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Transcendentalism and the Way to Freedom

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Transcendentalism and the Way to Freedom

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“Build, therefore, your own world.”

— R. W. Emerson

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Introduction

If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal—that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.

(Thoreau, *Walden* 176)

For many of us, Transcendentalism sounds like an outdated word, confined to another era and another set of values, whereas freedom still ranks first in our ideals and in what we believe to be our priorities and our daily goals. The association of these two notions in the title to this Master's thesis is a promise to prove that they are inextricably linked and absolutely timeless. Transcendentalism, just like freedom, is a complex notion to grasp, and it seems necessary to specify what I am talking about. Although it is impossible to lock it up in ready-made and immutable categories, it is important to disambiguate the notion of Transcendentalism in this study from other approaches to transcendence that can be found in other fields. In this paper, I am referring to Transcendentalism as a complex movement that can be defined at the same time as a philosophical, spiritual and literary innovation which developed in New England in the United States, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Transcendentalism, often described as an offshoot of Romanticism (Gavillon 164), relies

heavily on the idea that man can enjoy an original and unique relation to the universe and experience serenity through this authentic relation in which he becomes one with the world around him. Transcendentalists experience the world around them and their own existence in a way that transcends—that goes beyond—their physical senses, not through logic but rather through intuition and imagination. I will have time to develop in depth the different aspects and specificities of this movement further on, but it is important to understand that Transcendentalism is multifaceted and ought not to be restricted to simplified definitions. So is freedom. The notion of freedom contains in itself the idea of freeing one from something, but also freeing one towards something—both aspects, *freedom from* and *freedom to*, will be considered in this paper. Transcendentalism and freedom are concepts that are obviously not restricted to one and only one place, but for the purpose of this study I will concentrate on the United States, for it is the cradle of the movement, and it is here that one witnesses the biggest paradoxes to be examined later on concerning people's attitudes towards Transcendentalism and freedom.

What exactly makes it worthwhile to study these two notions together? An immense personal interest in this topic that I found both intriguing and puzzling prompted me to pursue my inquiry via the opportunity offered by this Master's thesis. But this study of Transcendentalism and freedom, which straddles the standard French university categories of "literature" and "civilisation", goes far beyond a personal concern in the matter and is, I believe, of general public interest. Both notions reach into the depths of human souls and human lives, and as such, are important to everyone. These are timeless and "spaceless" concepts, touching on global and universal ideas, leaving the door open for anyone to think about. The questions, paradoxes and issues contained in this paper have confirmed their legitimacy to be studied in an academic field as issues of general concern since these are questions that I have been asked repeatedly by a wide range of people, most of them

unfamiliar with Transcendentalism but curious about what I had to say about it.

Transcendentalism as a movement seeks, not to say promises, to free people from their “chains”—be they internal or external, and as such carries in itself enough legitimacy to be worth anybody’s time, just as freedom (its presence or absence) is claimed to be everybody’s concern.

If we descend from a general vision and take a specific look at the interpersonal relations of the American people and their attitudes towards Transcendentalism, we can observe that it is an important window into understanding the paradox between the prestigious place that Transcendentalism holds in the canon of the United States versus the way that the actual American society is seemingly growing more and more in opposition to Transcendentalist ideas, and is thus calling into question the actual place that freedom truly holds in the society. Why, then, in a country founded on the ideal of freedom, does the bulk of society seem to live in contradiction with the precepts and examples of its Transcendentalist heritage whereas the latter promises to free people from internal and external constraints, such as self-enslavement and the “chains” of modern life? Transcendentalism does look very appealing in the writings of its leading proponents, yet its persistence on the American scene today—other than in the cultural canon—appears so questionable that we are led to wonder whether Transcendentalism is in the end only made up of abstract, impractical ideals bound to be ephemeral or only living on in select college courses, or if it could be an actual path to freedom across generations. I admit that referring to “American society” in general is delicate as this society is composed of millions of individuals and does not exist or act as a monolith. I am therefore well aware of the difficulty of speaking knowledgably about more than three hundred million people living and dying in a continent-sized country.

My research question is partly based on a shared representation conveyed by the media, leading one to observe that in a society dominated by advertisements and marketing,

endlessly creating new products, therefore creating new longings that tend to be easily mistaken for new needs, individual liberty often seems to be reduced to the mere idle and frivolous behaviour of immediate consumption, and society takes on an artificial aspect, imprisoning people into deceits and illusions. I wish to make it clear that although for the purpose of this study, the facet of today's United States that I will mostly focus on is that of a consumerist and materialist country, I know very well that the country cannot be reduced to that single, rather unflattering dimension. Similarly, I know that this facet of modern life is not simply binding, but is also extremely convenient in many regards. My aim is not to point implacably at the country's failings, but to analyse the relation between the way this facet is amplified and vilified by media coverage and the obviously arguable persistence of Transcendentalism in the United States today. I also know for certain that part of my knowledge is filtered through what gets reported in the media and that above all, most people's lives are not mediated and not known outside of a rather small circle of close friends and relatives, but it is precisely this representation in which I am interested and that I will explore in this study.

Although Transcendentalism may be better known as a literary movement, it is approached in this paper from a wider cultural perspective in order to grasp its multifaceted nature. Consequently, the corpus selected for researching this paradoxical movement in depth is vast enough to encompass all the aspects and issues I want to shed light on, but specific enough to support the claims put forward in the development of my main argument. The main works selected are diverse as much in form as in content and therefore provide for an analysis as unbiased, comprehensive and thorough as possible. In this study, it seems essential to devote a first part to explaining and detailing the nature of Transcendentalism: how and why it developed in the United States in the early 1800s, who were its leading proponents at its birth, what it advocates and what it stands against, through what fields and areas these ideals were

circulated, but also the extent to which this movement is or has ever been intended as a model to be followed. Once better acquainted with the topic, I will use the depiction of the United States conveyed by most media as a country at odds with its Transcendentalist heritage to investigate the reasons why some people choose not to follow the precepts and examples of this movement. I will focus not only on the criticism from people who do not approve of the Transcendentalist movement, but also on the more complex relation to Transcendentalism from people who do feel attracted by the movement but cannot join in as much as they would like to for various reasons. Finally, I will reveal the limits of the media's representation of the United States by exploring how many more people today actually do follow the examples of nineteenth-century Transcendentalism than one might think. I will explain why the evolution that the movement underwent over time might make its proponents harder to recognise, although they are still well and truly present. I will illustrate my argument with a focus on three case-studies: that of Transcendentalism as experienced by the main character of John Krakauer's biographical book *Into the Wild*, that of Transcendentalism as symbolised in Terrence Malick's movie *The New World*, and that of Transcendentalism in the political sphere through a selection of speeches of President Barack Obama, thus demonstrating how Transcendentalism is still strongly alive in the United States today.

I. Nature and Purpose of Transcendentalism

I.1 – The Early 1800s in the United States, a Context Favourable to the Birth of Transcendentalism

A) Between Conquest of the Land and Preservation of the Wilderness

On becoming independent at the end of the eighteenth century, the newly created United States of America expressed and enacted their desire to conquer the land on which they were to develop their nation. This land, immense and unknown—especially the American West—was first perceived as hostile wilderness to be tamed and mastered by man. As early as 1785, the Law Ordinance passed by Congress took upon ascertaining the mode of disposing of lands in this part of the country by dividing the entire Western territory into townships and sections through a grid pattern—by domesticating wilderness as best as possible (Beaujeu-Garnier, Lefort, and Vermeersch). The myth of the frontier, a founding element of the American spirit, emerged in this dynamic. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously explains that it is through the frontier, through these margins, these borders to be conquered, that the American nation built its identity—as Gavillon puts it, “The immensity and immaculacy of the lands are the guarantee—the matrix, even—of freedom and conquering individualism”¹ (168).

However, the land conquest enterprise eventually came to be accompanied by a desire and a will to preserve this wilderness somehow, and this desire was blended with the conquest desire in order to complete the multifaceted founding myth of the frontier. The desire to preserve wilderness prepared the ground for the emergence of Transcendentalism whose

¹ Translation mine.

proponents, who advocated for an unmediated (as possible) communion with nature and who played a significant role in this preservation dynamic, saw in it both the spark and the justification for the movement they were about to popularise. The myth of the frontier strongly influenced the movement as, besides the fact that Transcendentalism itself developed as a movement “of the margins”, Transcendentalist proponents were to rely heavily on the symbols of frontiers, borders and crossings in their beliefs and their literature. Americans’ growing awe regarding wilderness and their desire to protect it in spite of their conquering spirit also enabled them to define themselves in opposition to Europe at the time, where nature was being domesticated to a huge extent and made to suit the taste and fancies of men.

B) A Country Looking for Its Own Intellectual Identity

At a time when Europe was rich with an internationally renowned intellectual heritage, the new United States was lacking intellectual specificity. The country was then regarded as coarse and vulgar by many intellectuals: Alexis de Tocqueville deplored the United States’ lack of traditional grandeur when he observed in his 1840 book *Democracy in America* that “Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in one word so anti-poetic, as the life of a man in the United States”² (89). We have to keep in mind that the nineteenth century was a period of increasing industrialisation, growing mechanisation and rising inequalities between rich and poor—enough to disenchant the world and to prompt people to wish for reforms (Grellet 36). Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Father of Transcendentalism and one of its major figures, shared this view. A minister at the time, he resigned from his functions that he believed were no longer in accordance with his beliefs and

² Tocqueville was nevertheless willing to say that American democracy established a new kind of grandeur, that which comes with expanding equality of social conditions and a robust embrace of personal freedom. For more on the matter, see chapter 6 “Democracy and the New Dignity” of C. J. Delogu’s book *Tocqueville and Democracy in the Internet Age*.

lived off public lectures he gave around the United States, calling for something grand for his country, a grandeur that he believed could be brought forward by visionary poets who would pull the society upward. Emerson was looking for a purpose, exhorting his fellow-citizens to shoot higher, to have more ambition for themselves than that of merely copying existing models (notably the European social model), admonishing them to quit slavishly repeating a routine far beneath their potential and instead encouraging them to live in a way that would transcend the mere pattern and limited objective of building and selling things. Emerson's desire was one of a bigger vision for his country and one of emancipating individuals and enhancing their lives for the common good—which seems quite far from the existing criticism regarding Transcendentalists as rather selfish and idle intellectuals with no interest whatsoever in the society (Constantinesco and Specq 3).

The results of Emerson's efforts were significant and people did respond to his call: the most famous answer was that of Walter Whitman, who spontaneously sent Emerson a copy of his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Emerson saw in Whitman the poet he was hoping would appear on the American cultural landscape and wrote back to him saying that he believed Whitman's work to be "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed" (qtd. in Phillips 60). Whitman soon published an open letter to Emerson in his book's next edition in 1856, denoting how influential Emerson had been and was to be for the next generation of American poets:

I say you have led the States there—have led Me there. I say that none has ever done, or ever can do, a greater deed for The States, than your deed. Others may line out the lines, build cities, work mines, break up farms; it is yours to have been the original true Captain who put to sea, intuitive, positive, rendering the first report, to be told less by

any report, and more by the mariners of a thousand bays, in each tack of their arriving and departing, many years after you. (358)

Whitman's letter embodies the idea that Emerson's collection of works—especially his work *Nature* in 1836, considered the manifesto of Transcendentalist ideals (Hankins 23) and “The American Scholar” in 1837, regarded as America's “intellectual Declaration of Independence” (Holmes qtd. in Erskine 5)—provided the framework and springboard for a whole generation of writers who, together, would change the face of the American cultural landscape.

I.2 – Transcendentalism, a Multifaceted Movement: Core Beliefs Examined from a Prismatic Angle

Transcendentalism became a movement as such and an acknowledged organisation when New England intellectuals Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederic Henry Hedge, George Ripley and George Putnam created the Transcendental Club in September 1836 (Packer 47). Hedge pointed out that it was “no club in the strict sense . . . only occasional meetings of like-minded men and women” who gathered to discuss their dissatisfaction with the state of the American society at the time, pondering upon an alternative idealist state of affairs (Gura 5). In 1840, the Club launched the first issue of *The Dial*, the magazine that would serve as the vehicle for their ideas throughout the country. *The Dial* brought the writer Margaret Fuller, then rather in the shadows, to the foreground of the movement when she was entrusted with the role of editor for the magazine. From then on she played a crucial role in thoroughly disseminating Transcendentalist ideas in a way that would reach wider audiences.

A) A Philosophical and Spiritual Movement

i) Defending Idealism Over Materialism

As explained by Emerson in his lecture “The Transcendentalist” read in Boston in 1842, credits for the essence of the very notion of Transcendentalism have to go to Immanuel Kant and his philosophy of Transcendental idealism. Kant advocated that there existed what he called “transcendental forms”, which he defined as “a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired”, or in other words, as “intuitions of the mind itself” (199). United States

Transcendentalism relies heavily on Kant's philosophy, all the more so as the movement developed as a reaction against the state of intellectualism of the time, notably the influential doctrine of materialistic positivism carried out by French philosopher Auguste Comte, and spreading beyond European frontiers. As Angèle Kremer-Marietti reminds us, positivism suggests that the world ought to be explained through the thorough mathematical analysis of concrete facts both observable in reality and validated by experience, thus rejecting intuition and metaphysical explanations to try to understand the world's phenomena. The materialistic approach added to positivism, Georges Gusdorf explains, reinforces the idea that only matter can be considered as an existing entity and that ultimately, every phenomenon—be it of the physical or the moral world—results from material interactions. In contrast, Emerson's lecture "The Transcendentalist" favours the tendency of Kant's Transcendental philosophy to both give intuitions all authority over our experience and promote idealism—consciousness along with the power of thought and of will—over materialism, circumstances and the illusion of senses (193). Transcendentalist proponents suggest that the physical world, however observable and concrete as it might seem, is nevertheless only an appearance, and that mind is what ought to be taken as a departure point to account for the world's phenomena. They believe that the spirit has the intuition of its auto-transcendence over this material manifestation: "All that you call the world is the shadow of that substance which you are, the perpetual creations of the power of thought" (195). This formulation recalls Plato's allegory of the cave that he develops in *The Republic*, in which he encourages people not to be content with the illusions they may have of the world and rather to find out what is beyond these illusions. Transcendentalists believe that there is more to the world understanding than a mere material description and mathematical analysis. They try to understand the universe differently and deem their quest a noble one in that they endeavour to connect to what is

permanent—thoughts and ideas—rather than to what is marketable or perishable—matter, circumstances and the data of the senses (Emerson 208).

ii) A Spiritual More than a Religious Movement

The shortcut from Transcendentalism to a religious definition is easily made, and yet it is not accurate—Transcendentalism is much more about spirituality than it is about a specific religious institution. However, several religious influences on the movement certainly have to be acknowledged. On the one hand, Transcendentalism was inspired by ideas introduced by the doctrine of Unitarianism, the dominant religious organisation in Boston at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unitarians stressed the importance of intellectual reason—of “the ability of the intellect to discern what constituted ethical conduct”—to understand the “benevolent nature of the universe” and to reach “divine wisdom” (Finseth 21).

Transcendentalists drew on these ideas, took them up and pushed them further to advocate for an even more intense spiritual experience than that offered by Unitarianism. On the other hand, Transcendentalist proponents do not shy away from showing a significant appeal for Oriental religions as an inspiration for their beliefs. In his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau draws on Hinduism to describe his spiritual experience:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra,

who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. (242)

Emerson as well illustrates the parallel between Oriental religious beliefs and Transcendentalism by explaining that

If there is anything grand and daring in human thought or virtue, any reliance on the vast, the unknown; any presentiment; any extravagance of faith, the spiritualist adopts it as most in nature. The oriental mind has always tended to this largeness. Buddhism is an expression of it. The Buddhist who thanks no man, who says, “do not flatter your benefactors,” but who, in his conviction that every good deed can by no possibility escape its reward, will not deceive the benefactor by pretending that he has done more than he should, is a Transcendentalist. (“The Transcendentalist” 197)

However, if Transcendentalism should be linked to religion at all, it ought to be more to the idea of a spiritual religious practice than to the institutions of a given religion. Emerson, ordained a pastor in 1829 at Boston’s Second Church, soon began to disagree with the church’s methods and ended up resigning in 1832 as he explained in one of his journals that “I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers” (*The Journals* xi). In *Nature*, Emerson exhorts his peers to distance themselves from archaic religious methods and not to be scared of inventing their own “original relation

to the universe”, and find serenity in this authentic relation in which they could be one with the world around them (7). He deplors the fact that

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion y revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? . . . The sun shines to-day also . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship. (7)

He encourages people to step away from traditions that are no longer representative of their beliefs and convictions and he thus promotes what would become a key aspect of Transcendentalism: fearlessness, and the possibility that men are not limited to only obeying the rules and the status quo and can rather build their “own world” (48).

iii) Love of Nature

One core aspect of Transcendentalism, astride philosophy and spirituality and energising the whole movement, is the belief in the intrinsic goodness of both man and nature, and the idea that man, in order to be happier and fulfilled, should re-learn to have a harmonious relation with nature instead of a mere relation of exploitation. This aspect of Transcendentalism is significantly influenced by not only German but also English Romanticism—it can even be partially described as an outgrowth of Romanticism to some extent. Transcendentalism draws on the Romantic dynamic of reintegrating man into nature,

contrary to the idea put forward in the Enlightenment period that man is not and cannot be integrated in nature but can simply be a contemplator of nature. Emerson abolishes this border between the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite, as he considers that a) God being nature and nature being God and b) man being an integral part of nature, then c) each man possesses a piece of the divine, a piece of what he calls the Over-Soul (a concept he develops in an eponymous essay); as such, nature transcends this border, nature itself becomes transcendental (Gavillon 164; Emerson, “The Transcendentalist” 198). Henry David Thoreau, too, contests the Enlightenment theory according to which man’s relation to nature needs to be mediated by culture—for Thoreau, the appreciation of nature is immediate and he “encounters wild nature without an established repertoire of categories, attitudes and responses” (Oelschlaeger 136). Thoreau, considered as the first American nature writer and one of the first environmentalists—he rightly observed in his essay “Walking” that “In Wildness is the preservation of the world” (239)—was the first Transcendentalist to shed so much light on the precious character of nature and to advocate for its preservation, to a greater extent than Emerson (Gavillon 165). Thoreau’s preservation call would be actively answered and put in practice by environmentalists such as John Muir, an avid trekker in the wilderness and a follower of Emerson and Thoreau’s ideals. An ecocentrist rather than an anthropocentrist, Muir believed that every living being had an equal right to exist and, just like Emerson, showed pantheist convictions through his way to consider nature as the incarnation of God, and man as an integral part of this picture: “Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature” (Muir 212). Muir combined theory and practice as he became at length the father of modern Conservation Movements, contributing actively to the creation of several National Parks (Gavillon 167). This dynamic paralleled the rise of ecology at the same time, both in the United States with Marsh’s 1864 *Man & Nature*, the first American ecological

essay (Gavillon 176), and worldwide with Haeckel's official definition of ecology in 1866 (Gavillon 167).

iv) Self-Reliance and Individuality

Along with the Transcendentalist idea that man can find his best self when in harmony with nature comes the insistence on the value of self-reliance and individuality. Transcendentalists believed that society and its organised institutions were on the whole noxious for man and immured him into norms and conventions that ultimately corrupted both his purity and his potential. Moreover, they maintained that it was not only better to be self-dependent, but also simpler (Emerson, "The Transcendentalist" 195). However, Emerson insists on the fact that Transcendentalists do not shun general society out of whim or from unsociability; on the contrary, they do need and wish to be loved. Only, they do not feel that there are many with whom they can enjoy genuine and sincere relationships and they would rather be lonely than partial in their affinities, which leads them observe that eventually "there are never so fit for friendship, as when they have quitted mankind, and taken themselves to friend" (202). In other words, as Grellet puts it, "Emerson does not preach selfishness, but a liberation of man from the bonds of habits and conventions to reach self-reform and rejuvenation" (81).

B) A Literary Movement

Transcendentalist philosophical and spiritual principles are enhanced and illustrated through a literature that is representative of the movement both because of the ideas it conveys and because of the way it conveys them. For Transcendentalist writers—either when

writing prose or poetry, both equally important in the Transcendentalist literary tradition—the letter serves the sense and the form of the writing is an integral part of the content expressed. Both are inextricably linked and enrich each other. According to Emerson,

it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, —a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet. (“The Poet” 450)

Emerson’s idea of a poet, much more than someone owning the said title and producing standard poems, is he who can really *see* nature when looking at it: “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet” (*Nature* 9). A vision itself can be poetic and be expressed so, even if it does not follow the rules and norms of poetic standards. That is what Transcendentalists support as much in their philosophical principles as in their literary experiments: spontaneity, innovations and the courage to go against traditions. Emerson’s principle that “it’s not metre but a metre-making argument that is the true essence of poetry” is the core belief that would fuel Whitman’s confidence to make the break from the traditional norms of poetry and begin free verse, which, from the moment he tries it out, is going to go on to be America’s dominant mode of poetry to the present day:

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at
the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.
All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
luckier. ("Song of Myself" 34)

Emily Dickinson and Mary Oliver also challenged the existing definition of poetry. Instead of letting language trap the writer into conventions and constraints inherent either to artistic rules or linguistic rules, they tried to break these constraints and to experiment new forms, giving free rein to their imagination in order to faithfully transpose the exaltation of their emotions. Emily Dickinson's poems deal copiously with encounters, borders and cross-overs—a key symbol in Transcendentalism. Her poem "After Great Pain" tackles this cross-over between pain and peace and enables us to ponder upon the features of this cross-over in an unconventional form:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way

Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –

Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –

Remembered, if outlived,

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –

First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

Dan Chiasson, in his article “Ecstasy of Influence,” takes on Emerson’s idea that a poet is not necessarily he who follows poetic standards but he whose argument and whose passionate conveying of this argument is poetic. Not only does he consider Emerson’s essays at the reflectors of Transcendentalist ideals, shedding the influence of past masters and standing anew in the American literary tradition for “Their authority comes not from the Church of the ministry but from the power of their prose”, but he also considers his “quicksilver prose” with “its sentences like signal flares launched one after another into the ether” as poetry itself. Chiasson maintains that in a way, Emerson already was the poet that he had in mind in “The Poet”—not through his poems as such, but through his inflamed prosaic voice.

Transcendentalism can therefore be understood as a tripartite movement: a philosophical and spiritual movement embodied within literary pieces—both of fiction and non-fiction—and implemented through actions, reforms or a lifestyle in accordance with Transcendentalist beliefs and principles. Transcendentalism as a movement seeks to liberate people both from the external constraints of oppressive traditions and of growing capitalism and materialism in society, and from the internal constraint of being lulled into believing that

they must seek comfort and security in ready-made patterns instead of using their potential to dream bigger and achieve grander goals. Transcendentalist proponents, as bookish and well-read as they might be, are not simply skilful talkers but also strongly advocate for actions to follow up discourse. In *Walden*, Thoreau suggests that students “should not *play* life, or *study* it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics” (42). He illustrates his argument by exhorting the reader to ponder upon the following situation:

Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month—the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this—or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a Rodgers' penknife from his father?

Which would be most likely to cut his fingers? (42)

Transcendentalism is as much about having an original insight on the world as about effectively putting into practice these new visions and convictions. However, the development and establishment of Transcendentalism as a movement does not necessarily equal the idea that this movement was ever intended by its original proponents as a one-track model to be followed as such.

I.3 – Divergences Among Transcendentalists as to the Practical

Aims of the Movement

In order to understand what is at stake in my research question when I ponder upon the reasons why Transcendentalism today does not seem to have more weight that it does in the actual United States (contrary to what its place in the canon on the country would lead one to think), it is important to understand whether the movement has ever been intended as a model to be unanimously followed, and if yes, to what extent.

A) On the Didactic Tone of Transcendentalist Proponents

In an important number of Transcendentalist pieces, the authors adopt a didactic tone to address the readers or to imply that they ought to change the way they live should they want to be happier. In Emily Dickinson and Mary Oliver's poems, the reader is often given the opportunity to be endowed with a sense of purposefulness, or encouraged to think of his life as a myriad of possibilities and not simply set on a one-way track from which they cannot deviate. That is the message that Oliver attempts to express in the particularly vivid and powerful ending of her poem "The Summer Day":

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

This didactic tone is sometimes on the verge of being moralising, and the best example of this fragile border can be found in the writings of Thoreau, which are full of aphorisms. In *Walden*, he deplores that “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (7). Throughout the book, the reader understands that Thoreau deems his way of living in the woods much more fulfilling than that of most men, whom he is pained to see living in such trivial and unchallenging ways. He particularly laments the fact that men seem to be working and toiling for the wrong purposes, “doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways” (4) and spending “the best part of one’s life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it” (44), when they could instead start living at once. Thoreau, in his constant restlessness, his endless wandering of the soul, is a seeker—always looking for more, dissatisfied with taking life as it comes without questioning it, he exhorts people to awake

form their lethargy, to shed comfort and security in order to live an authentic life, to give them a “sense of waking” (Merwin xiv). However, this didactic tone does not necessarily spring from the same impulse for every Transcendentalist proponent, and they do not all intend their sermonising advice to be followed to the same extent.

B) Implementing Transcendentalist Principles on Different Levels

It seems fair to wonder to what extent the didactic call of Transcendentalist proponents is meant to be followed: individually, collectively, privately, publicly? Emerson, in his lecture “The Transcendentalist”, confesses that even though he believes that a complete transcendental outlook on life is worth aiming at spiritually, it is bound to remain a somewhat utopian project as it is impossible to achieve in practice. He admits that

there is no pure transcendentalist; that we know of no one but prophets and heralds of such a philosophy; that all who by strong bias of nature have leaned to the spiritual side in doctrine, have stopped short of their goal. We have had many harbingers and forerunners; but of a purely spiritual life, history has afforded no example. I mean, we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels' food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how; clothed, sheltered, and weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his own hands . . . Shall we say, then, that transcendentalism is the Saturnalia or excess of Faith; the presentiment of a faith proper to man in his integrity, excessive only when his imperfect obedience hinders the satisfaction of his wish. (197)

Emerson was therefore well aware that his was an ideal vision of Transcendentalism—not a political model nor doctrine that ought to be implemented right here and right now, but something that *could be*, something whose benefits could be experienced not only upon attaining the ultimate goal but in the quest itself towards that ideal.

However, for some other Transcendentalists, this internal and individual outlook on self-fulfilment is not sufficient to hope for the improvement of one's condition, and they believe that more concrete actions should be carried out in the public sphere and not only on the individual level. They seek to understand some state, some condition they are unsatisfied with and to transcend this condition. These individuals take Transcendentalism to the level of active reform on the collective stage. I have already mentioned how John Muir got actively involved in the Nature Conservation Movement, but many proponents also actively fought for other social reforms, as Lawrence Buell demonstrates in his book *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. These reforms concerned as much the field of education (in which major experiments were led by Amos Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody), the advancement of social rights (Margaret Fuller, known as the first notable American feminist, was a fervent partisan of woman's rights and of the antislavery fight), or the more global idea that the system needed a radical change overall. Orestes Brownson for instance, in his essay "The Labouring Classes" in 1840, demonstrates why he believes that the system in the new industrial era is evil for the labouring class which becomes only poorer and poorer, and that this system should be destroyed and changed anew for a socialist system endowing the Government with the responsibility to help the poorer classes while limiting its powers and intervention in other domains (198). His vision echoes English critic John Ruskin's vision of the degrading effect of labour on men that he develops in his book *The Stones of Venice* in 1851, in which he deplores the fact that people of the working class "feel that the kind of labour to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes

them less than men” (163). The idea that man’s potential is so much more than that of being merely a tool is essential for Transcendentalists, and Brownson insists on this idea when he asks, “Is it a condition,—nay, can it be made a condition,—with which a man should be satisfied; in which he should be contented to live and die?” (196) Brownson was aware that such a change of system could not take place peacefully and thought that if violence was what it took for the change to take place, then it would be worth it anyway. Consequently, he felt at odds with the Transcendentalist proponents who believed the philosophy was to be experienced essentially on the spiritual level, as he explains quite critically:

Reformers in general . . . would have all men wise, good, and happy; but in order to make them so, they tell us that we want not external changes, but internal; and therefore instead of declaiming against society and seeking to disturb existing social arrangements, we should confine ourselves to the individual reason and conscience; seek merely to lead the individual to repentance, and to reformation of life; make the individual a practical, a truly religious man, and all evils will either disappear, or be sanctified to the spiritual growth of the soul. (197)

Brownson believed that Emerson’s individualism only “abet[ted] existing social hierarchy rather than offer[ing] the necessary systemic reform”, and that instead of setting the focus on withdrawing from mainstream society, real change should rather be initiated through undertaking legislative activism (193). However, it is worth noting that Emerson did not turn away from active actions and did, by his somewhat rebellious attitude at times, initiate significant religious reforms. We saw earlier that Emerson, after being ordained a minister at the Unitarian Church of Boston’s Second Church, quickly felt alienated from the methods of the Church that he found outdated and not in line with his own convictions. In 1832, he

delivered his sermon “A Young Minister Refuses to Perform a Crucial Duty” explaining his decision to refuse to perform the ritual of communion, which led not only to a significant split in the church as to the ministers’ stances towards Emerson’s choice but also ultimately to his resignation (Buell 20). Later on, in 1838, he gave his incendiary “Divinity School Address” at the Unitarianism’s academic home base of Harvard Divinity School, deprecating the different aspects of the Unitarian theology he stood against. Quite expectedly, his discourse “caused an irreversible rift between Unitarian liberals and radicals” (Buell 129), thus entailing a significant change in the practice of the religion for many of its disciples.

Transcendentalist proponents were often at odds with each other over the details of their movement, and their different ways to approach Transcendentalism and its implementation—on the individual level, through a spiritual quest, or in the public sphere through reformist social actions—could appear as a lack of unity in the movement. However, they are all integral parts of the movement, informing one another and inter-relating, and this is when our definition of Transcendentalism as a movement and not as a doctrine is of critical importance to understand it accurately. Transcendentalism is not teachable in terms of rules or norms, especially since it openly exhorts people to get out of set norms, and as such did not develop as a doctrine to be taught and followed as such. Rather than a doctrine, a theory, or even a common model, Transcendentalism is more a source of inspiration, a “nudge” for its proponents to experience the beliefs and principles of the movement according to their own “original relation to the universe” (Emerson, *Nature* 7).

C) Transcendentalism as a Cornerstone of American Culture

In spite of its multifarious facets, its many diverse implementations and the divergences of opinions within the movement, Transcendentalism quickly imposed itself as a canon of the

United States literary tradition—one cannot read an anthology of American Literature without finding a significant section about the impact of Transcendentalism on the American literary stage. Grellet demonstrates how Transcendentalism provided the United States with a national literature and directly influenced both the writers of so-called Dark Romanticism such as Hawthorne, Poe and Melville in terms of the focus put on the clash between individuals' values and society's values, as well as following poets such as Longfellow, Lowell and Whittier, and of course Whitman who gave American poetry its free verse impulse (37). On the more global cultural stage, Transcendentalism did leave a considerable mark as well, so much so that the *Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism* defines Transcendentalists as “innovators and precursors of much that we now regard as central to American life, literature, and national identity” (Myerson, Harbert-Petrulionis, and Dassow-Walls xxv). We also saw how Transcendentalists, as dreamers and reformers, brought significant changes in the domains of religion, education, politics and even economics for their country, thus leaving a cultural legacy entirely integrated into American history.

Nevertheless, despite the important heritage Transcendentalism left for the United States, this has not prevented the country of Emerson from becoming ever more materialistic, industrialised and mercantile over the years to the point of becoming today the “capital of capitalism” in the world, as symbolised by Wall Street and the World Trade Centre towers. How can we explain that Transcendentalism, in spite of its immense heritage for the United States and its leading role in the creation of an American national identity, seems to be now unheeded in the country which took a path seemingly to the exact opposite of the principles advocated by the movement and one that leaves little room to individual liberty? E. B. White points out this perplexity in his book *One Man's Meat* (1944) where, in an imagined letter to Thoreau, he writes:

The account which you left of your sojourn there [at Walden Pond] is, you will be amused to learn, a document of increasing persistence; each year it gains a little headway, as the world loses ground. We may all be transcendental yet, whether we like it or not. As our common complexities increase, any tale of individual simplicity (and yours is the best written and the cockiest) acquires a new fascination; as our goods accumulate, but not our well-being, your report of an existence without material adornment takes on a certain awkward credibility. (80)

II. Rejection of Transcendentalism

II.1 – A Society Swimming against the Tide of Transcendentalist

Principles

The United States remains for many the leading example of capitalism and materialism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a socio-economic framework that seems to be in utter contradiction with Transcendentalist principles. I do not wish to provide an analysis of the economic situation of the United States, but to further explore the representation that we might have of this country, as it comes across through books, articles, movies and advertisements, while keeping in mind that our knowledge is precisely filtered through these different conveyers of information. Very often, what we see of the United States is a capitalist and materialist society ruled by an excessive and superficial consumerism, with people working harder than they ought in order to be able to “keep up with the Joneses,” and getting into debt to pay for a home, a car, or an education that will then keep them hooked on their different loans and trapped in this never-ending pattern. Rebecca J. Rosen notices in her article “The Triumph of Consumerism” that “Even the wealthiest are working more hours than they were three decades ago—the very people who are at liberty to ease up on work a bit and indulge in some of the nonmaterial consumption . . . Consumption, not culture, has triumphed.” Such a depiction of the United States finds its sources in multifarious material.

As far as books are concerned, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* is a rather acerbic criticism of the superficiality of the American society. Written in 1955, the book delves into the country’s addiction to mass consumerism, blinded by materialism and obsessed by artificial

Hollywood glamour. It depicts shallow and bland characters obsessed with appearances, slaves of the false promises and fake rhetoric of advertisements—characters following an American dream cheapened by the dictatorship of consumerism. The protagonist himself, although aware of this masquerade, cannot help but being obsessed by the epitome of artificiality represented by the young Lolita. In many regards, Nabokov’s *Lolita* tackles themes similar to those dealt with in the movie *American Beauty* realised by Sam Mendes in 1999: the empty promises of materialism, the loss of individuality in the race for a life conforming to the standards of success, and the corruption of the American dream into a superficial ideal providing no guarantee of satisfaction nor fulfilment. In the middle of this crushing and oppressive society keeping up appearances, one or two characters only precisely try to look for beauty on the margins of the American model imposed on them.

In addition, the United States appears as an overly-consumerist country buying without second thoughts, through the advertisements promoting American products, encouraging compulsive shopping and gradually leading to a significant loss of individuality and originality. The brand Diesel, for instance, blatantly plays on the promotion of stupidity to make customers purchase the company’s products.



Even more pernicious are the advertisements precisely drawing on Transcendentalist principles to make people act exactly the opposite way—to be tame, obedient consumers. Apple has been playing along these lines since it launched its first products, and this is particularly obvious in a video advertisement released in 1997, praising the company in these terms:

Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.

It is quite ironic that this description, which could bring to mind the image of a ground-breaking Emerson or an anti-conformist Thoreau, should be used for one of the biggest commercial firms in the world which, although meant to be innovative, has now propelled its customers in a blatant and hardly equalled conformism regarding their shopping and buying patterns of these products. Similarly, the brand Levi's used Charles Bukowski's poem "The Laughing Heart" for its "Go Forth" campaign in a 2011 video, narrating:

your life is your life
don't let it be clubbed into dank submission.
be on the watch.

there are ways out.
there is a light somewhere.
it may not be much light but
it beats the darkness.
be on the watch.
the gods will offer you chances.
know them.
take them.
you can't beat death but
you can beat death in life, sometimes.
and the more often you learn to do it,
the more light there will be.
your life is your life.
know it while you have it.
you are marvelous
the gods wait to delight
in you.

The use of such a spiritual poem for mere mercantile purposes echoes W. S. Merwin's observation in his introduction to *Walden* when he notices that "In the course of his [Thoreau's] own century, and then in ours, the impulse for such retreat from the assumptions and traffic of society has become something of a commonplace. It has been blurred and cheapened sometimes in the process" (xiii). Vicious is this strategy of some advertising companies to draw on a spiritual approach to the buying and selling process, knowing that this

is precisely the kind of lifestyle that people may want to be able to indulge, and cheapening it to instead keep them hooked on the completely opposite consumerist lifestyle.

The image of the United States as a consumerist and materialist country is also widely spread through magazines and newspapers articles, both within the United States and abroad. In his article in the magazine *Salon*, Professor Marc C. Taylor defines the American economic system as a system giving priority to market expansion over people's well-being. He explains that

Market capitalism has long been associated not only with rationality but also with the freedom of choice. By the latter half of the twentieth century, economic principles defined reason as much as reason characterized markets. Rationality came to be defined largely by what made economic sense, and what was not in a person's, a company's, or a country's economic self-interest was considered irrational by definition. Choice, defined by economic logic, came to be widely considered an unquestionable good—the more choices, the better. Within this regime, freedom of choice is little more than the freedom to buy and consume. According to this logic, economic progress can be measured by the increasing number of choices that consumers have. Though rarely acknowledged, increasing the number of choices is really less about improving human well-being than it is about expanding the market.

Additionally, in an article by Rebecca J. Rosen in *The Atlantic* entitled “Can There Be a Less Materialistic American Dream?”, she notices that “the American dream has always been, in some ways, a consumerist vision,” but she adds quite interestingly that materialism also seems to be “the other person's disease.” She draws on a poll showing that eighty percent of the people in the United States do believe that Americans are too materialistic, without, most of

the time, applying this definition to themselves. This confirms the important influence (and the occasional bending of information) that the media can have upon one's opinion.

While this material either spreads the vision of a somewhat shallow country or looks more deeply into the causes and roots of this supposed shallowness, it puts forward the image of a country eaten up with materialist goals, caught up in a vicious circle that people cannot seem to be able to give up although it leaves them deeply unfulfilled. As George Monbiot reminds us in *The Guardian*, the well-known saying that money cannot buy you happiness has been backed up and reinforced by numerous correlations established between materialism and loneliness, anxiety, depression and self-destruction. It therefore appears as a real paradox that people should want to remain in a system leaving so very little room to individual liberty instead of implementing the recommendations of their Transcendentalist forebears.

Transcendentalist proponents, in spite of their many disagreements, all strove to praise the freedom of the modern man. They sought to free people both from their ties to a too conformist society and from their fears preventing them from dreaming bigger, but they also sought to free people towards a personal well-being that would have a positive impact on society as a whole. Yet, we have seen that through their materialist and appearance-based behaviour, people in the United States seem to disregard Transcendentalist advice, either deliberately or more reluctantly.

II.2 – Deliberate Irreverence to Transcendentalism

Although Transcendentalist proponents exhort people to live according to new ways of thinking that they present to be liberating, their call is not answered unanimously—some people deliberately choose not to march to the sound of the Transcendentalist drum.³

A) Early Criticism

Irreverence to Transcendentalism is not new and from its early beginnings, some people deliberately rejected the movement, no matter how ground-breaking. This was the case notably of Edgar Allan Poe, whose antagonism towards Transcendentalism is sarcastically expressed in his short story “Never Bet the Devil Your Head.” In it, he directly attacks Transcendentalism by narrating the downfall of the offensive Toby Dammit, a character “affected with the transcendentials” (126). Besides calling it a “disease” (122), Poe also makes fun of the movement when the narrator expresses his uneasiness at his friend Dammit’s offensive talk and explains that although he himself would call it queer, “Mr. Coleridge would have called [it] mystical, Mr. Kant pantheistical, Mr. Carlyle twistical, and Mr. Emerson hyperquizzitistical” (125). Poe’s moral of the story is conveyed through the protagonist’s final explanation that his friend Dammit, with time, eventually “grew worse, and at length died, a lesson to all riotous livers” (127). Poe’s hostility towards Transcendentalism was both on stylistic and ideological grounds: not only did he think that the Transcendentalists’ overuse of suggested meaning and metaphors served their writings badly (“The Philosophy of

³ To my readers interested in a more comprehensive analysis of the Transcendentalist controversy (on which I unfortunately cannot dwell as much as I would like), I suggest that they read Sabine Remanofsky’s thesis “In Quiet Possession of the Gospel? La Controverse Transcendentaliste et ses Déterminants, 1805-1859.”

Composition” 167), but he also strongly departed from their views on abolition and social reforms, “fashioning himself a member of the Virginia gentry” (Hayes 15).

Herman Melville, too, can be considered irreverent to Transcendentalism, but in a more complex way. His novel *Moby Dick* embodies what seems to be his ambivalent stance towards the movement. Ramon Espejo Romero, in his article “Negotiating Transcendentalism, Escaping ‘Paradise’: Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*”, analyses thoroughly the various scholarly readings of *Moby Dick* and their different interpretations as to the kind of relation that Melville entertained with Transcendentalism. He concludes that rather than either explicitly condemning or praising the movement, Melville, through the doomed quest of character Captain Ahab, indirectly warns about the dangers of taking Transcendentalism too literally and seeking to be a pure Transcendentalist—which, let us remember, would be impossible according to Emerson. Melville’s warning against the disastrous consequences of following impractical ideals to the letter is in line with his rather dark vision of both men and their lives, a vision quite opposed to the much more positive perspective on life defended by Transcendentalism. In *Moby Dick*, he writes that “All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life” (290).

Even more ambiguous maybe is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s relation to Transcendentalism. Hawthorne was closely connected to this movement as he was, for one year, a member of Brook Farm, a utopian community founded in Boston by socialists with Transcendentalist ideals (Hawthorne 633). In his novel *The Blithedale Romance*, he gently satirises his experience there, taking inspiration from it to create a fiction exhibiting the impracticality of these utopian beliefs, while asserting his fondness for the movement’s impulse in the preface of the work (634). However, although he felt affection for the movement because of its free-spirited dynamic and its anti-conformism, he could not entirely follow through as he felt that

Transcendentalism was full of contradictions which somehow served its purpose badly. Although the movement exhorted people to endlessly question the world around them according to new standards and to admit that the soul “accepts whatever befalls” (Emerson, *Nature* 39), Hawthorne felt that this questioning process was only a pretence as Transcendentalists seemed to already have in mind a set of answers they ought to tend to—namely, the positive and optimistic beliefs associated with men and nature that we are now familiar with. Hawthorne’s conclusions about men and their lives were somewhat darker and more pessimistic, and he felt that if the soul was to “accept whatever befalls,” then it should accept the possibility to come to these dark conclusions about men without trying to blind oneself for the sake of preserving a romanticised approach to life. Today all three writers—Poe, Melville and Hawthorne—are affiliated to so-called Dark Romanticism, a movement whose beliefs are significantly opposed to Transcendentalism, although it developed as a subgenre of Transcendentalism itself. Dark Romantics were not satisfied with the majority of Transcendentalist beliefs that they found naïve and too utopian. Instead, they shed light on what they believed to be truly predominant in mankind: imperfection, fallibility and a tendency to self-destruction. Contrary to Transcendentalists who believed that man was inherently good and that each man possessed a piece of the Over-Soul, G. R. Thomson explains that Dark Romantics emphasised

fallen man's inability fully to comprehend haunting reminders of another, supernatural realm that yet seemed not to exist, the constant perplexity of inexplicable and vastly metaphysical phenomena, a propensity for seemingly perverse or evil moral choices that had no firm or fixed measure or rule, and a sense of nameless guilt combined with a suspicion the external world was a delusive projection of the mind. (6)

The credibility and legitimacy of Transcendentalism was therefore already criticised at its birth, but the present-day criticism and rejection of the movement has taken on a new dimension with the hindsight and the further knowledge that current critics hold about the movement.

B) Present-Day Irreverence

More recent irreverence to Transcendentalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is not so much criticism of the beliefs themselves than it is of what is perceived as a problematic inconsistency between what is professed and what is actually done by Transcendentalist proponents. A robust example of some people's ambivalent feelings towards Transcendentalism today is displayed in the article "Pond Scum" by Kathryn Schulz (*The New Yorker*, 19 October 2015). Schulz explores the reasons why Thoreau's *Walden* is nationally cherished whereas she deems it to be merely the journal of a blatant fraud. Schulz sheds light on what she believes to be the three major faults of Thoreau impeding his credibility: his selfishness and righteousness, the impracticality of his recommendations, and his inconsistency. Although this article is specific as to the piece it criticises, I chose it to embody today's criticism addressed at Transcendentalism as a whole as Schulz reviews an important number of arguments which other critics of Transcendentalism used before her, and as *Walden* is considered a major Transcendentalist text.

Thoreau, Schulz tells us, was "self-obsessed: narcissistic, fanatical about self-control, adamant that he requires nothing beyond himself to understand and thrive in the world." She also claims that Thoreau's self-absorption explained his significant incuriosity and parochialism, along with his lack of interest in civilisation which he considered as a contaminant which ought to be departed from at once. Not only was he selfish and careless

towards other people, but he was also very conceited, in Schulz's opinion, and he considered his intuition and opinion better than anyone else's. Thoreau's most insufferable claim, in Schulz's eyes, is his assertion that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (*Walden* 7). In her words, "By what method, one wonders, could a man so disinclined to get to know other people substantiate an allegation about the majority of humanity?" His conceit, Schulz explains, led him to look down on the rest of humanity, including his admirers. Schulz strengthens her argument by drawing on Emerson's description of his fellow Transcendentalist, in which he confesses that the way Thoreau treated people who asked for his company was "never affectionate, but superior, didactic—scorning their petty ways" ("Thoreau" 458).

It would be one thing for Thoreau to be as Schulz describes him and to remain one of a kind, but what she believes was particularly aggravating was his wish to be imitated—something she sees as his ultimate purpose for writing *Walden*. Thoreau's wish to enlighten others, she says, could have disastrous consequences if people were to emulate him and try to apply his philosophy on a political level. Schulz explains that Thoreau's desire to favour his own intuition and moral compass over others' individually and over society's as a whole is incompatible with the very purpose of democracy which is to adjudicate between different and sometimes conflicting moral compasses. Besides, Thoreau's inconsistency and whimsical character, Schulz explains, do not exactly serve his own moral compass right, and she notes that "to issue contradictory decrees based on private whim" is the behaviour of "a despot." It is not surprising, according to her, that *Walden*, praising as it does "rebellion against societal norms" and conveying the idea that "everyone else's certainties are wrong while one's own are unassailable", appeals a lot to teenagers. Thus she considers Thoreau: immature, childish, just like a teenager not yet ready to be allowed any official political implication on the national level for lack of consistency. On top of that, Schulz ironizes that the very political

recommendations that Thoreau gives are ridiculously utopian and completely impractical, on the ground that “such a nation [as Thoreau imagines] has never existed” and she mocks that “even if nothing else militated against Thoreau’s political vision its impossibility alone would suffice.”

Schulz is also unforgivable concerning Thoreau’s discrepancy between his theory and his practice which, according to her, reduces *Walden*’s value at best to not more than a good naturalist book, and at worst to a fraud, “a fantasy about rustic life divorced from the reality of living in the woods, and, especially, a fantasy about escaping the entanglements and responsibilities of living among other people.” Schulz mocks that “Thoreau insists that we read it [*Walden*] as the story of a voluntary exile from society, an extended confrontation with wilderness and solitude.” As she reminds us, Walden Pond was ridiculously close to the rest of civilisation (a couple of miles only) and Thoreau was frequently diverted from his grand solitary experience by visits he paid several times a week to his mother, who replenished him with enough food to make it possible for him to boast about subsisting on very little the rest of the time. Schulz points out that Thoreau’s deception (both towards himself and others) was blatant in that “Only someone who had never experienced true remoteness could mistake Walden for the wilderness,” adding sarcastically that “had Thoreau truly lived at a remove from other people, he might have valued them more.” That really is what Schulz is the most critical about: the fact that “Thoreau did not live as he described,” and that, even worse, he also “preached at others to live as he did not, while berating them for their own compromises and complexities.” She remarks that his very recommendations are inconsistent with the anti-conformist dynamic of Transcendentalism itself. How odd, she tells us, that a major Transcendentalist figure should be so Puritan—or so conservative, in other words—in his austere and dry approach to how life should be lived, worthy of a real “program of abstinence.”

Schulz believes that her criticism towards Thoreau is all the more legitimate as the United States has unsuitably elected *Walden* as a symbol of the Americans' national conscience and Thoreau as an "American hero," a "moral paragon." She explains that the country might have done so either because people read *Walden* selectively, taking only what is valuable in it—namely, Thoreau's naturalist observations—and turning a blind eye to the rest of its flaws, or precisely because Thoreau, in all his individualism, his selfishness and his elitism, makes for a very convenient national hero in a country which should not want to live by the standards of too selfless a character, for the sake of economic survival among other things.

Schulz's article undoubtedly raises points that need to be acknowledged—one has to admit that Transcendentalism is not and has never been devoid of contradictions. But a real interest in Transcendentalism will show that the contradictions inherent to the movement stem from its very richness, and that the movement cannot be studied or analysed or even criticised from the surface only. One needs to go beyond this surface, to plunge deeper and to have the perseverance to read between the lines. A subsequent issue of *The New Yorker* (9 November 2015) published letters from several professional and ordinary readers who reacted to Schulz's piece and deplored that she did not go beyond the surface of *Walden*. Sharon Cameron believes that Schulz failed to engage with what is most importantly at stake in the book, that is, "the complex question of why Thoreau's passion for nature seemed to him to require the (impossible) exclusion of the social world," and that she limited herself to a one-track criticism of the book through a piece exhibiting "the same lack of generosity that she ascribes to Thoreau." One of Schulz's most important arguments is that Thoreau deluded himself into believing he was living in the wilderness and that this delusion weakens the whole of his account. However, Thoreau was never ambiguous as to the fact that Walden Pond was not more than a mile away from any civilisation (3), and that the whole point of his

experience was not so much to be remote as to feel remote (72-73), and that is what Schulz obviously overlooked.

Sanjay Gulati rightly observes that Schulz's harshness towards Thoreau's inconsistency cannot be entirely accounted for as "'Walden' makes no claim to consistency or universality. Its author is alive to his personal contradictions." Thoreau clearly did not aspire to be emulated, contrary to what Schulz would have us believe in her article. He clearly states in *Walden* that "I would not have anyone adopt *my* mode of living on any account . . . but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbour's instead" (58). It is therefore quite inappropriate for Schulz to convict Thoreau with reaching false conclusions based on his distorted intuitions when she herself seems to do the exact same thing.

Elizabeth A. Linehan backs up this opinion by explaining that Thoreau's theories are neither claims of "personal infallibility" nor "theories of government," as Schulz believes, but simply theories of moral obligations applying to himself. Besides, when Schulz mocks the impracticality of Thoreau's political recommendations on the grounds that "Such a nation has never existed," she does not seem to take into account that Transcendentalism is precisely not about envisioning things as they are or have been but as they could be.

Lewis Hyde argues that Schulz got it wrong when she claimed that Thoreau, in all his dryness and sententious behaviour, shunned humour—instead, Lewis believes that she simply missed it altogether. He does not think that Thoreau's austere tone should be taken literally at all times, so when Thoreau writes that "It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil" (55) when talking about the uselessness of having a doormat, Lewis explains that it is not out of "fine Puritan fashion" as Schulz suggests, but quite on the contrary, out of "nineteenth-century Yankee humor" that Schulz did not perceive.

Lucille Scott debunks Schulz's argument about Thoreau's selfishness and disinterest in others by revealing how "a close, sensitive reading of Thoreau reveals a complex man deeply connected to family and community." She quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson's son, Edward, as a warrant of her argument: the young boy, who considered Thoreau as "the best kind of an older brother," was deeply unsettled about misconceptions and fallacies that writers would write on Thoreau's account whereas he knew the man was "refined, courteous" and "kind." Schulz seems to omit the many occasions in *Walden* when Thoreau is being humble and reminds the reader of the reasons why he takes the stance to talk about himself and about his experience in such a self-centred way. He starts *Walden* by clarifying that the book will be self-focused to answer some questions that he has been asked:

I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book. In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. (3)

He completes this explanation by adding that "If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement" (41). Had Schulz taken a closer look at that sentence, she might have reconsidered using most of the arguments she picked against him. Thoreau, who in most regards corresponds to Emerson's paradigm of the Transcendentalist, is not against men; on the contrary, he is "warmly cooperating with men,

even preferring them to himself” (“The Transcendentalist” 195). He tries to draw on his own meditations to try and lift up everybody else. However, and Schulz’s article proves it, this is no easy enterprise and as Plato explains in *The Republic*, he who endeavours to enlighten his peers and to get them out of the cave is bound to be loathed by those who would rather stay blinded by their illusions. Moreover, Schulz conveniently simplifies Thoreau’s thought on philanthropy by making him appear as a mere egotistical character, looking down on the needy and deluding himself into believing he is worth more than the rest of humanity. However, whoever has read *Walden* thoroughly with an open mind will remember what Thoreau’s extract about philanthropy is really about—and that it is far from what Schulz reduces it to. Thoreau debunks philanthropy not for lack of generosity, but because on the contrary he sincerely believes that the enterprise is too often a self-interested one, and he loathes that “there is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted” (61). Being philanthropic and giving one’s money away for the sake of being perceived as someone good or believing oneself someone good is clearly not praiseworthy in itself, he says, and it is instead much more interesting to seek to “give the poor the aid they most need,” which is rarely purely financial. Scott correctly observes that in the end, “Schulz’s ‘gotcha’ criticism cannot erode the lasting value of contextual reading.”

Lastly, Schulz is wrong when she claims that Thoreau is cherished as a role model by the whole of America. Among those who have read him, no doubt a shrinking minority in the Internet age, he has had his fair share of criticism over time, as much among people seemingly well established in a conventional way of living as among people who go out of the ready-traced path.⁴ The traveller and adventurer Bill Bryson, for example, has never been inspired by Thoreau’s experience, and has this to say in *A Walk in the Woods* (1998):

⁴ To readers interested in such pieces, I recommend reading Perry Miller’s *Consciousness in Concord* (1958), Richard Bridgman’s *Dark Thoreau* (1982), and Robert Louis Stevenson’s article “Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions” published in the June 1880 issue of *CornHill Magazine*.

The American woods have been unnerving people for 300 years. The inestimably priggish and tiresome Henry David Thoreau thought nature was splendid, splendid indeed, so long as he could stroll to town for cakes and barley wine, but when he experienced real wilderness, on a visit to (Mount) Katahdin in 1846, he was unnerved to the core. This wasn't the tame world of overgrown orchards and sun-dappled paths that passed for wilderness in suburban Concord, Massachusetts, but a forbidding, oppressive, primeval country that was 'grim and wild...savage and dreary,' fit only for 'men nearer of kin to the rocks and wild animals than we.' The experience left him, in the words of one biographer, 'near hysterical.' (62)

Although the United States proudly counts both Thoreau and Transcendentalism in its cultural heritage, neither of them are unanimously erected as paragons for the American nation. This paradox can be understood by investigating the fact that in addition to people who deliberately reject the Transcendentalist movement, there are numerous people who would like to follow these precepts but who turn away from Transcendentalism as they feel that they do not have either the possibility or the ability to do so.

II.3 – Reluctant Dismissal of Transcendentalism

A) Transcendentalism as a Luxury

As we know now, Transcendentalist proponents encourage people to shed luxury in their daily lives and to come back to a simpler and more natural way of living. In *Walden*, Thoreau exhorts people to keep their vital needs—which he identifies as food, shelter, clothing and fuel—to a strict minimum to be able to concentrate on what he calls the “true problems of life” without being dazzled by unnecessary lavishness (10). He asserts that “Many of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind . . . None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty” (12). Yet, this mode of living that Transcendentalism tends to could be considered a luxury itself, for at least two reasons. First, Schulz appropriately remarks that what Thoreau wanted to try, an experience that “we would call today subsistence living,” is “a condition attractive chiefly to those not obliged to endure it.” She puts *Walden* face to face with the work of Laura Ingalls Wilder, famous for her series of children books *Little House on the Prairie* in which she recounts her somewhat trying childhood in the Big Woods region of Wisconsin. Although the “battle” is not fair as Schulz presents Wilder’s work as an “excellent corrective” to *Walden* whereas Thoreau never pretended to write on the same impulse as that of Wilder, it is interesting to see that Wilder recalls growing up in such remoteness and in such precariousness as a harrowing experience a lot of the time, mainly because she did not have the choice to live otherwise anyway. We are quite far from Thoreau’s—or any Transcendentalist proponent’s for that matter—description of nature as benevolent, redemptive, and of subsistence living as fulfilling. Both can be so only if deliberately chosen

and not unwillingly suffered. Wilder probably would have liked to have the luxury to choose to enjoy only the enriching aspects of living in remote wilderness, and to go back to a more reassuring material comfort every time she would have gotten slightly tired of the experience of subsistence living.

Secondly, Transcendentalism does seem like an appealing movement to be part of for a good number of people, but many feel that they cannot live up to its standard because they do not have yet the minimal material security that would allow them the freedom to do so. Leading a contemplative life, rejecting or even fighting to overthrow a deeply rooted social, political or institutional system, spending time enriching oneself spiritually through meditation rather than going to earn a living unenthusiastically, taking a leap of faith to shun tradition and instead going for the unknown: these are so many aspects of Transcendentalism which demand a considerable risk, so much so that many of us do not see how such a risk could be taken at all, financially and materially speaking. Not all of us are born as privileged as Emily Dickinson who was able to choose to write poems over going to work at the textile factory. Not all of us, for being daily confronted with the physical and concrete realities of life, can fathom how one can bet it all without any material guarantee of success and expect anything else in the end than hardship, worries and trouble—least of all a warrant of personal fulfilment. Interestingly enough, the paradox—not to say the irony—of Transcendentalism praising anti-conformism and breaking free from rules is that the possibility for Transcendentalists to indulge in such a way of life relies on the necessity that other people get the “dirty work” done for them. They are heavily dependent on the bulk of society to carry out all the trivial tasks they seem to loathe. Emerson did need someone to spend their days assembling the different microphones he would use for his conferences about how people should live more poetic lives. Thoreau certainly did need someone to obediently make the suit he was wearing when strolling around Walden Pond, writing about how tailors should break

free from their trivial “making-selling” way of life. Dickinson undoubtedly needed someone to be relentlessly carving pencil mines every day for a living for her to be able to write all about how she “dwell[s] in possibility” in her eponymous poem (327). The didactic stance taken on by many Transcendentalist proponents exhorting people to adopt the principles of the movement intersects with this paradoxical reality, leading us to wonder whether Transcendentalists would really benefit from the whole of humanity emancipating themselves and acting according to their advice. The argument of the sustainability of the Transcendentalist way of life is certainly open to question, even among Transcendentalists themselves—let us remember that Emerson recognises in “The Transcendentalist” that there is no and can be no “pure transcendentalist” (197).

However, considering Transcendentalism as a luxury only on the ground that it is only available to the privileged would be a misconception of the movement. Transcendentalism is not just about shedding material comfort and going back to some kind of Edenic paradise by the force of one’s spirit, and yet this shortcut about Transcendentalism is too often taken by poor literary and cultural analyses found notably on the Internet nowadays. There is a lot more to Transcendentalism than that, as we saw in the first part of this study, and each one of us is free to take in it what can help him be fulfilled best. Therefore, rejecting Transcendentalism on this ground—that it is a luxury available to the privileged only—is either out of a misconception of the movement or out of a delusion as to one’s true ground for rejecting the movement, that being perhaps the fear of the freedom it seeks and commends. We saw that Transcendentalist proponents praise and value the freedom of modern man and exhort people to join in this individual or collective quest for freedom. It follows that there can be two major answers to this call: either people embrace their freedom and emancipate themselves living creatively, or they flee from it for fear of it.

B) Fear of Freedom

i) Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*

In *Escape from Freedom* published in 1941, Erich Fromm offers a valuable analysis of the meaning of freedom for modern man. With the aim of trying to understand why American society does not appear to follow the example of the Transcendentalists' quest for freedom, Fromm's work will be our basis to investigate the place that freedom holds in American democracy and the reasons why modern man is actually often prompted to relegate what he sees as the burden of his freedom to higher authorities.

Before all and in order to follow through on Fromm's analysis, we need to understand the major distinction that underlies the whole book: Fromm distinguishes between "negative freedom"—to be *freed from*—and "positive freedom"—to be *freed towards*—and claims that men are wrong to believe that the abolition of external domination is a sufficient condition to attain the cherished goal of the freedom of the individual (6). One of the main questions he ponders is whether or not the desire for freedom is inherent in human nature. It has been postulated at the beginning of this study that freedom is a priority for men, and that this makes it arresting to see that the American society appears to live contrarily to the Transcendentalist principles which could arguably help them in this quest. Fromm intends to demonstrate that the concept of freedom has somehow become a kind of empty shell for modern man, so much so that often, the latter believes himself to be seeking freedom whereas he is actually running in the opposite direction without always knowing it.

Earlier in this study, I painted quite a critical picture of the United States, portraying it as a consumerist, conformist and strongly materialist country—characteristics linked to its capitalist framework. However, Fromm reminds us that capitalism is not simply the evil that

some people believe it to be—it has actually been beneficial for modern man in many regards. It has freed man mentally, socially and politically from traditional bonds—enabling him to attain negative freedom—and has contributed significantly to offering him the potentialities to develop his positive freedom, by allowing him for the first time to “visualize a future in which the continual struggle for the satisfaction of material needs would cease” (97). However, Fromm explains that the main issue lies in the fact that these potentialities remain precisely theoretical potentialities only, whose actualisation is hindered by the reverse side of the capitalist system. Man quickly became the servant of the very machine he built. In the capitalist system in which success and material gains risk becoming ends in themselves (rather than means to a grander end such as happiness), the role that man has to assume—that is, subordinate his self and his life to the economic machine—may make him feel insignificant and powerless on the individual level (96). As a consequence, the self in the interest of which modern man acts is the social self, “a self which is essentially constituted by the role the individual is supposed to play” (101). The real self ends up frustrated, all the more so as the system gives the real self the illusion of being the centre of the world, but instead makes it feel less and less powerful. This explains notably what I would call the side issues of capitalism such as over-consumerism. As Fromm puts it, “The less he [man] believed himself to be somebody, the more he needed to have possessions” (104). Fromm sums up this whole idea by explaining that modern man in the United States may have been “freed from the bonds of preindividualistic society”—that is, he has gained negative freedom from the most obvious kinds of external domination (6)—but has not yet “gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities” (3).

It is only after understanding the psychological impact that capitalism can have on man that we can understand that the system only furthers insecurities and dilemmas that any

individual is bound to face at some point in his process of individuation. Fromm explains that the process of individuation—that is, breaking free from the primary ties which he defines as ties that exist “before the process of individuation has resulted in the complete emergence of an individual” (23)—is a normal part of human development. These primary ties can be found between parents and their infant, for instance. Freedom from these primary ties—negative freedom—gives man independence and rationality, but it can also leave him with an important feeling of aloneness and powerlessness as the primary ties were ties to be sure but reassuring ones. As Fromm puts it, “As long as one was an integral part of the world, unaware of the possibilities and responsibilities of individual action, one did not need to be afraid of it” (27). When he loses that comfort, man is brought face to face with the fact that it is now up to him to actualise his freedom entirely—to attain positive freedom, to find another way to connect to the world—and this responsibility can easily get overwhelming. Man can therefore choose two routes: either he can embrace his freedom through the full realisation of his self, or he can escape this burden by relinquishing his freedom to another entity—that is, he can try to contravene the anxiety of this responsibility by seeking security in an attempt to reverse the process of individuation. As this process can never be reversed, however, that last option is bound to propel him into new dependencies and to lead him to a result that is the opposite of the one wished for. The responsibility for one’s own freedom is already a big enough challenge, so when it happens in such a system as capitalism which on its own increases the feeling of man’s powerlessness, this challenge redoubles in difficulty. Capitalism, especially in the absence of labour unions, by isolating man and cutting most ties between one individual and another through individualistic activity, frustrated one of man’s vital needs: that of being related to others, to belong somewhere (18). That makes the process of individuation (which is always a process dependent on the kind of society one is born into) even more complicated as the system is obstructing it (27). Resulting from the insecurity of the isolated self, man too

often opts for different mechanisms of escape from a freedom he does not feel he can live up to.

Dostoevsky wrote in *The Karamazov Brothers* (1880) that “man has no more pressing need than to find someone to whom he can give up that gift of freedom with which he, unhappy being that he is, was endowed at birth” (319). In order to escape from having to bear the responsibility of his freedom, Fromm explains that man can “give up the independence of one’s own individual self and fuse one’s self with somebody or something outside oneself in order to acquire the strength the individual self is lacking” (121). He points notably at masochistic strivings—the tendency to belittle oneself and submit to outside forces—and sadistic strivings—the wish to make others dependent on oneself and have absolute power over them. These strivings show that suffering can be something sought for, not as an aim in itself, but as a means to the aim of forgetting oneself (132). By surrendering to another authority—be it external or internal—man is “saved from making decisions, saved from the final responsibility of the fate of his self, and thereby saved from the doubt of what the meaning of his life is” (133). However, only the conspicuous feeling of insecurity is eliminated, but the more profound underlying unhappiness remains. Man can alternatively cease to be himself by adopting a personality offered by cultural patterns and becoming like all others. By losing his self to conformity, he eliminates this discrepancy between himself and the world and thus eliminates his conscious fear of the overwhelming character of the outside world (158). This, Fromm explains, is the solution that the majority of individuals adopt in modern society. The most pernicious aspect of this is that wants, feelings and thoughts can be induced from the outside and yet be subjectively experienced as one’s own. Fromm offers a detailed explanation of how genuine thinking, feeling and willing can come to be replaced by pseudo thinking—rationalisation of opinions induced from the outside (164)—pseudo feeling—wearing the mask of what we are supposed to feel in a particular situation

(166)—and pseudo willing—persuading ourselves that “we make our own decisions whereas we actually conform with expectations of others” (169). As a consequence, the real self comes to be substituted by a pseudo-self, which only increases the insecurity and helplessness of the individual, and keeps the vicious circle running. This makes the relation of modern man to freedom a very complex one: as Fromm explains, “He would be free to act according to his own will, if he knew what he wanted, thought, and felt” (215). Fromm deplores the fact that the American system and culture foster this tendency of people to conform from a very young age, and makes it difficult for modern man to even realise that his impression to be a self-willing individual is only an illusion. Thus, Fromm deplores that “Behind a front of satisfaction and optimism, modern man is deeply unhappy” (215).

Fromm, however, is not at all hopelessly pessimistic about the situation. He insists that fleeing from one’s freedom is not the only path man can choose, and that he can instead attain positive freedom and reach a true feeling of fullness through the realisation of his real self through spontaneous activity—through free activity of the self in whatever domain it may be (218). However, it is a condition for this attainment that man be transparent to his own self and accept his own self unreservedly: only then can man unite himself anew with the world—with people and with nature—and “overcome the terror of aloneness without sacrificing the integrity of his self” (219). It is important to understand, Fromm notes, that the genuine growth of the self is always a growth on the basis of the uniqueness and peculiarity of the individual, and is therefore not a process whose aspects are identical for everybody (222). This echoes Thoreau’s concern that his readers should not conform to his own way of living—which he does not believe to be a role model in itself but simply the best way for him—and should rather find their own genuine way to let their true self be (*Walden* 58). Fromm ends his analysis with the subtle observation that “The cultural and political crisis of our day is not due to the fact that there is too much individualism but that what we believe to

be individualism has become an empty shell” (228). In other words, the issue does not lie in the whole concept of individualism, but in what we make of it. Individualism should not be cultivated as the separation of all ties between one individual and the other, but rather as the cultivation of the uniqueness of the self. It is in this last sense that Transcendentalism cherishes this concept, and therefore embodies the exaltation of positive freedom that Fromm exhorts us to aim at.

Escape from Freedom enables us to understand one of the main paradoxes underlying this study. On the one hand, Fromm claims as a fact that man can be truly happy only by attaining positive freedom, and we now know for a fact that Transcendentalism promises to help in the quest for positive freedom—Emerson notably defines poets as “liberating Gods” (“The Poet” 462). On the other hand, Fromm explains that freedom is a heavy responsibility to bear—especially positive freedom—and man can therefore easily get scared by it. From these different elements, we understand that even though man ultimately wants to be happy—if we are willing to rely on this Aristotelian premise—the price to pay for happiness (which is, bearing the responsibility of one’s freedom) is not a price that all men are willing to pay (be they conscious of it or not). Therefore, we can posit that most people who turn away from Transcendentalism do not do so because they do not want to join in the quest but because they do not feel able to.

ii) Fear of Freedom and the Enlightenment

Without minimising the value and the importance of Fromm’s work, it should be noted that his claim about the complex relation of man to his freedom is not new and had notably already been expressed in the Age of the Enlightenment. In his essay “What is Enlightenment?”, Immanuel Kant already pointed out that the main challenge for man was to

think, feel and act spontaneously and genuinely, without the guidance of any other authority than one's own self. Kant insists that man ought to emerge from his "self-imposed nonage," that is, from his "inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance."

Similar to Emerson's exhorting people to have an original—as in, self-induced—relation to the universe, Kant exhorts people to "Dare to Know"—*Sapere Aude*. Even though Kant is somewhat harsher than Fromm as he explains that "Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance," his argument is in accordance with Fromm's as he explains that on the surface, heteronomy is much more reassuring than autonomy, and that consequently freedom, however strongly cherished in theory, is not always sought for in practice. He illustrates his idea as follows: "If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on — then I have no need to exert myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take care of that disagreeable business for me." Kant furthers his argument by explaining that the logical consequence of indulging in this state of minority is that it makes it ridiculously easy for anyone yearning for power to "set themselves up as guardians" and to make sure that men do not ever seek to leave that state of minority they seem comfortable with:

Those guardians who have kindly taken supervision upon themselves see to it that the overwhelming majority of mankind . . . should consider the step to maturity not only as hard, but as extremely dangerous. First, these guardians make their domestic cattle stupid and carefully prevent the docile creatures from taking a single step without the leading-strings to which they have fastened them. Then they show them the danger that would threaten them if they should try to walk by themselves. Now this danger is really not very great; after stumbling a few times they would, at last, learn to walk.

It is therefore a real challenge for man not only to refuse to live under the thumb of a higher authority, but also to create the conditions for actualising his autonomy and making a creative force out of it. The major figures of the Enlightenment made it their challenge to emancipate themselves in that way, both for their own sake and for helping the rest of humanity to do the same, Kant explains. The Enlightenment, similarly to Transcendentalism, started with an iconoclastic dynamic, rejecting traditions and past authority on the basis that they mostly hindered new and original thoughts, and therefore blocked human development. Denis Diderot summarised accurately this spirit of iconoclasm of the philosophers of the Enlightenment in his *Encyclopédie*: “The eclectic is a philosopher who tramples upon prejudice, tradition, antiquity, universal consent, and authority—in short, upon anything that subjugates the minds of the masses. It is anyone who dares to think for himself, who goes back to the clearest general principles in order to examine and discuss them . . .”⁵ (qtd. in Delon 416). However, philosophers of the Enlightenment knew that rejecting what had been was not enough, and could not be a positive force without being accompanied by a process of restoration—that is, creating the conditions for man’s autonomy to be a constructive force. Paul Hazard explains in his work *La Crise de la Conscience Européenne* (in which he analyses the Age of the Enlightenment) that this process is a difficult one to set going. Man, being freed from restrictive ties and becoming aware of his freedom as his own responsibility, is left with a feeling of void and anxiety. The biggest challenge for man is thus to enter a constructive process after being done with the process of rejection, which echoes Fromm’s explanation about the difficulty of entering the quest for positive freedom. Therefore, similarly to what Fromm points out, Hazard explains that because the reconstruction part is difficult, the destruction part sometimes eclipses it and either leaves man clueless as to what

⁵ Translation by Michel Delon.

to do apart from indulging in that destructive process, or leaves him willing to revolt against the norms only in theory without seeming ready to do anything about it in practice.

It is interesting to see how Emersonian ideas and beliefs of the Enlightenment meet on the issue that man needs to shed outdated traditions and authorities in order to attain a more genuine fulfilment, all the more so as major figures of the Enlightenment expressed ideas quite opposite to those of Transcendentalism in many other regards. As we saw, they tended to set man apart from nature whereas Transcendentalism would have man completely integrated in Nature. Moreover, while most figures of the Enlightenment praised the predominance of experience, circumstances and reason as a guiding thread to understand the world, Transcendentalism rather favoured the power of thought, will and individual consciousness (Emerson, "The Transcendentalist" 193).

Fromm's analysis as well as ideas expressed during the Enlightenment shed light on the ambiguous meaning of freedom for modern man and help us understand better why in the modern era of capitalism especially, and more specifically in the United States, Transcendentalism can be rejected not necessarily deliberately, but also rather unconsciously, on the basis that it exhorts people to accept the tremendously scary responsibility of their own freedom, a responsibility worth bearing for their own sake and yet one that not everybody is willing to accept. One passage from the movie *Easy Rider* by Denis Hopper sums up both Fromm's and Kant's ideas in a more informal but widely accessible manner:

- You know this used to be a hell of a good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it.

- Man everybody got chicken, that's what happened. Hey we can't even get into like a second-rate hotel. I mean, a second-rate motel, you dig? They think we're going to cut their throat or something. They're scared man.

- Well they're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to them.
- Hey man, all we represent to them, man, is somebody who needs a haircut.
- Oh, no. What you represent to them is freedom.
- What the hell's wrong with freedom, man, that's what it's all about.
- Oh yeah, that's right. That's what it's all about, alright. But talking about it and being it, that's two different things. I mean it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're going to get real busy killing and maiming to prove to you that they are. Oh yeah, they're going to talk to you and talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom. But they see a free individual, it's going to scare 'em.
- Well, it don't make them running scared.
- No, it makes 'em dangerous.

Does all this mean that Transcendentalism was only a sort of aborted attempt at reaching positive freedom, a short-lived experience, favourable to a certain context at a given time only, but no longer viable in the socioeconomic framework of the United States of today? My answer is no. Although it was necessary that I endeavour in this second part to understand why the bulk of the American society seems to live in contradiction with the precepts and examples of their Transcendentalist heritage, one cannot pretend to reach valid conclusions if one does not go beyond the consideration of the United States as a monolith. It was imperative to consider this “group perspective” in order to have a global vision enabling us to understand where our representations of the United States stem from, and to understand the societal dynamic of the country in order then to be able to go from a general to a particular approach and to grasp accurately in what group dynamic the particular evolves. Now that we have a clearer idea of this group dynamic in the American society, we understand that it

makes it appear as if the country as a block rejected Transcendentalism either out of dissatisfaction with it or fear of it. However, to my research question “Why does the bulk of the American society seem to live in contradiction with the precepts and examples of its Transcendentalist heritage whereas the latter promises to free people from internal and external constraints?”, my answer rather lies in the fact that the global picture of the United States, which does not necessarily seem favourable to the presence of Transcendentalism for the various reasons that I covered, actually occults the fact that Transcendentalism is still very much present but has simply evolved over time. Far from having disappeared, it has rather found in its new scattered proponents multifarious subtle ways to be implemented.

III. Present-Day Transcendentalism

Many more people in the United States follow Transcendentalist principles and examples—without necessarily knowing that they are doing so—than one might think and that our representation of the country could lead us to believe. Only, these new proponents of Transcendentalism are not that easy to spot for at least two reasons.

As I demonstrated, Transcendentalism has never really been a movement of the mainstream but rather of the margins—a movement of the dissidents, the breakaways, the square pegs in the round holes, the non-conformist. It is therefore not easy to have one's opinions widely acknowledged when one is acting on these margins. Besides, Transcendentalist proponents seem and are rather scattered as they cannot be identified as one distinguishable group acting and thinking all together in a one-track dynamic or characterised by any unmovable measure of categorisation.

Moreover, although Transcendentalism has always rather been a movement of the margins, it was nevertheless still getting more “publicity” at its official beginnings than nowadays. One just has to look into the important number of conferences that Emerson gave across the United States to publicise and spread most of the core ideas of Transcendentalism during his life. This made the movement's adepts and proponents more easy to spot than as they could identify personally and publicly with such major guiding figures. As a consequence, media coverage—be it scholarly or not—has been tempted since then to define Transcendentalism as a movement of the nineteenth century and to confine it somehow to that period. It is therefore no wonder that the movement, thus presented as something of the past, appears today to be a dusty trend from which people have moved on. Interestingly enough however, these sources do not give any clear reason as to why the movement should have to be limited to the nineteenth century only: was it stifled? Did it crumble under its own weight?

Is it still alive today in another form? My answer lies in that last hypothesis.

Transcendentalism is still very much alive today, but it is hard to track down as it is now much more of a subconscious, ingrained phenomenon, and it is not necessarily recognised as such by its own proponents. We can posit that the term “Transcendentalism” was dropped after Emerson’s and Thoreau’s generation because it was no longer useful as it had found its place at last in the United States and had eventually become part of the country’s tradition.

The principles and beliefs themselves however are still vivid within a lot of individuals, each having emancipated their own self (or seeking to) and developed an “original relation to the universe” (Emerson, *Nature* 7). As the United States has evolved, ideas have been led to evolve as well, and today’s Transcendentalists not only identify with many of the founding Transcendentalist beliefs but also create some of their own individual ways, thus adding on to the ever-changing meaning of Transcendentalism.

In this last part, I will focus on three specific figures who each provide a window onto the significant presence of Transcendentalism in the American society nowadays on different levels. These case studies obviously do not constitute an exhaustive list of what Transcendentalism amounts to today, but the diversity of the examples selected and the particular-to-general—or rather private-to-public—organisation of my analysis intend to demonstrate that Transcendentalists are not restricted to a specific and distinct profile and that Transcendentalism can be found as much on the individual and personal level as on the more public and collective level.

III.1 – Transcendentalism in the Private Sphere: Christopher Johnson McCandless As an Offbeat Transcendentalist Wanderer

People nowadays can be inspired by Transcendentalism on a private and individual level, and have this inspiration pervade their personal experiences. With a focus on Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* (1996), I will argue that Krakauer's story is an interesting depiction of current-day Transcendentalism, drawing at the same time on core principles of the movement and bringing to the foreground other aspects typical of the evolution of the movement until today. The book merges influences of nineteenth-century Transcendentalist writings, wilderness literature such as Jack London's Alaska writings, as well as late twentieth-century "'road narratives' of the 'Beat generation' that sought to 'escape normative culture' and to 'live in the moment'" (Krehan 12). I will show that current day Transcendentalists are to be found notably amongst adventurers—or "pilgrims" as Krakauer puts it (85)—with a spiritual as much as a physical quest, for whom Transcendentalism is experienced as a healing process through a confrontation with the harshness of the wilderness enabling the excavation of the suffering. *Into the Wild* is mainly the biography of the young Christopher Johnson McCandless who, after graduating from college in May 1990, decided to cut all ties from his previous life and go on a two-year odyssey across North America "in search of raw, transcendent experience", as Krakauer explains in the author's note. Christopher ended his trip in Alaska in the derelict "Bus 142" and after living off the land for two months, he found death by starvation at the age of twenty-four after eating mouldy seeds. The book is written in a style similar to that of investigative journalism, bringing together Krakauer's interviews with Christopher's friends and family members, writings such as letters and journals by

Christopher himself, and parallels with other offbeat adventurers, including Krakauer's own climbing experience. The story could qualify as creative non-fiction where "factual information is mixed with speculation and augmented with narrative embellishments to make it read like a novel" (Krehan 5). It is important to keep in mind that Krakauer acknowledges in the author's note that in spite of his attempt to minimise his authorial presence throughout the book, he cannot altogether be an impartial biographer as Christopher's story "struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible." Although I tried to stay clear of Krakauer's subjectivity for the analysis of the story he narrates, it is still important to keep it in mind and understand it as a *mise en abyme* of his own Transcendentalist beliefs projected onto and increasing the weight of Christopher's Transcendentalist profile.

A) Parallels with Nineteenth Century Transcendentalism

i) The Luxury of Subsistence Living and Asceticism

At the beginning of the book, in the author's note, Krakauer defines Christopher as "a young man from a well-to-do East coast family" who highly admired and sought to emulate Leo Tolstoy for having "forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute." Even if Tolstoy is not affiliated to Transcendentalism, Christopher's admiration for such a character highlights the fact that Transcendentalism and its praise of subsistence living seems to appeal particularly to people who, ironically, have enough material security to take the risk to afford such a way of life. This appeal is embodied through Christopher's revealing move to burn all of his cash on departing for his trip (29), and is also exemplified in a letter he sent to Wayne Westerberg (his formal employer and friend he made on the road) after

working for him, in which he confesses that “Tramping is too easy with all this money. My days were more exciting when I was penniless and had to forage around for my next meal” (qtd. in Krakauer 33). Similarly, when another friend he made during his trip, Ronald Franz (whose name has been changed in the book on his request), exhorts him to get a job and “make something out of his life,” Christopher makes it plain that he lives the way he does not by default but by choice: “You don’t need to worry about me. I have a college education. I’m not destitute. I’m living like this by choice” (qtd. in Krakauer 51).

Living with nothing but the essential was a mind-set that Christopher had developed long before he left for his two-year trip. His father, Walt, explains that “Chris was very much of the school that you should own nothing except what you can carry on your back at a dead run” (qtd. in Krakauer 32). Christopher’s wish to emulate Thoreau’s asceticism showed notably in the way he kept his student room as “orderly and spotless as a military barracks” with nothing more than “a thin mattress on the floor, milk crates and a table” (22). Such moral rigor did not leave much room for lighter pursuits. “He was what you’d call extremely ethical,” recalls Wayne, “he set pretty high standards for himself” (qtd. in Krakauer 18). The inspiration he took from Tolstoy and Thoreau on that matter led him to “measure himself and those around him by an impossibly rigorous moral code” (122) that not only usually beggared common understanding but also did not correspond to the code that the bulk of society followed.

ii) Resisting Traditional Rules and Authority

In the same fashion that nineteenth century Transcendentalists were not satisfied with the status quo or the influence of antiquated—almost anachronistic—authority, Christopher was not content with a significant number of established rules he deemed irrelevant, be they

social, legal or academic. Although Christopher was “a high achiever in almost everything that caught his fancy,” he did not let his abilities overshadow his non-conformism. Attaining A’s in almost every subject at school, he once brought home the only F of his curriculum because he had deliberately decided to ignore his physics teacher’s requirement that students write their lab reports in a particular format, believing it to be a stupid rule (110). Similarly, he was a gifted French-horn player as a teen in the American University Symphony but suddenly quit after “objecting to rules imposed by a high school band leader” (110). In sports as well, in spite of the fact that he “had so much natural talent,” his father deplores that “if you tried to coach him, to polish his skill, to bring out that final ten percent, a wall went up. He resisted instruction of any kind . . . The only way he cared to tackle a challenge was head-on, right now, applying the full brunt of his extraordinary energy” (qtd. in Krakauer 111). Christopher resisted the mainstream American lifestyle with the same intensity, notably the job system. Krakauer explains that when Christopher’s parents encouraged him to get a college degree in order to accomplish a fulfilling career, he “answered that careers were ‘demeaning twenty-first century inventions’, more of a liability than an asset, and that he would do fine without one” (114). The concept of external authority which he was so virulently opposed to found its main embodiment in the parental figures, which shows in a letter he wrote to his sister Carine shortly before he departed:

Since they won’t ever take me seriously, for a few months after graduation I’m going to let them think they are right . . . that I’m “coming around to see their side of things” and that our relationship is stabilizing. And then, once the time is right, with one abrupt, swift action I’m going to completely knock them out of my life. I’m going to divorce them as my parents once and for all and never speak to either of those idiots again as long as I live. I’ll be through with them once and for all, forever. (64)

Christopher's antagonism towards his parents was intensified when he found out about family secrets about his father's former life that, in his opinion, made his own life appear as a fraud. This antagonism parallels Fromm's explanation about the difficulty for one to accept that one's chosen ideal, or "magic helper," is not perfect and is bound to be disappointing at some point (Fromm 149). Christopher submitted to his parents' authority through college while raging inside, but eventually rebelled as he promised himself he would, "and when he finally did, it was with characteristic immoderation" (Krakauer 64).

iii) Intensity of Character and Transcendentalist Idealism

Krakauer explains in the author's note that on leaving for his odyssey, Christopher donated all of his 24-thousand-dollar savings to the charity OXFAM⁶, abandoned his car and changed his name to Alexander Supertramp, ready to invent "a new life for himself, taking up residence out at the ragged margins of our society, wandering across America in search of raw, transcendent experience." Christopher's move was his own way of constructing his own relation to the universe, as Emerson advised. "He was an extremely intense young man and possessed a streak of idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence," Krakauer tells us, and his school friend Andy Horowitz adds that he was "looking for more adventure and freedom than today's society gives people" (qtd. in Krakauer 174). As Fromm explains, one's process of individuation always happens within the limits set by the society one is born into (17), and Christopher seemed aware of these limitations and was obviously unable to harmoniously become a fully-fledged individual within these social boundaries. His frustration with these limitations is illustrated in a passage he highlighted from Tolstoy's

⁶ Oxford Committee for Famine Relief

Family Happiness that was recovered among his possessions: “I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger . . . I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet life” (qtd. in Krakauer 15).

On the one hand, Christopher’s “superabundance of energy” went hand in hand with a frustration with society’s incapacity to fulfil his yearnings, but on the other hand, it also found satisfaction in his relation in symbiosis with nature and his passion for adventuring into the unknown. Christopher’s fervour and uncompromising intensity is exemplified in the following letter he wrote to his friend Ronald Franz in April 1990. This letter is probably the most blatant display of how Christopher’s spirit mirrored that of nineteenth-century Transcendentalism:

I'd like to repeat the advice that I gave you before, in that I think you really should make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may previously never have thought of doing, or been too hesitant to attempt. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun . . . You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living . . . Ron, I really hope that as soon as you can you will get out of

Salton city . . . You will see things and meet people and there is much to learn from them. And you must do it economy style, no motels, do your own cooking, as a general rule spend as little as possible and you will enjoy it much more immensely. I hope that the next time I see you, you will be a new man with a vast array of new adventures and experiences behind you. Don't hesitate or allow yourself to make excuses. Just get out and do it. Just get out and do it. You will be very, very glad that you did. (qtd. in Krakauer 56)

Mixed with the late twentieth-century influence of the Beat Generation for whom a nomadic life on the road established itself as the “must-do”, Christopher’s letter practically sings Transcendentalist ideals in every line. It exhorts Franz to refuse the status quo and engage in an original relation to the world around him to attain genuine happiness. It encourages Franz to tackle the unknown and therefore to choose change and adventure over tradition and security. It reveals a pantheistic tendency similar to Emerson’s belief that the Over-Soul was to be found everywhere in nature and in each human being. It advocates economical and frugal living so as to be able to focus one’s mind on the essentials of life. Finally, the whole point of this letter is to lecture Franz about his sedentary way of living and to prompt him to undertake active action to remediate that, an impulse typical of nineteenth-century Transcendentalists who tried to use their own meditations for enlightening others and “getting them out of Plato’s cave.”

Christopher’s inspiration from Transcendentalism is also blatant in a comment he made in his own journal about “Deliberate Living,” which he defined as “Conscious attention to the basics of life, and a constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns . . . (Circumstance has no value. It is how one relates to a situation that has value. All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you)” (qtd. in

Krakauer 168). This comment echoes Emerson's lecture "The Transcendentalist" in which he insists that Transcendentalist idealism is opposed to the importance that materialism attaches to circumstance (193). It also echoes Emerson's claim that the world is only an appearance, and that the mind—and by extension, our interpretation of and relation to the world—is the supreme reality (193). In that same journal entry, Christopher insisted on the "Insurpassable Joy of the Life Aesthetic" (qtd. in Krakauer 168), which is in line with a letter he sent to Wayne on arriving in Alaska, in which he revealed he would "live this life for some time to come. The freedom and simple beauty of it is just too good to pass up" (qtd. in Krakauer 92). In order to better understand Christopher's fascination for beauty, Krakauer makes a parallel with the young Everett Ruess who, like Christopher, went to live into the wild in the 1930s, never to be found again, but driven by an insatiable enthrallment for beauty. Krakauer sheds light on this fascination with the help of Wallace Stegner's analysis:

What Everett Ruess was after was beauty, and he conceived beauty in pretty romantic terms. We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there were not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it . . . If we laugh at Everett Ruess we shall have to laugh at John Muir, because there was little difference between them except age. (qtd. in Krakauer 87)

This fascination for beauty echoes Emerson's manifesto of Transcendentalism, *Nature*, in which he explains that ultimate beauty can be found in man being able to *see* nature, and that this very perception of nature's beauty is necessary to man's happiness (16). Christopher's intensity of character was observable not only in his words and ambitions, but also in his actions—as such, he walked within the steps of his Transcendentalist fathers who were not only skilful talkers but also active doers.

iv) Dreaming Genius, Active Doer

Christopher's relatives described him as "good at almost everything he tried" (118), a sort of genius born "with unusual gifts" (106), but with a dreaming personality that sometimes left him a bit out of touch with reality (83). This shows notably in the vision he had about his last big adventure, that to live off the land in the Alaskan wilderness. Krakauer explains that

In coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map. In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map—not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma: He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would remain *incognita*. (174)

McCandless, in order to live out his dream to be "lost in the wild", chose a derelict bus thirty miles away from a highway, sixteen from the highly visited Denali National Park's main road and six from four rangers' cabins. "Ironically," Krakauer comments, "the wilderness surrounding the bus . . . scarcely qualifies as wilderness by Alaska standards" (165), which reminds us of Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond. However, Krakauer insists that "despite the relative proximity of the bus to civilization, for all practical purposes McCandless was cut off from the rest of the world." This clarifies the importance for Christopher not necessarily to be remote but rather to feel remote, and this reminds us once more that for Transcendentalists, "All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon" (Christopher McCandless qtd. in Krakauer 168).

Nevertheless, Christopher was not simply about indulging into wild dreams and fantasies: he precisely lived them out and "walked his talk." As Stegner said about Ruess, and

as could be equally said of Christopher, “the peculiar thing about Everett Ruess was that he went out and did the things he dreamed about, not simply for a two-weeks’ vacation in the civilized and trimmed wonderlands, but for months and years in the very midst of wonder. . .” (qtd. in Krakauer 90). In spite of these characters’ inner contradictions, one thing that cannot be denied is that “At least they tried to follow their dreams,” admits Ken Sleight, who had been researching on Everett Ruess and was equally interested in the McCandless story, “that’s what was great about them. They tried. Not many do” (qtd. in Krakauer 96).

v) Complexity and Contradictions

The different sides of Christopher’s personality completed one other to a point so baffling that his character was actually more complex and eventually contradictory than coherent and consistent. Krakauer lets us know that he could be as private as he could be gregarious, as moralising as he could be entertaining, as generous and caring as he could be impatient and self-absorbed (115, 120). One of Christopher’s great ambivalences—which is typical of many Transcendentalists—was that he seemed to seek solitude as much as he seemed to need contact with other people. Christopher, in February 1991, wrote in his journal that he had arrived in Los Angeles and intended to “get an ID and a job but feels extremely uncomfortable in society now and must return to road immediately” (qtd. in Krakauer 37). When his friend Ronald Franz, old enough to be his grandfather, suggested that he could adopt him, Christopher deferred the request and left for Alaska, “relieved that he had again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it,” according to Krakauer (55). In his fashion, he was “fleeting out of their [people’s] lives before anything was expected of him” (55). In the same vein, chastity was a value that Christopher held in high regard. In his copy of *Walden*, he had circled the

passage stating that “Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it” (qtd. in Krakauer 66). This Thoreauvian influence encouraged him to “embrace wilderness with single-minded passion” and to convince himself that what he found in nature superseded what amorous contact could have possibly given him—that his yearning was “too powerful to be quenched by human contact” anyway (66). However, in spite of the fact that he needed solitude, “he wasn’t antisocial,” his sister Carine clarified, “he always had friends, and everybody liked him” (qtd. in Krakauer 107). Moreover, he did believe that there was much to learn from other people, as he confessed in the letter he wrote to his friend Franz (58). But beyond that, he also wished to share his experience with others, not out of mere pride or condescension, but well and truly for the sake of sharing. He did not shy away from telling his stories to whomever was willing to listen to him, and even confessed to Wayne that he intended to write a book about his travels someday (66).

Another baffling paradox of the young man was the relation he had to money. Christopher did not hide his aversion to money and wealth which he believed were corrupt and debased. He also “took life’s inequities to heart” and made sure to take action in his own way, taking classes addressing social issues such as “racism and world hunger and inequities in the distribution of wealth” (123) and blending in with underprivileged people in his spare time, “chatting with prostitutes and homeless people, buying them meals, earnestly suggesting ways they might improve their lives,” hosting vagrants when he could (113). Yet, he did not identify with liberal ideas and, far from affiliating to the Democratic Party, he was instead a strong supporter of Ronald Reagan and co-founded the “College Republican Club” in his University years (123). Moreover, his mother explains that he had always been an “entrepreneur” since as early as eight years old, trying to make money from selling goods and services, not for need of it but for the fun of it (115). This echoes the paradox that the

Transcendentalists' emancipation came along with and was dependent on the rise of capitalism and industrialisation, concepts that they otherwise seemed to reject so ardently.

vi) Criticism

Just as Transcendentalism is either praised or mocked, emulated or criticised, Christopher's story was received in various ways. "Some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity," Krakauer explains in the author's note. The criticism he received sounds a lot like Schulz's criticism of Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond. In a letter that Krakauer received, a reader despised Christopher's "arrogance" and his "contrived asceticism," comparing him to a "histrionic highschool kid" who "lacked the requisite humility," eventually concluding that "his ignorance is what killed him" (qtd. in Krakauer 71). Such harsh criticism is puzzling when we consider the fact that Christopher did not want to have anything to do with anyone. Roman, a teacher at Alaska Pacific University, suggests that "There are plenty of other Alaskans who had a lot in common with McCandless when they first got here, too, including many of his critics. Which is maybe why they're so hard on him. Maybe McCandless reminds them a little too much of their former selves" (qtd. in Krakauer 186). Krakauer backs up this hypothesis of bitter nostalgia by insisting on "how difficult it is for those of us preoccupied with the humdrum concerns of adulthood to recall how forcefully we were once buffeted by the passions and longings of youth" (186). Also, this criticism sends us back to the freedom speech in the movie *Easy Rider* in which the main character argues that offbeat individuals such as Christopher represents freedom to people, and that for many, seeing a free individual brings them face to face with their own complex—and often frustrating—relation to freedom, and thus makes them scared, if not dangerous. To

one of Christopher's critics arguing that "McCandless was hardly unique; there's quite a few of these guys hanging around the state, so much alike that they're almost a collective cliché" (qtd. in Krakauer 71), Krakauer answers that Christopher was not a stereotypical drifter nor some "feckless slacker, adrift and confused, racked by existential despair. To the contrary: His life hummed with meaning and purpose" (184). Christopher was not a "fraud," but well and truly a pilgrim, a late Transcendentalist of the turn of the century.

B) Transcendentalism as a Healing Process

"We have in America 'The Big Two-Hearted River' tradition: taking your wounds to the wilderness for a cure, a conversion, a rest, or whatever. And as in the Hemingway story, if your wounds aren't too bad, it works. But this isn't Michigan . . . This is Alaska."

(Edward Hoagland, "Up the Black to Chalkyitsik" 250)

Christopher's experience epitomises one pattern of current-day Transcendentalism: that of experiencing Transcendentalism as a healing process characterised by not only a spiritual quest, but also an important physical quest. This physical quest, meant to overcome the suffering, is characterised both by a sort of cult of hardship, the wish to push oneself beyond one's limits, and by one's confrontation to the harshness of the wilderness in order to emerge stronger and mended from this experience, connected to the basics and essentials of life.

i) Physical Quest: Looking for Hardship

On arriving at the derelict Bus 142 in Alaska in which he chose to live for a while, Christopher engraved the following in the bus's interior: "All hail the Dominant Primordial Beast! And Captain Ahab too! Alexander Supertramp, May 1992" (38). These references to Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* reveal Christopher's fascination with the harsh side of nature. In both stories, the main character is confronted to the harshness of the elements, driven by an inner desire to fulfil his quest. However, Melville, in his novel, intended to display that the extreme to which his character yields—the drifts of wishing to be a pure Transcendentalist despite the impossibility of this wish—can lead to disastrous consequences. Christopher seemed to be drawn by the same kind of extreme, which left him completely heedless of personal safety. His father recalls that Christopher "didn't think the odds applied to him. We were always trying to pull him back from the edge" (qtd. in Krakauer 109). Moreover, Christopher was "undeterred by physical discomfort; at times he seemed to welcome it" (92). This intensity, this discontentment with the mere middle-ground, this longing—this need—for excess, his fellow-adventurer Everett Ruess felt it as well: "I had some terrific experiences in the wilderness . . . overpowering, overwhelming. But then I am always being overwhelmed. I require it to sustain life" (qtd. in Krakauer 91). Just like Ruess, Christopher's intensity found its climax in the wilderness.

In studying Christopher's story, Krakauer notably wanted to study "the grip wilderness has on the American imagination," he explains in his author's note. Christopher's goal in going to Alaska was to get lost in the wild and "live off the land for a few months" (4). But Gallien, the Alaskan truck-driver who gave Christopher his last ride, insists that "living in the bush is no picnic" (qtd. in Krakauer 5). He notes that "Alaska has always been a magnet for dreamers and misfits," but that substantially, "the bush is an unforgiving place that cares

nothing for hopes or longings” (qtd. in Krakauer 4). This, however—“peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation”—was precisely what Christopher was seeking, as Krakauer explains in his note. However, we understand that even though he knew how harsh and rough the wilderness could be, his very vision of the redeeming power of living in such conditions was somehow romanticised. “Jack London is King,” he carved in a piece of wood next to the bus (9). Krakauer notes that Christopher was

so enthralled by these [London’s] tales, however, that he seemed to forget they were . . . constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London’s romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness. McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself had spent just a single winter in the North and that he’d died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print. (44)

Surely Christopher knew about London’s paradoxes, yet “To a self-possessed young man inebriated with the unfolding drama of his own life, all of this held enormous appeal” (138). For Roderick Nash, the fact that Christopher’s romanticised vision of his own life—which showed notably in the way he would automatically use the third person in his journals or his engravings throughout his trip, as to become the main protagonist of the “drama of his own life”—culminated in his wilderness experience is no surprise. Wilderness, he explains, offers “an ideal stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul” (qtd. in Krakauer 157). Christopher, however, did not get lost in the wild only to indulge in self-centred fantasies the bush would have exacerbated, but truly to “discover the inner country of his own soul” (183) in addition to the outer land around him (183). Nature,

for Christopher, provided a refuge that would help him find answers to his existential questions.

ii) Spiritual Quest: Looking for a Purpose

Christopher, through his quest into American land and of his inner-soul, was looking for ultimate freedom, and just as Fromm explains, he first went through the process of completing his negative freedom—*freedom from*—before being able to attain his positive freedom—*freedom to*. Christopher saw his trip as an epic odyssey that would “change everything” (22), that would enable severance from his previous life with which he was deeply dissatisfied. According to Gallien, it is no wonder that Christopher decided to elect Alaska as the ultimate receptacle for this longing, as it is typical of the place to appeal to people who think that “the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives” (qtd. in Krakauer 4). On arriving at Bus 142, he engraved the following declaration of independence in a piece of wood within the bus:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyageur whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, ‘cause “the West is the best.” And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the great white North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild. (qtd. in Krakauer 163)

However, thus freed from the initials chains that blocked him, Christopher needed to submit to some other kind of authority while waiting to find his own balance. He seemed aware of that as he highlighted the following extract in his copy of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* that he had brought along with him:

Everything had changed suddenly—the tone, the moral climate; you didn't know what to think, whom to listen to. As if all your life you had been led by the hand like a small child and suddenly you were on your own, you had to learn to walk by yourself. There was no one around, neither family nor people whose judgment you respected. At such a time you felt the need of committing yourself to something absolute—life or truth or beauty—of being ruled by it in place of the man-made rules that had been discarded. You needed to surrender to some such ultimate purpose more fully, more unreservedly than you had ever done in the old familiar, peaceful days, in the old life that was now abolished and gone for good. (qtd. in Krakauer 103)

Submitting wholeheartedly to such an absolutism could have been just another way of escaping his freedom. However, during his two months in Bus 142, this commitment was gradually replaced by an open-mindedness that would enable him to call into question his inflexible principles and break free of this absolutism as well. He groped around, looking for a purpose, trying to understand where or in what real meaning resided. Eventually, his dawn came upon realising that all the experiences he had lived could be fulfilling in the utmost only if shared. He discovered that what he was after was actually not the rejection of companionship, but instead companionship through which his passion would resonate and which would make him feel complete. He highlighted the following passage in Leo Tolstoy's *Family Happiness*:

I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one's neighbor—such is my idea of happiness. And then, on top of all that, you for a mate, and children perhaps—what more can the heart of man desire? (qtd. in Krakauer 169)

The mention of genuine love and meaningful work as keys to happiness parallels Fromm's idea that these are two of the major components enabling the spontaneous realisation of the self through which positive freedom can be attained (Fromm 220). The day after he finished Tolstoy's book, Christopher attempted to depart Bus 142—to go back to civilisation after understanding he needed human contact, one can speculate. However, to do so, he had to cross the same river he crossed upon first coming to the bus; only this time, the river had grown so big that the crossing was impossible. Christopher had to go back to the bus, disheartened, stating in his journal that he was "lonely, scared" (qtd. in Krakauer 170) and that he had "literally become trapped in the wild" (qtd. in Krakauer 195). Only after finding the purpose and meaning he was looking after so ardently did he come to experience the severance from society as a suffering. After ingesting mouldy seeds, he was intoxicated and his shape deteriorated so alarmingly that he understood he would probably not be able to survive much longer. In a leap of faith, he posted a note for help on the bus's door pleading whoever would come by to save him (12). He signed with his real name instead of the alias Alexander Supertramp he had been using throughout his trip. That simple move suggests that he was finally at peace with his real self. But nobody came by that day, and Christopher

understood that nobody would do so later either. Next to *Doctor Zhivago*'s extract "And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness . . . And this was most vexing of all" (qtd. in Krakauer 189), he inscribed "Happiness only real when shared" (qtd. in Krakauer 189). Before dying, he wrote a goodbye note in which he confessed: "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord, goodbye and may God bless all" (qtd. in Krakauer 199). From all the evidence he left, he died fulfilled from having brought to its quest the ultimate meaning he was seeking. His whole odyssey revolved around trying to be free, finding a purpose to life and seeking to understand the meaning of it, and he did eventually—he understood, after two years of peregrinations, that for him, positive freedom, purpose and meaning laid in realising that happiness is only real when shared. Christopher's story, far from being that of a fiasco, is instead truly that of a success.

Through the analysis of Christopher's story, I hope to have demonstrated that the young man, by combining a spiritual quest for meaning and purpose with a physical quest for redeeming hardship in the wilderness, while drawing on core Transcendentalist principles of the nineteenth century, is a telling example of the persistence of Transcendentalism nowadays. However, beyond the individual level—beyond the private and personal scope of Transcendentalism—current-day Transcendentalism can be observed just as much on the more popular and collective level.

III.2 – Transcendentalism in the Cultural Sphere: Terrence

Malick As a Transcendentalist Artist

“I heard that you ask’d for something to prove this puzzle, the New World.”

(Whitman, “To Foreign Lands”)

Transcendentalism can be experienced not only on a personal level but also expressed as a work of art, as an invitation for everyone to share the experience. This is Terrence Malick’s approach, an example of twenty-first century Transcendentalism. Through his movies, the seventy-two-year-old American filmmaker manages to transfer his Transcendentalist ideals into a creative talent, both liberating on the personal level and inviting on the cultural, popular level. In this part, we will focus on his 2005 movie *The New World*, a romantic historical drama taking us back to 1607 and depicting the American pioneers’ founding of the Jamestown settlement in the Colony of Virginia, on the land of the Powatan Native American Tribe. I will explain how this movie can be considered a Transcendentalist movie, and explore how Malick exhibits, adapts and reworks what could easily be considered Transcendentalist clichés.

A) Connection to the Land

The first and probably most obvious connection between Malick and the Transcendentalist tradition is the way he portrays the human relation to the land. In his other movies, the human relation to nature is also present, but only as a background to the main story. In *The New World*, it is at the heart of the plot. François Bovier, in a 2007 article in the magazine *Décadrages*, explains that Malick wants to highlight two different kinds of human connection

to the land: that of the pioneers, and that of the primitive Indian society. Malick puts face to face the harmonious relationship of the primitive man to the nourishing land and the poor behaviour of the pioneers who attempt to submit the land to their desire and to domesticate nature (65). In other words, he opposes two conceptions of nature: that of nature as subject for the natives, and that of nature as object for the pioneers (68). Malick's depiction of the natives' healthy relation to their land shows from the film's opening scene—a pure, innocent and happy scene where an Indian couple is swimming in the river, a voice over conveying the idea of a spirit filling the world with beauty. Throughout the movie, body and nature are explored similarly in the native tribe, the one being part of the other. This echoes Emerson's pantheism as expressed in *Nature*:

The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other . . . His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food . . . In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows . . . Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God . . . The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. (10-11)

Malick's praise of life in the outdoors, which is a typical Transcendentalist approach to nature, also echoes Whitman when he confesses in "Song of the Open Road" that "Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons, / It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth" (123). Malick's depiction of the natives' connection to the land is described by Bovier as an ecological fantasy, reviving the ideal of an economy based on giving and the

pooling of resources, exempt from the modern civilisation's enslaving dynamics of money (68). English Captain John Smith confesses at one point in the movie that money is "the source of all evil. It excuses vulgarity, makes wrong right, base noble." Contrary to the harmonious and balanced relationship that the primitive tribe has with the land, the pioneers, as soon as they arrive, regard the land as something to possess, to master, something either to conquer or to retain. As they deal with the land as something to assuage their cupidity as they spend their days drilling for gold instead of entertaining a balanced relationship with the land, their greed progressively leads them to their doom as the fort they build upon arriving slowly turns into their tomb.

Protagonist Captain John Smith is an interesting and complex character as he wants to break free from the norms of Western society which he thinks is corrupt and whose rules he no longer respects, while having trouble shedding altogether his background. Smith regards his mission as the opportunity to create a new egalitarian society fuelled by solidarity and fraternity, as he thinks to himself:

We shall make a new start. A fresh beginning. Here the blessings of the earth are bestowed upon all. None need grow poor. Here there is good ground for all and no cost but one's labour. We shall build a true commonwealth, hard work and self-reliance our virtues. We shall have no landlords to rack us with high rents or extort the fruit of our labour. No man shall stand above any other, but all live under the same law.

This Transcendentalist yearning parallels the impulse behind the founding of Brook Farm in the 1840s and also echoes Whitman's poem "For You O Democracy":

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
 With the love of comrades,
 With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores
of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other's necks,
 By the love of comrades,
 By the manly love of comrades. (99)

Smith, contrary to his fellow pioneers, quickly feels in communion with this "New World," notably during his stay with the native tribe, in which he is first kept a prisoner but where, ironically, he actually feels freer than ever. As he learns to understand the land more and more, he goes through a sort of initiation rite, or rite of passage: he sheds all material goods in order to take up with his genuine self again (Bovier 68). "Deeper. Into the wild. Start over. Exchange this false life for a true one. Give up the name of Smith," we hear him think to himself. One can easily make the parallel between Smith's wish to give up his name in this scene and Christopher McCandless's desire to choose the alias "Alexander Supertramp" over his birth name as he begins his own initiatory trip. Eventually, it is through love that Smith will be truly awakened to a life in perfect union with nature, the two themes being inextricably linked in Malick's movie. In love he will find his truth, through love he will feel free: "Love. Shall we deny it when it visits us? Shall we not take what we are given? There is only this. All else is unreal," he ponders. Through love, he will transcend his condition—not

only his Western condition, but even his human condition. This transcendence is served notably by Malick's skilful use of unconventional visual and sound codes which exhort us to think beyond our classic human perception of events.

B) Decentring Our Common Visual Perception

As Jean-Michel Durafour explains in the magazine *Cadrage* in a 2008 article about Malick's visual choices in *The New World*, the filmmaker does not rely on human landmarks which usually give structure to the anthropomorphic narration (1). He wants to decentre our perception, to provide us with a visual experience that goes beyond our common human understanding—that transcends our human condition (4). This perceptual deconstruction, this new aesthetic experience where landmarks are overturned is all the more interesting as it corresponds to the pioneers' new experience, a new discovery of the "New World" (3). With this perceptual deconstruction, as well as with several small deliberate jump cuts in scenes where the eyes have a major role, Malick wants to warn us that the look, be it that which the characters exchange or that of the audience, is something one should be wary of (5). Refusing both a classic and transparent perception as well as an "over-modern" approach to filming that would purposefully highlight the artificiality of the movie, Malick tries yet another approach which favours a constant decentring of perception in order to encourage the subjective experience of the very act of looking, up to the point where the act of looking at the world merges with that of being looked at by the world (3). That is precisely what Malick is looking for: the entrenchment of the world within man, a perception that encourages the audience to stop looking and to contemplate instead—that, is, etymologically, to be seen by the world (2). Only contemplation and looking no longer with the eyes but with the soul can enable us to unite with what Emerson calls the Over-Soul and with nature, which see us as we truly are

and not as we would like to appear (2). The very idea of transcendence is therefore expressed through Malick's deconstruction of our common visual perception, but also through his use of sounds and music.

C) Finding a Universal Language: Voice-Over, Music and Synaesthesia

Malick's Transcendentalist ideals are skilfully transmitted to the audience through his use of voices and music as vehicles for these beliefs. Throughout the movie, Malick makes extensive use of voice-over: voices that cannot be heard—but only “felt”—by the characters of the movie. These voices, whose lyricism parallels the free verse of Walt Whitman's poems, contribute greatly to the musicality of the movie and to its aesthetic impact (Bovier 69). Through them, Malick praises the communion with nature and with one another through a language which is not that of the verbal sphere, but proper to a spiritual sphere beyond our usual medium of communication. The movie opens with an inviting feminine voice-over: “Come, spirit. Help us sing the story of our land.” We later recognise this voice as that of the protagonist Pocahontas, an Indian native, which may be disturbing as the voice speaks in a perfect English, at a point where Pocahontas has not learnt anything of this language yet. However, Alain Boillat, in his 2007 article in the magazine *Décadrages*, offers an interesting analysis of this incongruity: Pocahontas's apparent glossolalia is, he says, only the translation for the audience of a thought that does not need verbal language whatsoever to enjoy a direct contact with nature (16). In line with Malick's pantheist approach, the voice merges with the environment: it is as much everywhere as it is nowhere in particular. Similarly, upon arriving to the “New World,” Smith's voice-over expressing his hopes concerning this new land is not so much the fruit of him engaging in a careful reflexion as it is presented as the manifestation of nature itself speaking through him (18). The voice wonders “Who are you, whom I so

faintly hear? Who urge me ever on? . . . What voice is this that speaks within me, guides me towards the best?” Voice-over, or even internal monologues, are also very important in the romance between Pocahontas and Smith: for lack of a common language, their two hearts can only lay themselves bare and reveal their true colours to one another through these inner words. In doing so, the two lovers speak their hearts by turns as if they were connected in the same spiritual space (18). These voices, immaterial, floating, can be considered in Emerson’s words as the manifestation of the Over-Soul, with which they are able to connect within their own selves and which reveals itself so self-evidently for the other to be able to connect with it as well. Their understanding of one another within this spiritual space rather than in a classic spatiotemporal dimension is magnified by the lack of any spatiotemporal landmarks through the elliptical editing of their scenes together. Interestingly, this harmonious communication between them can be so only precisely because the two lovers lack a common verbal language. Boillat describes Malick’s primitive land, connected to the spiritual realm, as a land “pre-Babel,” in which the English language—less noble, corrupt even—cannot fit harmoniously (17). Ironically, it is once Pocahontas is acquainted with the English language and when they start sharing their thoughts out loud that their relationship starts to wither (18). At the beginning of the movie, the voice-over makes plain the unfathomable “transparency of consciences,” but the power of this absolute internalisation weakens when Pocahontas becomes familiar with the English language and with the conventions which externalise all meaning, stripping her from her rooting in the land in favour of an open and verbally worded socialisation (19). In *Nature*, Emerson ponders upon that same relation between different types of languages and how they relate to the natural world:

Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures . . . This immediate

dependence of language upon nature, this conversion of an outward phenomenon into a type of somewhat in human life, never loses its power to affect us . . . Thus is nature an interpreter, by whose means man converses with his fellow men. A man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon his love of truth, and his desire to communicate it without loss. The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. (22)

As soon as the audience realises that many aspects of the pioneers' language and culture cannot harmoniously fit within Malick's primitive world, the latter inexorably appears as a paradise lost, in which Smith and Pocahontas strike one as a new Adam and Eve, bound to be separated from the very moment they meet (Bovier 60). Both Smith & Pocahontas turn away from this Eden—Smith by favouring his Western obligations over the possibility of a pure wisdom and life, and Pocahontas by indirectly choosing Smith over her tribe, through the help she offers him when the two peoples are at war. Pocahontas is thus banished from this Eden by her own father, and Smith is aware that he failed to seize his chance to be a part of it, as he prays: "Lord, turn not away Thy face. You desire not the death of a sinner. I have gone away from you. I have not hearkened to Your voice," when misery befalls him. Malick puts forth the idea that this Eden can never be recovered, but his movie is not only lamenting this loss, it is also about suggesting that something great, although different, can be made out of this loss. In a way, this parallels Fromm's idea that although it may seem insufferable at first to leave the comforting and reassuring primary ties of the pre-individualistic state—which can never be recovered once left—it is actually the opportunity for man to decide actively what he wants to make of his own freedom (27).

Malick's insistence on the universality of the spiritual language as a way to transcend one's human condition is backed up on the extra-diegetic level by the way he uses music as a

way to give an all-encompassing and universal unity to a movie that could otherwise seem disjointed, lacking a clear spatiotemporal continuity. Laurent Guido, in his 2007 article in the magazine *Décadrages*, explains that such an approach to music finds its source in ideas developed in the early nineteenth century by German Romantics—known to have influenced American Transcendentalists (55)—such as Wagner, whose Prelude to *Das Rheingold* (“The Gold of the Rhine”) is used as a recurring theme in the movie. This Prelude is used in the movie as the synaesthetic interweaving between visual and sound elements: it represents the immobility of the spatial sphere in the movie, through its same initial note endlessly repeated, while playing on the temporal flow through the addition of more and more layers of sound and the slow increasing of the volume (57). In doing so, it progressively establishes a rhythm which echoes the flow of the water—to which the very word rhythm etymologically refers, as Guido reminds us (58)—as suggested by the title of the piece and the importance of the motif of the running water in the movie. This symbolic interweaving establishes a sort of universal rhythm which appears to guarantee the fluidity, the coherence and the unity of Malick’s otherwise seemingly fragmented universe (58). Jean-Jacques Nattiez notes in his book *Tétralogies Wagner, Boulez, Chéreau* that the Wagnerian conception of man was that of an individual quest for truth which enables man to “transcend his dispersal and be one again with the great All”⁷ (44)—a conception close to Malick’s philosophical and aesthetical approach. Besides, in Wagner’s opera, the first scene portrays the three girls of the Rhine during their mission to keep the Rhine Gold, and the arrival of Alberich, a man who manages to steal gold from the Rhine and in doing so, disrupts a world up to then peaceful and ordinate. The use of *Das Rheingold* Prelude at the very beginning of the movie foretells the upcoming pillaging of the “New World” primitive land by the Western population, and fits with the pastoral ideal regularly taken over in the American cultural sphere (59). This tradition idealises a simple and

⁷ Translation mine.

primitive rurality, an existence devoted to the pursuit of happiness in a community defined by its own rules, and generally features, at one point or another, the rather undesired bursting in of modernity within this natural scenery (58). In the end, Malick does not try to hide that his romantic exaltation of unspoilt wilderness and primitive living is the fruit of a Western perception alive to its own cultural stereotypes (59).

Ultimately, the way Malick breathes nineteenth-century Transcendentalist ideals into his movie is particularly interesting in the framework of this study for at least two reasons. First, he uses the rather recent medium of the cinema, with all the different techniques it offers and the wide audience it implies, to circulate his ideals and beliefs and make them intelligible through a mode of filming that aspires to universality. Moreover, he is aware of his own subjectivity towards these ideals—he approaches them mostly from a nostalgic, although hopeful, angle—and he purposefully enhances them through an aesthetics of the sublime that invites each member of the audience to have their own inner subjective experience of the ideals he conveys. He therefore manages to disclose and transmit his own Transcendentalist beliefs on the cultural and popular level through a widespread artistic medium of communication, while regarding his movies not as a means to force his beliefs onto the audience, but as an invitation to the subjective experience, pointing at the inner and contemplative way with which he ultimately approaches Transcendentalism. However, today's Transcendentalism on the popular level is not to be found only under this contemplative mode, and it can also be invested as a means to prompt and encourage collective and concrete action.

III.3 – Transcendentalism in the Political Sphere: Barack Obama

As a Transcendentalist Statesman

“Changes happen because the American people demand it—because they rise up and insist on new ideas and new leadership, a new politics for a new time.”

(Obama, “The American Promise”)

Our last case study shall be one proving that current-day manifestations of Transcendentalism are also to be found on the collective and political level, as a force not of the margins but precisely at the centre of the public sphere, binding the nation together. Through the figure of President Barack Obama, I will show how Transcendentalism can still be drawn upon in the twenty-first century to promote changes on a national level, and how Obama, as a Transcendentalist President, represents the country in another way than that which may be conveyed by the media. I will principally focus on Obama’s connection to Transcendentalist ideas through his rhetoric and his speeches, while showing that although he also implements the very political reforms he talks about, talking, in such a case, is already doing.

A) Obama’s “Rhetoric of Hope”

Throughout his 2008 presidential campaign, two of Barack Obama’s main motifs—and therefore two of the words he used the most—were that of change and hope (Coe and Reitzes 394). Through his rhetoric, his two main slogans “Yes we can” and “Change we can believe in,” up to the very titles of his speeches—“Call to Renewal” in 2006, “A New Beginning” in 2007, “The Past Versus the Future” in 2008, “Change that Works for You” in 2008—and of

the books he wrote (especially *The Audacity of Hope* in 2006), Obama relied on a rhetoric of hope to support the idea that change at the level of a whole nation was possible. Eventually, upon winning the elections in 2008, his own position as the first African-American President of the United States made him the very embodiment and epitome of this change. Mark S. Ferrara's 2013 book *Barack Obama and the Rhetoric of Hope* and Wolfgang Mieder's 2009 study *Yes We Can: Barack Obama's Proverbial Rhetoric* are valuable works enabling us to better perceive how Obama's rhetoric throughout his campaign and presidency can be considered in many regards as a Transcendentalist rhetoric.

Obama, Mieder explains, is an "eternal optimistic filled with unwavering hope" (23). In Ferrara's opinion, this "optimistic idealism" (13) infuses his political rhetoric with utopian propensities that echo Transcendentalism. To be utopian, Ferrara tells us, is "to look out at the world — at its continued poverty, war, and oppression — and to imagine a better place" (14). This depicts accurately Obama's spirit, as he himself insists on the importance to be "comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there's still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that" in his interview of the writer Marilynne Robinson ("A Conversation—II").

This hope and this optimism, ultimately, are to be the servants of social betterment. Obama's rhetoric of hope is defined by Ferrara as a "deliberately constructed political discourse that envisions social betterment brought about by the force of shared values and culminating in a promise of a 'more perfect union' in the future" (11). This forward-looking vision of social progress is galvanised by the force to think positively and see the glass as half full rather than half empty. When talking about race issues, Obama notes that

What's remarkable is not the number of minorities who have failed to climb into the middle class but the number who succeeded against the odds; not the anger and

bitterness that parents of color have transmitted to their children but the degree to which such emotions have ebbed. That knowledge gives us something to build on. It tells us that progress can be made. (*The Audacity of Hope* 249)

However, Obama is clear about the fact that this optimism is not a reason to take any progress for granted: “As much as I insist that things have gotten better, I am mindful of this truth as well: Better isn’t good enough” (*The Audacity of Hope* 233). For Ferrara, to be utopian also includes “enduring discontentment with the status quo and holding fast to a stubborn impatience for a new day” (14). And as Barack himself explained in his interview with Robinson (“A Conversation in Iowa”), many great American innovations, initiatives and much progress come from a “nagging dissatisfaction,” a sort of healthy restlessness that spurs them, and which is not at all incompatible with an optimistic mind-set.

Another of Obama’s main rhetorical appeals during his campaign was for unity, and the importance of standing together rather than divided. Although he values the notion of self-reliance and does not hide the fact that Emerson is one of his great sources of inspiration, as Kakutani reveals in *The New York Times*, the collective effort and the idea of committing to something bigger than oneself as a united group is essential for him. He supports the ideas of novelty, of going against the grain, of getting off the beaten tracks to take the risk to innovate, but he strongly believes that this should be a group dynamic, a dynamic in which the Government can play its part and be an ally instead of being the norm to depart from. “We’re suspicious of Government as a tool of oppression,” Obama explains to Robinson, “and that scepticism is healthy, but it can also be paralysing when we’re trying to do big things together” (“A Conversation in Iowa”). In combining these two aspects and showing that Government can be an integral part of the Transcendentalist dynamic so long as we are ready to assume the best about one another, Obama refreshes and adapts Transcendentalist ideals to

the twenty-first century. Obama manages to rally people of different opinions to his cause through a rhetoric which, apart from being one of hope, is also one of accessibility. Mieder remarks that it is notably “through his proverbial language that he stylistically finds a common denominator of effective communication, where the metaphors of the proverbial phrases add commonality and common sense for everybody to understand his socio-political rhetoric” (6). Nevertheless, his metaphorical rhetoric, however optimistic and utopian, is not about impractical political propositions. It “seeks middle ground between ideology and realism,” Ferrara explains (13), by mixing his stirring prose with practical politics, “proposing humane, sensible solutions with uplifting, elegant prose” filling one with hope, which is rare in modern United States politics as Mieder notes (3). For Obama, a powerful rhetoric, even if it can rally the citizens, is not enough and needs to be actively supported by actions in the same vein. “In the end a sense of mutual understanding isn’t enough. After all, talk is cheap; like any value, empathy must be acted upon . . . We can make claims on their [our values] behalf . . . so long as we recall that they demand deeds not just words” (*The Audacity of Hope* 69). However, it is interesting to understand that although words may not suffice, they strongly matter anyway and they are an important starting point to bring about significant change. Obama explains this to Robinson when he talks about the importance to acknowledge goodness and to word it in order to actualise it. “There’s this huge gap between how folks go about their daily lives and how we talk about our common life and our political life . . . There’s all this goodness and decency and common sense on the ground, and somehow it gets translated into rigid, dogmatic, other mean-spirited politics” (“A Conversation in Iowa”). By making it his challenge to reduce this gap through the wording of such goodness, by such a performative speech act, Obama already owns his place as a doer. In order to have a better idea of how this rhetoric of hope is used in his speeches, I selected two of them which will

help us understand the extent to which we can consider Obama as a twenty-first century Transcendentalist.

B) Obama's Speeches: A Transcendentalist Appeal

i) Election Night Victory Speech, 4 November 2008 (Chicago)

Obama's election night victory speech is a clear paragon of Obama's rhetoric of hope and of his Transcendentalist profile. From the very first sentence, Obama establishes his optimistic character and announces his Presidency under the colours of hope and confidence. "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer." He seeks to reclaim the American Dream by assuring people that whatever their dreams may be, they are neither foolish nor anachronistic and they can be fulfilled in the United States of the twenty-first century. He shows them that just because they believed Obama could become the next President, this leap of faith for such an unexpected candidate is the proof that major changes are possible. "I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you – we as a people will get there." As we saw, Obama believes that this optimism can be most fruitful if it goes hand in hand with an argument for unity and common purpose. He does not mean to establish himself in opposition to those who may disagree with him, neither does he try to make everybody fit in the same box; instead, he exhorts people to remain their original selves while joining in the common dynamics for social betterment that would benefit each and every citizen. However, he does not reject the values of self-reliance and individuality and instead shows that these values are not irreconcilable with national

unity, and even reminds his audience that this is the precise combination of the two that have made the United States work as it does.

Obama also places his newly acquired Presidency under the label of change, paralleling the Transcendentalist idea that people should not live by the rules or the principles of a time or a system with which they can no longer identify. “This victory alone is not the change we seek – it is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were.” After eight years of Bush’s Presidency that left the United States in a delicate condition and many Americans disheartened, deploring the fact that the values on which their nation had been constructed were becoming something of an empty shell, Obama insists that the simple fact that people put their trust in him now proves that change has come to America, a change carried by the optimism that they, together, can “build, therefore, their own world,” that which would benefit every individual and the nation as a whole. “America,” he observes, “we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there is so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves: if our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?” Mentioning Ann Nixon Cooper, a 106-year-old African-American woman who witnessed drastic social changes and even turnarounds during her life, enables him to account for his utopian political outlook and its practicability, turning Ann into a “positive symbol for all changes on all fronts that she has experienced as a representative of all Americans during her long life” (Mieder 131). Obama insists that this need for change is not something he wishes to impose upon people; quite the contrary, he makes it clear that it is a need people expressed through casting their votes for him, through their tremendous implication and efforts towards raising him to the Presidency and entrusting him with their hope to see their wish for change actively acted upon by the representative of their country. Their implication, he explains, their victory, in a way, is the proof that “more than two

centuries later, a government of the people, by the people and for the people has not perished from this Earth.” Abraham Lincoln being Obama’s most inspirational political figure (Mieder 68), it is no surprise that he should reference his 1863 Gettysburg Address in this speech to support his point. Interestingly, this parallel indirectly strengthens Obama’s Transcendentalist inspiration, as Lincoln was known to be himself sympathetic to the movement’s ideals. Garry Wills, in his book *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*, notes that Lincoln’s “dialectic of ideals struggling for their realization in history owes a great deal to the primary intellectual fashion of this period, Transcendentalism” (103), and goes on to defining Lincoln as “a Transcendentalist without the fuzziness” (174). Wills obviously believes nineteenth-century Transcendentalists lacked concrete and pragmatic solutions for the implementation of their ideals, and explains Lincoln stood out in that although he had a Transcendentalist outlook on his politics, the solutions he brought forth were practical ones, which allowed him to “get the job done” at the centre of the political storm and not simply talk about it in the calmer margins. Obama therefore seems to have learnt much from his predecessors, but did not exactly copy neither their ideas nor their rhetoric. Instead, he “stood on their shoulders and adapted their vision to his own plan to bring positive change” (Mieder x).

Obama’s last remark in his speech sums up his Transcendentalist outlook and his confidence in its practicability provided everybody joins in the dynamics:

This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time. To put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth—that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and

where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes We Can.

Obama's leitmotif, "Yes We Can", ends a series of 7 occurrences in a row, and supports his main idea that if people dare to seize this opportunity for change, yes, they can answer positively the call exhorting them to build their own political framework, that resembling them, that which they are dreaming of, in the same way that Whitman answered Emerson's call to build the United States its specific intellectual identity.

ii) Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney, 26 June 2015 (Charleston)

On the evening on June 17, 2015, a man in favour of white supremacy killed nine people, including state senator Clementa C. Pinckney, at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. About a week later, for Pinckney's funeral, Obama delivered a speech which reveals his Emerson-like spirituality in a slightly different way than his victory speech did. Obama's speech for Reverend Pinckney is both about reinforcing the idea that collective action is the most fruitful and about how the Transcendentalist principle of genuinely believing in the innate goodness of others is the key to not only a successful democratic system, but also to a happy life.

In his speech, Obama describes Reverend Pinckney as "a man who believed in things not seen," a man who would come to Church to "imagine what might be." A fervent optimistic, Pinckney sincerely "believed there were better times ahead," and he embodied this hope for betterment: Obama reports that friends of Pinckney remarked that when he "entered a room, it was like the future arrived." Obama insists that what made Pinckney's optimism all the more

precious is that it was implemented in concrete actions and fuelled and strengthened by uniting with others. “He encouraged progress not by pushing his ideas alone, but by seeking out your ideas, partnering with you to make things happen,” Obama explains to the audience. “He embodied the idea that . . . to put our faith in action is more than individual salvation, it’s about our collective salvation; that to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society.” Insisting on the importance of deeds and not just words is something Obama returns to several times. He warns that to “settle for symbolic gestures without following up with the hard work of more lasting change—that’s how we lose our way again.” Through Pinckney’s eulogy, Obama emphasises some of his own values—that of union and of backing up words with actions—and wants to make it clear that these values can be fruitful for every citizen, and not simply, in the present case, for the members of the African-American Church. “A sacred place, this Church,” Obama confesses. “Not just for Blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who is about the steady expansion of human rights and human dignity in this country. A foundation stone for liberty, and justice for all, that’s what the Church meant.”

This speech is also significant in that it parallels more than any other the Emersonian idea that each and every one of us possesses a piece of the Over-Soul and is responsible for making the best of it. Through the thirty-eight occurrences of the word “grace” in the speech, Obama wants to convey the idea that people have to draw on this grace within them, this part of the divine within them, to be good to one another, even in the face of such terrible events:

God has visited grace upon us for he has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind.

He’s given us the chance when we’ve been lost to find our best selves . . . we may not have earned it, this grace, with our rancor and complacency, and short-sightedness and fear of each other, but we got it all the same. He gave it to us anyway. He’s once more

given us grace. But it is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift.

Part of proving ourselves worthy of this gift is, according to Obama, using it as a “reservoir of goodness,” quoting his friend and writer Marilynne Robinson. This “reservoir of goodness,” Obama says, is already drawn upon by many people, as it could be witnessed through the way the American people reacted to the shooting: “The alleged killer could not imagine how . . . the United States of America would respond—not merely with revulsion at his evil act, but with big-hearted generosity and, more importantly, with a thoughtful introspection and self-examination that we so rarely see in public life.” Expressing God’s grace by keeping one’s heart open: that, according to Obama and Robinson, is the key to do wonders in American society. Robinson believes that “the basis of democracy is to assume well about other people,” and Obama adds that “that’s not just what our democracy depends on, but I think that’s what a good life depends on. Occasionally, you’ll be disappointed, but more often than that, your faith will be confirmed.”

Through our study of President Obama’s speeches and rhetoric, we now understand better how this figure can be considered a twenty-first century Transcendentalist. Like his predecessors in the movement, he does believe that change is needed to reflect accurately people’s evolving mentalities, and that this change necessarily needs to be brought about by a relentless optimism and a rhetoric of hope. What he does insist upon that might be more peculiar to our time than to Emerson’s century is that social betterment, which is to be ultimately the goal of such a Transcendentalist mind-set, is to be obtained by favouring union and partnership, and by valuing and sustaining the existing democracy through the assumption of goodness in others. By combining his own personal story as the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya with his position as a statesman and his rhetoric of

hope for the sake of change, Obama embodies the way in which Transcendentalism can, in our time, be used as a binding force for society rather than a transversal force dissatisfied with society, a force to be beneficial on the national level and not simply on the margins of mainstream America.

Conclusion

Throughout this Master's thesis, I endeavoured to investigate why the bulk of United States society should appear to be following patterns at odds with its Transcendentalist heritage, whereas the latter promises to emancipate people from their "chains" and accompany them on the path to freedom, a pursuit the country cherishes as one of its founding ideals. The organisation of this study led us to understand that this discrepancy is mainly conveyed and amplified by the media's representation of the United States, and that if one takes a closer look at it, one can notice that Transcendentalist ideals and principles are still living on in many parts of today's United States. We saw that often, the media deplore the excessive materialism, consumerism, and conformism of the United States—so many things against which Transcendentalism stands—along with the corruption of the American dream. They lament the fact that Americans have relinquished their true individual freedom to this evil capitalist spiral and that the United States has trouble living up to the ideal of freedom upon which the country was proudly founded. However, such a representation, although it sheds light on an aspect of capitalism worth taking into consideration, is too categorical. It is true that Transcendentalism may be dismissed by some people—either out of antagonism towards the movement or out of fear of freedom—and that capitalism might play a part in relegating spirituality to the bottom of the system's scale of values, far beneath economic growth for example. However, capitalism is not incompatible with Transcendentalism, and it is worth remembering that the time and labour-saving progress it brought about precisely enabled the movement to appear, grow and be embraced on a concrete and practical level in the nineteenth century. And so it does today, against all odds, scepticism, and mockery. Indeed, Transcendentalism has lost none of its questioning and assertive force. Only, its presence might be harder to perceive today as it is less publicised than it was at its birth, but

also as its proponents do not necessarily explicitly align themselves with the movement, and above all as it has evolved over time to adapt to a country itself evolving. From Thoreau's *Walden* to modern pilgrimages in search of a communion with oneself and with the world around, from Emerson's *Nature* to environmental glorification through artistic media of our era, from Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* to political stances and actions aiming at reclaiming the democratic ideal and building a fairer world for the twenty-first century: these are so many threads through which Transcendentalism has come down to our own day in the United States, proving that the movement's vision, tension and paradoxical energy still endure. The force of the movement comes from its very diversity, and almost two hundred years later it still proves to be an essential concept with a recognisable core vision and practice in spite of its diversity—Transcendentalism, rather than being *the* path to freedom, is rather a firm “nudge” helping people, one by one, to find their *own* path to freedom. Not every Transcendentalist will choose the same path: that which is relevant for one will not necessarily be for the other. However, ultimately, they will all be heading towards freedom—understood as the emancipation of their real and original self, in harmony with the world around them. This path is open to anyone who would consider living according to the ideals of the movement, as long as one is ready to accept that Transcendentalism is not a model as such providing a sort of unique magic recipe to attain freedom, but rather a spiritual way of experiencing and deepening life relationships.

The complex relationship between Transcendentalism and capitalism would be worth being studied further within the frame of today's major ecological crisis—of which climate change, deforestation, biodiversity extinction and the degradation of ecosystems are some aspects—and such a study would benefit from taking into consideration the planetary scope of Transcendentalism, given the timeless and “spaceless” ideals of the movement. This crisis—for which capitalism cannot be held completely innocent—is bringing the Transcendentalist

force across the world up to the surface in a way that seems to be completely inverting the capitalist scale of values which had until now been placing economic growth at the top and a more harmonious relation to nature far below. That global awareness is reflected through an important number of civil initiatives showcased notably in ecological documentaries, whose popularity has been increasing lately. These documentaries not only praise the personal benefits of a more harmonious life with the world around us, but above all highlight the vital urgency of changing the way we live for a more respectful relationship with nature. The 2015 documentary *En Quête de Sens* by Nathanael Coste features several renowned speakers across the world (Dr Vandana Shiva, Satish Kumar, Hervé Kempf and Pierre Rabhi among others) who all insist that the dominant capitalist system which “rules the world” is not only responsible for today’s global ecological crisis, but is also precisely unable to fix the crisis it engendered. They acknowledge that the system has brought along its fair share of progress and advantages, but that its peak is far behind it and that capitalism as we know it is now no longer in tune with today’s ecological realities. Initiatives are being undertaken on the civilian level, as the movie shows, but the speakers insist that for our planet’s as well as our own survival, we quickly and necessarily need to change and innovate on the political level as well for a system that refuses the outdated ideology of unlimited growth and profit. That change, they say, must be accompanied by the awareness that nature is the condition of our being alive, and by the spiritual understanding that we are connected to—and therefore dependent on and responsible for—the rest of the world around us. David Collings, in his 2014 book *Stolen Future, Broken Present*, supports the same idea that we need, on the planetary level, to accept our “infinite responsibility” (136) for today’s ecological disaster and use that awareness as a starting point for undertaking significant change in the way we live. On another level, Pope Francis also uses his position as a religious and spiritual leader to rally people behind this ecological cause. In a *New York Times* article examining his papal

encyclical from June 2015, entitled “Laudato Si,” Laurie Goodstein highlights that Pope Francis “attributes the environmental crisis to wealthier, industrialised countries that extract resources to feed an insatiable desire for consumer goods,” and the journalist remarks that via his encyclical, the Pope “intends to provoke action—to cause an enormous ‘conversion’ in how humans understand their place and responsibility to a planet that is in peril.” That global and increasing awareness across the world is of significant importance to understand the change that the dominant system of values is undergoing. That change is reviving Transcendentalist ideals in an unprecedented manner, bringing them back into the spotlight, presenting them no longer only as a choice but as a necessity for our own survival. That is why in the face of today’s ecological urgency, a study about the extent to which the ecological crisis can be considered essentially a spiritual problem (and the role, accordingly, that Transcendentalism can play in helping to solve that problem) would be a relevant priority. Such continued scholarship on Transcendentalism would be not only of strong interest, but also of great help—not to say of great necessity.

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