World*, the contrast between Ripley and Emerson captures the social and intellectual transitions that remade Concord in the early republic. *The Transcendentalists and Their World* is a sequel of sorts to Gross’s 1976 classic, *The Minutemen and Their World*, tracing the social, economic, religious, and intellectual transformations that occurred between roughly 1812 and 1845 in one small Massachusetts village. As in his earlier book, Gross has written a finely detailed community study—one that seeks to capture the ordinary life at the heart of an ex-
traordinary town. We see a village in transition, filled with farmers struggling to adapt to an increasingly national market, merchants pioneering new trade networks, artisans transitioning to manufacturers, everyday religious believers seeking new spiritual choices, ex-slaves struggling for survival, and dueling politicians, all of whom happened to be neighbors to a handful of world-famous intellectuals.

In nearly all of these transformations we see the symbolic change from Ripley’s communitarianism to Emerson’s individualism play out. This is a book about transcendentalists, but more so it is a book about modernity, about the shift from Ripley’s world of fixed roles and stable communities to Emerson’s vision of a self that takes on the task of defining its own essence amid constant change and thinning ties between people. The book is a major accomplishment and should frame discussions of transcendentalism and the social history of the early republic for years to come.

At the heart of Gross’s book is a fascinating methodological question: can we combine the “community study,” perhaps the epitome of 1970s social history, with more recent cultural and intellectual history? The Transcendentalists and Their World is a remarkable achievement—the product of decades of research—that demonstrates the incredible range and possibility of such close study of a single community. In an era when Atlantic, global, and “vast” histories seem to dominate the field, Gross—with an incredibly painstaking archival reconstruction of a single town—has shown the virtues of looking small. Despite limiting himself to a town with a population of little more than two thousand, he has assembled an astonishingly rich archive; a reader feels like they are floating along the Concord River, observing in real time the intimate lives and struggles of farmers, dry-good clerks, small-town lawyers, and intellectuals.

One of the happy ironies of The Transcendentalists and Their World is that it is a remarkably un-transcendentalist way to tell the story of transcendentalism. As Gross tells it, the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau did not spring fully formed from their genius heads but rather necessarily grew from out of a town and region that was experiencing epochal social and economic transformations. If transcendentalism has often had a reputation for abstraction and flights of numinous airiness, here we see a transcendentalism ascending from earth to heaven, rather than the other way around, one responding to a series of very concrete transformations in the way that New Englanders lived. If popular imagery of transcendentalism often evokes the pastoral and nonhuman (how many covers of transcendentalist books feature an image of a placid lake or New England forest?), Gross shows us a distinctly modern transcendentalism, one that could only emerge from out of the maelstrom of capitalist transformations.

Picking up where his older book left off, Gross begins his book with Ripley’s older Concord, one where “individuals were not free agents, apart from society,” but enmeshed within family, church, school, town meeting, tavern, and tradition (p. 27). Town politics was dominated by old Puritan families—like the Emersons, descended from town founder Peter Buckeley. Farmers, operating much as they had for hundreds of years, worked each other’s lands, helped to put up barns, assisted with each other’s heavy work, and stopped by for long chats over cider. Congregants in the church in town—descended from Buckeley’s seventeenth-century parish—meddled in each other’s lives, doling out pies for the needy and moral advice to the wayward. Merchants and artisans collaborated to beautify the town (the town’s Concord Ornamental Tree Society took the lead in planting handsome trees to spruce up downtown) or restore the milldam, the district surrounding a manmade pond that provided waterpower for blacksmith shops and cabinet makers. The scarcity of hard cash meant that, simply to buy basic commodities or sell their wares, most villagers became enmeshed in complicated networks of
debts and credits with each other, networks that were as social as they were economic.

It is hard not to be charmed by the details that Gross unearths, the colorful characters and rural traditions that inhabit Gross's old weird Concord. There is William Munroe, a cabinet maker whose tinkering with graphite produced the nation's best pencils. For every Munroe who looked forward, though, there was a cranky George Minott—the lifelong bachelor who resisted changing his farming techniques and impressed a young Thoreau with his stubborn independence—who looked backward. One sign of the growing modernization is when husking parties, communal events where neighbors would gather to husk corn or pare apples (generally as an excuse for a “drunken frolic”) gave way to the more sober agricultural fairs of the Society of Middlesex Husbandmen and Manufacturers (p. 175). We see the schoolmaster, the ambitious young Lemuel Shattuck, struggling to modernize the curriculum and facing off against the age-old strategies that bored schoolchildren invent to disrupt the classroom (epidemics of fake coughing, apparently, are one of the few true universals of human history).

But as market, transportation, and communication networks extended into Concord nearly every aspect of this rural arcadia was upended. With disestablishment and the entry of a more Calvinist Trinitarian Church to rival Ripley's Unitarian Church, everyday citizens had the freedom—and anxious burden—to be able to choose their religious community for the first time. And with the emergence of the Anti-Masonic Party in the late 1820s, Concord became riven with class conflict and partisan divides. Competition with grain from New York or Ohio meant that farmers were forced to diversify their crops, increasingly growing luxury items like fruits and vegetables for a distant market rather than staples for themselves. The Concord grape, cultivated by Ephraim Bull, would become the most famous such product. Artisans, like Munroe, began producing for a national market, converting their small shops into factories with permanent wage-earning employees. As fewer and fewer young people followed their parents back to the farm, adolescence became a stressful time when young men had to choose their own profession, a decision that, as today, was both economically risky and existentially fraught. By the 1840s, the railroad allowed Concord to become a commuter town, while simultaneously bringing in Irish immigrants and even, shockingly, Catholic masses. As Ripley noted at the end of his life, there was an “agitated and unsettled state of society” (p. 373).

Perhaps the most methodologically exciting part of the book is how its analysis of transcendentalism as a religious and intellectual movement seems to grow seamlessly out of this social history. In particular, Gross uses reception history to attend to how these social transformations shaped how everyday Concordians read and responded to Emerson and Thoreau. In transcendentalism, young men like George Moore, the son of the Concord sheriff, sought intellectual guides to navigate the new anxieties of youth. Moore attended Emerson's lectures in Boston, finding his call for self-trust helpful while struggling to choose a career (he ended up a Unitarian minister).

Individuals such as Moore were freer but also burdened with more choices than ever. In diaries and letters, Gross uncovers young Concordians struggling with the ambivalent freedom of the new modern life and the self-doubt fostered by having to navigate a “fluid society with multiple choices” without the assistance of the old authorities (p. 403). The stable homogenous world of Ripley was giving way to a spirit of “constant ferment ... novelty and change, mobility and uncertainty, diversity and disorder” (p. 109). All that was solid in Concord was melting into air. In such an insecure world, Emerson was popular with young men like Moore exactly because he reflected and reveled in the sense that older traditions no longer offered any reliable guides, instead ask-
ing his audience to ground action in their own private intuitions and self-trust. Thus Emerson would become a philosopher of flux and transformation, one who celebrated the fact the soul never is, but is always becoming, who demanded that every individual reevaluate all philosophies and religions by their own reason and intuition.

“In an era of rapid change,” Gross tells us, “Emerson was offering to make sense of the complex world faced by his fellow New Englanders” (p. 386). Perhaps counterintuitively, though, this sense that “incessant change is the condition of life and mind” inspired a search for religious and moral truth that could “transcend” the ever-changing present (p. 393). The transcendentalists’ skepticism of the means of religious expression—their search for a “permanent” core of faith more solid than the “transient” forms that religious life took—was well suited to a society and culture in the process of social revolution. Part of the brilliance of Gross’s book is that we see, in incredibly fine detail, how the social transformations in Concord helped produce such abstract ideas.

The increased individualism of life did not always translate into real freedom in Concord. In fact, paradoxically, it also sometimes encouraged greater bureaucratization and social conformity. Concord residents successfully pushed new and better systems of education at the village schoolhouse, but this meant that “power over local schools was thus shifted upward, away from the districts and into the hands of a potentially strong supervisory body” (p. 191). The enlightened religious liberalism of Ripley and other Unitarians—which stripped deacons and other congregants of the power of disciplining fellow members—also, perhaps unintentionally, enhanced the power of the minister at the expense of the lay congregant. The Concord Debating Society—a perfect example of the Tocquevillian instinct to associate—also served “to impose a new order on public speech” (p. 229). The Concord Lyceum exposed Concordians to new ideas, aiding in their individual quest for self-culture but also censored discussions of slavery. And of course the growing power of the market subjected all Concordians to a greater economic discipline, especially with the entry of the railroad corporation into village life. Modernity liberated individuals like Moore but also, it seemed, enmeshed them in new forms of power, bigger and less face to face than before. The transcendentalists’ celebration of romantic individuality, then, ought not be seen as a defense of the emerging economic order. Rather it was a social critique of the ways that true individuality was threatened, that mass society paradoxically liberated individuals and subjected them to faceless coercions that made authentic individuality difficult to achieve.

The Transcendentalists and Their World is split into two parts: the first is almost entirely a social history of Concord and the second focuses more closely on Emerson and Thoreau. Readers might be surprised, then, to get three hundred pages in before Gross begins analyzing transcendentalism as an intellectual or cultural movement with much detail. Social and economic historians, though, will particularly appreciate the first half. If the story of capitalist transformation he tells is broadly consistent with histories told by Charles Sellers, Jon Levy, and others, few scholars have told it in such granular detail and with such rigorous evidence.

Gross was faced with some difficult choices in terms of what to include and some important parts of the transcendentalist story are glossed over quickly. Margaret Fuller, for instance, gets relatively short shrift, appearing only occasionally as a commentator. Given her prominent place in the recent historiography this is a bit disappointing. Brook Farm and the “socialist” transcendentalists, such as George Ripley, do not get much serious analysis. His exclusive focus on the place of Concord means that he pays less attention to those transcendentalists who made Boston their home—like James Freeman Clarke or, eventually, Theodore Parker. Surely the relationship between
social change and intellectual production looked different from the crowded bustle of State Street than it did from the woods of Concord. But one cannot seriously fault Gross for these omissions; the book already pushes past six hundred pages.

_The Transcendentalists and Their World_ took decades to research and write, but it is well worth the wait. Its portrayal of a transforming Concord is a wonderful reminder of the promise of the community study, reminding us of its rich value for cultural, intellectual, and political history. It is social history at its very best—uncovering and recreating the lives of everyday people and showing how those lives matter. There is a beautiful democracy to Gross’s writing; in the hands of this skilled historian a long-forgotten farmer like Daniel Hunt, making decisions about what crops to sow, proves to be as interesting and important as some of the most famous thinkers in American history. In fact, without the actions of thousands of Daniel Hunts, it seems unlikely that transcendentalism could have emerged at all. It turns out that philosophy and farming practices have a great deal more in common than we may have thought.

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