



## ‘HIGHER LAWS’ AND ‘DIVINE MADNESS’

### Transnational and Translocal Configurations of Quixotic In/Sanity in the American Renaissance

#### INTRODUCTION

“To every brain a several vein/ Of madness from the gods!” Ralph Waldo Emerson wishfully exclaimed in a poem tellingly titled “The Skeptic” (1996: 1296). Yet he knew that the madness he was referring to was not for “every brain” and in his essay “Heroism” made it clear that “The heroic cannot be the common, nor the common the heroic” (379). And the heroic consisted for Emerson of a rare, or uncommon, god-blessed madness. His younger fellow Concordian Henry David Thoreau echoed: “Nothing remarkable was ever accomplished in a prosaic mood [...] Referred to the world’s standard, the heroes and the discoverers are always insane” (1985: 933). Emerson encouraged Bronson Alcott, William Ellery Channing, Henry Thoreau, Jones Very, and Margaret Fuller to be uncompromisingly high-minded in accordance with his view of the literary vocation—which, in fact, remained quite nebulous and extravagant and so kept them all from literary success, at least as the common reader would measure it. In what follows, I will focus on the severe incompatibility between the Emersonian ‘godly madness’ and the lack of any institutionalized outlet for it during the age of the American Renaissance. Dealing with the Romantic understanding of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* as a book about the uplifting potential of literature and need for uncompromising high-mindedness in everyday life, I will outline the anomalous position of the Transcendentalist literati

Albena Bakratcheva  
New Bulgarian University  
Sofia  
Bulgaria



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6517-6854>

in terms of a New England 'in/sane' Quixotic quest for perfection—both of the individual and the world. Moreover, the unique sense of place that Emerson's Transcendentalists possessed will be approached as offering a specifically New-England-tinted, yet, at the same time, transnationally/translocally relevant, perspective toward different/similar literary traditions as well as their own cultural contexts.

#### TRANSCENDENTALIST NONCONFORMISM

"We are the club of the like-minded," James Freeman Clarke, one of the New England Transcendentalists, once claimed, explaining, "because no two of us think alike" (Le Beau 1985: 23). The pun was good enough and, moreover, truthful in its apparent paradox. What lay behind it was Emerson's demand for nonconformism, or inveterate self-trust. "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist," Emerson insisted, "Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" (1990: 151). Emerson's appeal—Quixotic as it was in its idealism and inapplicability to real life—turned out to be extremely attractive to most of Concord's intellectuals of the time. It provoked all kinds of different and even contradictory responses, but always demonstrated the utmost respect for the uniqueness of individual thinking and behavior. However, it also reflected all the complexities of Emerson's steadfastness and bore the practical or, rather, all the impractical consequences regarding actual life experience.

The Transcendental Club regarded itself as "informal," and took pleasure in it, as this seemed closest to being noninstitutional and self-reliant. Yet, though institutionally independent, it was nonconformist and self-reliant in the sense of sticking to Emerson's idea, which could not but cast Emerson's shadow over its members or, in other words, make them 'Emerson-reliant.' Emerson realized this and warned against it: "The wise man must be wary of attaching followers" (*Journals* 6: 279). This was one of Emerson's typical abstractions which could not possibly be put into practice. But Emerson persisted: "Act singly! Your conformity explains nothing [...] what you have already done singly will justify you now" (1990: 156).

Lawrence Buell called this "Emerson's *blindness* about the dissonance between the message and the practice of his teaching"

*One World  
The Americas  
Everywhere*

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(2003: 308). However, the poem quoted above seems to answer whether or not Emerson was *actually* blind about this dissonance: “Many for the dawn have hoped,/ And some more brave, or else more *blind*,/ The freedom all desire, pretend to find” (1996: 1297). Such freedom-seeking blindness was, for him, equal to divine madness, with which only “some more brave” are blessed. Originating in fundamental devotion to the ideal of noncompromising high-mindedness, Emerson’s preference for the message over the practice of his teaching was, in fact, a pleasingly deliberate Quixotic choice. Hence, as he writes in his essay “The Poet,” the greatest reward the poet should expect is that “the ideal shall be real to thee” (1990: 224). The consequences of such a choice amid the sanity of the real world were predictable (hence the poem’s title, “The Skeptic”). Thus, within “the Reason-Madness nexus,” which, as Michel Foucault argues in the Preface to *Madness and Civilization*, “constitutes for Western culture one of the dimensions of its originality” (XI), Emerson’s Romantic vision displayed a New England interpretation of the godly, extra-worldly, in/sane powers of the creative imagination.

Whatever sense of subjection Emerson’s authoritative personality may have caused, it always retained an irresistible attraction of free, dignified thinking and spiritual elevation. Moreover, the Transcendental Club was an entirely New England phenomenon, the product of a settler’s culture which had always been conversational, a culture of sharing: it could therefore easily combine the Emersonian “new importance given to the single person” (1990: 99) with the traditional Puritan communal attitude and need for a spiritual leader. Emerson was there to play the role and he played it perfectly. In a time when it was becoming more and more clear that America’s culture had to finally define its own physiognomy, Emerson was the one to have, in the genuine Winthropian sense, “the eyes of all people” upon him, the one capable of reinventing the spiritual tradition of New England, transforming it into a major driving force of the American Renaissance through this broadly transnational Romantic context.

#### “THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR”

In August 1837, when Emerson delivered this speech at Harvard and announced the emergence of a new figure in America’s cultural

life, he stood for the first time in public as the Master, the new Teacher, the self-reliant individual—the American Scholar himself, who could proudly declare that “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close” (1990: 83). It seemed inevitable the oration should be dubbed America’s “Intellectual Declaration of Independence” and so it immediately was, by Emerson’s enthusiastic co-thinker Oliver Wendell Holmes, who provided what afterwards seems the only possible interpretation of the lecture.

Impossible as it is to imagine Emerson simply giving voice to his country’s cultural needs at the time, it cannot be denied that the 1837 Harvard oration invites itself to be read as a nationalist proclamation. It memorably reiterates the theme that “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (1990: 99), so now “we will speak our own minds” (100). Moreover, it unfolds through masterful rhetoric, playing the nationalist card in a most inspiring and convincing way—the practical result being the birth of the myth of its own cultural nationalism. The lecture portrays a magnetic ideal figure whose attractiveness comes, above all, from its clear American belonging. It was exactly this sense of belonging that granted Emerson’s rhetorical construct the status of a hallmark of America’s culture. Holmes’s qualification was both so fitting and attractive that it almost became the second title of Emerson’s lecture.

However, scholars focused on Emerson’s early career and the Emersonian mythology (such as Robert Milder, Merton Sealts, Jr., and others) began to problematize the nationalistic characterization of the 1837 oration as an oversimplification. Lawrence Buell offers a significant attempt in this direction in his book *Emerson* in the duly titled chapter, “How American Was Emerson’s ‘American Scholar’?” Having pointed out that Holmes’s “time-honored summation is both too sweeping and too narrow” (44), Buell continues with a convincing argument in favor of what he calls the lecture’s “refusal to wave the flag.” The explicitly American parts are striking but brief flourishes; the address was first published simply as “An Oration, Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard” and the title we know was added a dozen years later; Emerson made his own most fundamental

aim explicit in a journal entry a month before the occasion, namely to unfold “a theory of the Scholar’s office;” and, Buell emphasizes, “Not a word about cultural nominalism here” (45). To strengthen his argument, he writes that “nowhere does Emerson commend the recipe of nature-books-action as an ‘American’ program,” as well as that “all his exemplars of the spirit of the modern age are European” (46). Buell concludes that it was exactly the “avoidance of cultural specificity” that “made Emerson’s work more portable abroad” (46) because, to many foreign readers, Emerson “spoke, as Carlyle said, more as ‘a man’ than as an American” (49). Finally, Buell makes it clear that “The point of stressing his [Emerson’s] cross-border appeal in and beyond his own time is to underscore that his vision and standing were not reducible to his ‘Americanness’” (48).

Obviously, ‘Americanness’ is considered a category of reduction here; in order for the claim for Emerson’s cosmopolitanism to be supported, the myth of the lecture’s reception is replaced by the creation of a counter-myth—namely, that of its ‘Europeanness.’ However, all the European responses mentioned refer to Emerson’s work in general and not specifically to the early oration at Harvard. In other words, Buell’s statement that “Emerson’s own concern was with values that stand the test of time and unite the world” (58) would seem self-evident, hardly depriving “The American Scholar” of its American flavor. Moreover, most of the European examples that illustrate Emerson’s universalism can also be read the other way around. For instance, the fact that “Near the end of his life, even Charles Baudelaire found comfort in the tonic effect of Emerson’s maxims” (48), may not only suggest a certain closeness between the two minds, but also—and even more so—their difference: Emerson must have given Baudelaire the positive energy he doubtlessly needed in his last years, as well as the refreshing confidence that no *Flowers of Evil* could possibly be expected from a healthy American author. (Besides, all his life Baudelaire had admired Edgar Allan Poe, not Emerson; America’s ‘non-American’ Poe was the one close to him, not Emerson; and exactly because of that it was not Poe, but America’s very own Emerson who could have a tonic effect on the dying Baudelaire.)

Albena Bakratcheva  
New Bulgarian University  
Sofia  
Bulgaria

Buell pleads for the universal value of Emerson's thinking by pleading against its Americanness and, in doing so, he goes far beyond Emerson's early Harvard lecture. Bearing in mind not so much the text itself, but rather the immediate response it provoked, or the myth that was born at the time, he counterpoises that myth's 'reductive' nationalistic Americanness with Emerson's intellectual cosmopolitanism. Thus, in an excellent book which offers probably the most convincing and inspiring literary portrait of Emerson ever made, this is the only chapter that presents an Emerson who is 'trans-American' for his own good.

However, Emerson's thinking in "The American Scholar" moves smoothly and non-contradictively in its nationalist universalism, inviting no reductive 'either-or' approaches. The American Scholar Emerson describes is doubtlessly located in America *and*, at the same time, just as doubtlessly translocal and transnational; he is definitely American—*and* clearly cosmopolitan too. His message comes from a sheer sense of American belonging *and* crosses all borders in space and time because he "*is all*" (1990: 99), as Emerson's 1837 Harvard lecture insists, providing a way to read the lecture itself. So, when Carlyle said of Emerson (and not of any one of his lectures in particular) that he was speaking to him "as a man," he was most certainly expressing his admiration for Emerson's startling personality and mind rather than discrediting his Americanness.

As Daniel Malachuk convincingly argues, "the essentialism that nineteenth-century nationalist cosmopolitans emphasise is universalist in scope. This universal essence of humanity is posited as an objective *telos* for all the world's peoples to realize, rather than the starting (and ending) point of a particular nation's significance. Deep into the nineteenth-century [...], nationalism and cosmopolitanism are presented by at least some writers as ultimately allied means to the realization of our universal human essence" (142). Certainly "The American Scholar" was the oration which immediately made Emerson the leading figure among such American writers. Within the grand scope of Emerson's thinking, within the noble 'madness' of his vision attachment to *both* one's nation and the world was only natural, normal. And so it was for his younger fellow Concordian Henry Thoreau who wrote in his essay

“Walking” that “I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in. *You may name it America, but it is not America.* Neither Americus Vesputius, nor Columbus, nor the rest were the discoverers of it” (1990: 122). Both Emerson and Thoreau were remarkably faithful saunterers in a blessed place that was to them America *and*, at the same time, the whole perennial world inviting them to establish what Emerson called “an original relation to the universe” (15).

#### CONCORD'S LITERARY DUO

When Emerson wrote at midlife with deep satisfaction that after “writing and speaking [...] for twenty five or thirty years,” he had “not now one disciple” (*Journals* 14: 258), he was clearly exaggerating. This was theory for theory's own sake: Emerson would never think of self-reliance in any terms of mentorship, as this would contradict his insistence upon individual action. Still, it was Emerson himself who touched upon the teacher-student relationship as early as 1837 and ever since the “American Scholar” oration this would remain an important transcendentalist issue. It seems that Emerson's scholar was both teacher and student which, in turn, suggests an approach to the most significant intellectual relationship in nineteenth-century New England—that between Emerson and Thoreau, his junior by fourteen years.

Whether Thoreau was an Emersonian or not was a question already present in their contemporary Concord, as the following story from Emerson's journal demonstrates: “One of Thoreau's mother's boarders was holding forth on how Thoreau resembled Emerson. “‘O yes,’ said his mother, ‘Mr. Emerson had been a good deal with my Henry, and it was very natural that he should catch his ways’” (15: 490). The time of “The American Scholar” was the time of young Thoreau's self-identification; it was in these youthful years that Emerson's impact was definitely productive for him, as Emerson strongly encouraged Thoreau's sense of self-responsibility. Self-reliance became the deliberate choice of a life that would never accept the realization of not having been lived, as Thoreau would put it later in *Walden*. In 1837, a twenty-year-old Thoreau joined the Transcendental Club and made two significant steps towards the deliberate creation of his autobiog-

raphy: he changed his name, from David Henry to Henry David, and started to keep a journal.

Emerson had already celebrated “man’s power to connect his thought with its proper symbol” (1990: 29) and Thoreau—as he would do repeatedly over the course of the years—transformed his senior co-thinker’s impressive abstraction by applying it to his real life and his real person: he reversed his given name David Henry in order to establish what he felt the *proper* correspondence between himself and its symbol/name in this world, and so the writer Henry David Thoreau was born. This was essentially an act of self-initiation. Young Thoreau was already concentrated on his own self to such an extent that he could not be anyone’s follower, not even Emerson’s. Moreover, his self-reference was not pseudonymous but *veritonymous*; unlike his European contemporaries with their passion for pennames, Thoreau decided on the *true* name of the writer he intended to be. His self-naming marked the beginning of his life as a writer who would always have an astute sense for what is true and what is not. The gesture was intrinsically Quixotic in both the absolute seriousness it was made with and the sheer awareness it indicated that choosing a new direction in life requires a proper self-naming. Thoreau began his remarkable Romantic ‘in/sane’ quest for ultimate truths beyond those commonly seen by selecting a properly high-minded ‘knight-errant’s’ writerly name. Also, he set about keeping a journal.

His first journal entry begins as a dialog, in which he is most certainly responding to Emerson, even if he does not mention him by name. This was emblematic of the way things would unfold over the years, as Thoreau’s entire journal offers quite a vital and immediate image of its author who would listen to nothing (nobody) but his own “different drummer,” as stated later in *Walden*. Things were much more complicated, indeed, and the Emerson-Thoreau relation surely lends itself to be considered as *reciprocal* (Buell 2003: 300), especially in Emerson’s eyes. Though their friendship was slowly cooling, Emerson preserved his utmost admiration for his younger fellow Concordian; as for Thoreau, though he never admitted it, Emerson’s figure was indispensable. As Laura Dassow Walls observes in her recent biography of Thoreau, his “lifelong dialogue with Emerson, by turns loving,



inspired, hostile, angry, and reconciled, would turn Thoreau into a great and wholly original writer. Thoreau's creativity was realized not alone but in partnership, as Emerson fanned his creativity into genius" (2017: 87).

No critical discussion of Emerson can be had without including Thoreau and the reverse is just as true. Complex as it was, the reciprocal Emerson-Thoreau relationship evokes the long line of inseparable duos throughout literary history and to perhaps the most legendary one of them all. The dynamics of the relationship between Cervantes's duo, or "the Sanctification of Don Quixote and the Quixotization of Sancho" (Madariaga 1961: 35), offers an approach to the complicated interconnection between the two Concordians from the perspective of the meandering correlations their minds made over the years between illusion and reality, the wished to be seen and the actually seen, the ideal and the real, the abstract and the concrete, the general and the specific, the Kantian noumena and phenomena. Such a perspective clearly brings into focus the inseparability of Concord's literary duo: Emerson—the sage, the inspired and inspiring spiritual leader, the public speaker, who gained transnational recognition in his lifetime already, and Thoreau—the seemingly local writer, "transcendentalist, mystic, and natural philosopher to boot" (*Journals* 5: 4), whose ecocentric thinking would open up the whole global vista of future environmentalism: each man the alter ego of the other. Emerson's vagueness and Thoreau's astute sense of place, Emerson's nationalist cosmopolitanism and Thoreau's cosmopolitan nationalism, Emerson's transnationalism and Thoreau's translocalism: the uncompromising high-mindedness, the godly 'in/sanity' of the two remarkable New Englanders, which put them together in the eyes of the world as manifest eccentrics.

#### QUIXOTIC IN/SANITY

All of this brings in another important issue as well: namely, the reality of the Transcendentalists' own lives in the terms of their professional un/fulfillment. Directly stemming from their Puritan New England roots, Emerson's co-thinkers saw the greatness of art only as commensurate to its spiritual and moral truth; they were aesthetes and men of spirit, wanderers among the vague, barely

distinguishable shapes of beauty and of faith, who did not merely claim that every great artist had to be by definition a good man, but went even further, stating the reverse to be true, or that a good man made a great artist. And what was provocatively unique about them, as Buell has pointed out, was the *seriousness* with which they took all this (1973: 67). They could accept the messianic character of Emerson's Poet-Priest with nothing less than seriousness and so the image was turned into a desired *model for life*. Gazing steadily into the ideal, the like-minded Emersonians began to see their own lives within the absolute aesthetic-religious formula and thus, to differing degrees, for better or for worse, tried to shape their own lives according to the precepts of an idea. The Poet-Priest was not simply a role to play, but, more than anything, the naming for the inner make-up of a character. And such deliberate self-identification inevitably required a real-life career.

Finding such a career proved difficult, however, as Massachusetts in the first half of the nineteenth century provided no real conditions for professional fulfillment. The church pulpit was no longer sufficient, but profoundly Puritan New England had no other institutional option to offer. So, in their positive desire to identify themselves fully with the ideal, the Transcendentalists had to confront the lack of any institutional opportunities for realizing their ambitions. Emerson's public resignation from serving the church acquired symbolic significance for the entire Transcendentalist movement, but it also finally rejected the only available vocational choice.

As a result, the Transcendentalists came in contact with real life, with life's material and financial needs, only in so far as they managed to push aside temporarily the ideal of the Poet-Priest and accepted more or less institutionally regulated roles—such as that of a priest (Ellery Channing, Theodor Parker), a person of independent means (Emerson), a teacher (Thoreau, Bronson Alcott), a journalist (Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody), as well as a land-surveyor and a pencil producer (Thoreau). All of these were accidental roles which received positive social sanction but had nothing to do with the Transcendentalists' poetic-religious calling. The inevitable confusion all Emerson's young men suf-

ferred resulted in what Sherman Paul called “a series of personal failures” (Buell 1973: 16).

The lack of a socially sanctioned solution to the problem provoked a quest for a metaphorical one. Thus, Thoreau eloquently—but with a certain vagueness—remarked, he “would fain be a fisherman, hunter, farmer, preacher, etc., but fish, hunt, farm, preach other things than usual” (*Journals* 6: 45), adding elsewhere: “My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in Nature” (472). Likewise, one of the “professions” he undertakes in *Walden*, is “self-appointed inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms” (337); so the conviction came consequently that “The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?” (338). Such formula proved capable of explaining any failure by the standards of the world, literary included. Thus, when his first published book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, failed to sell and Thoreau was forced to buy back all of the remaining copies from his publisher, he could note in his *Journal* with humorous bitterness: “I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself” (*Journals* 5: 459).

In fact, adopting Emerson’s ‘sublime vision’ made the New England Transcendentalists into men with a calling, or vocation, as they liked to call it, but without real careers. And although Emerson tirelessly encouraged Alcott, Channing, Very, Thoreau, and Fuller in their literary work, in reality his support kept all of them from literary success—at least the literary success the world at large acknowledged. So the series of the Transcendentalists’ personal failures was the effect of a severe discrepancy between their ideals and reality. And yet this discrepancy was actively desired and searched for, as the very status of the Poet-Priest, the missionary, the prophet, the new messiah, in fact, rested on it. Thus the Emersonian Transcendentalists’ crisis of identity was to a great extent predetermined by their choice to become spiritual leaders whose poetic holy mission was to improve a dissatisfying world. And such a choice definitely implied pursuing an unconventional, non-prosaic, uncommon path. Moreover, its very impossibility in real life even provided an additional ground for the Transcen-

dentalists' pleasing self-awareness as noncompromising followers of a noble, 'insane' vocation.

All of this placed the Emersonian literati in what Buell called "a doubly anomalous position in relation to their time," as "on the one hand, they were in advance of their public in claiming more for the role of the poet than most of New England was prepared to admit. But on the other hand, they were also in a sense seeking to preserve the Puritan conception of the literary life in an era when that conception was fast becoming extinct" (1973: 53). Such an extraordinary position may certainly qualify as Quixotic since it epitomizes "the rivalry between the real world and the representation we make of it ourselves," or the "Quixotic principle," and inevitably leads to "the Quixotic confusion," or "the propensity to confuse the true with the fabulous" (Levin 1963: 49). The New England Transcendentalists deliberately chose a position which by definition did not belong to what was to them the common "prosaic mood" (to use Thoreau's phrasing) of their time: their choice was the result of representatively romantic discontent with their contemporary reality and, at the same time, in its vigorous Puritan spiritual leadership drive, it was essentially anachronistic. The sophisticated delight of identifying with such a doubly anomalous nonconformist ideal only intensified the need for counterbalancing the *prosaic sanity* of the real world with a wished-for *poetic insanity*, or Emerson's "madness from the gods." Such "madness by romantic identification," as Michel Foucault calls it, pointing out that its "features have been fixed once and for all by Cervantes" (1973: 28), naturally caused confusion between reality and imagination and the substitution of the true with the fabulous: hence all the metaphorical "professions" of the like-minded nineteenth-century New Englanders. They stuck to Emerson's admonishment that "A little integrity is better than any career" (*Complete Works* 6: 189) at the cost of severe crises of identity; but still, remaining madly and maddeningly confused between true poetic vocation and real life career was exactly what made them feel exceptional. Eric Ziolkowski observes of Don Quixote that "the problem of his madness *per se* has to do and is ultimately eclipsed by a more complex issue: his trying to sustain his faith in his illusions once he starts to be confronted by the harsh contingencies of reality"

and this problem, Ziolkowski stresses, “is inherent in the Quixotic principle” (1991: 18). And so it was in the case of Emerson’s Transcendentalists: the more impractical their ideal proved to be, the more eagerly they strove to maintain their trust in it.

Though peculiarly intensified through the ‘Puritanness’ and ‘Americanness’ in which the nineteenth-century New England intellectuals placed it, this problem was far from being merely a local New England phenomenon. In fact, it was inherent in the overall—distinctively translocal and transnational—disposition of all Romantics. Not surprisingly, they felt a closeness to Cervantes’s knight-errant, which made them transform him into a profound symbol: that of the universal conflict between the ideal and the real (F. W. J. Schelling), between poetry and prose (A. W. Schlegel), between the soul and the body (Heinrich Heine), etc. Similarly universalizing was Soren Kierkegaard’s understanding of Don Quixote as a kind of bridge character, whose poetic fate points towards the actual fate of the Christian ‘witness of truth.’ Kierkegaard adored Don Quixote’s ‘happy madness’ and was displeased with the ending of Cervantes’ novel: what troubled him most, as Ziolkowski points out, “was not that Don Quixote dies, but that he dies a rational man and so ceases to exist as a contradiction to this world” (1992: 145). Kierkegaard’s contemporaries, the American Romantics, or the New England Transcendentalists, doubtlessly shared this same profoundly symbolic approach to the hero of the great Spanish novel: because their noncompromising high-mindedness, their poetic in/sanity or Emersonian “Madness from the Gods” never ceased to exist as a contradiction to the overwhelming sanity of this world, the “pitiless/Performance-hating Nemesis” from Emerson’s same poem.

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Albena Bakratcheva  
New Bulgarian University  
Sofia  
Bulgaria

