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The *Dial* and the Transcendentalist Theory of Reading

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Emily A. Cope entitled "The *Dial* and the Transcendentalist Theory of Reading." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Dawn Coleman, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Janet Atwill, Martin Griffin

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

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The *Dial* and the Transcendentalist Theory of Reading

A Thesis
Presented for the Master of Arts Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Emily Ann Cope
May 2008

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Abstract

The two major anthologies of Transcendentalism, Perry Miller's *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (1950) and Joel Myerson's *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (2000), illustrate the scholarly divide over whether the movement was primarily religious or social and political in nature. Where Miller's volume prioritizes the Transcendentalists' theological radicalism, Myerson's emphasizes their interest in social and political reform. This paper presents a third alternative: that the Transcendentalists be understood primarily as a community of readers invested in reimagining how and why antebellum Americans read, a concern we can see clearly in the pages of the *Dial*. Margaret Fuller's article "A Short Essay on Critics," the first article in the *Dial*'s inaugural issue set the tone by lamenting the laziness and passivity of American readers and by calling for a new kind of criticism that met the demands of empowered readers. Positioning herself with all readers, she wrote, "Able and experienced men write for us, and we would know what they think, as they think it not for us but for themselves... We would converse with him [the critic], secure that he will tell us all his thought, and speak as man to man." What Fuller asked for was an altogether new understanding of the relationship between readers and critics. Throughout the *Dial*'s four-year run, the Transcendentalists used it to propose and practice a radical new theory of reading, one that departed from models dominant in the university and the church. *Dial* editors and contributors rejected hierarchical models of reading that located authority in a text, an author, or a critic. Instead, they insisted that the individual reader determine the meaning and value of literature through an intuitive connection with "Spirit." Proper

interpretation, they argued, is not strictly personal, but transpersonal, with the best interpretations emerging dialectically from sympathetic “conversations” between the author and the individual reader, and between the individual reader and a community of inspired readers. Because they imagined reading as conversation, the Transcendentalists constructed the *Dial* as a virtual salon, a place where these personal conversations could become communal.

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Introduction

When the new Transcendentalist journal the *Dial* was finally published in July 1840, it greeted its readers with a friendly but misleading introduction entitled “the Editors to the Reader.” The title of the *Dial*’s introduction was a fiction; in fact, although Margaret Sarah Fuller was the *Dial*’s sole editor, Ralph Waldo Emerson authored the introduction. Even though Emerson and Fuller were close friends and Emerson had personally urged Fuller to edit the *Dial*, he was so dissatisfied with Fuller’s drafted “Introduction” to the *Dial* that he composed his own, titled “The Editors to the Reader” (Myerson 46). Fuller disassembled her planned introduction and reincorporated aspects of it into her article “A Short Essay on Critics,” which immediately followed Emerson’s introduction in the first *Dial* (Myerson 46).

Given Emerson’s insistence on replacing Fuller’s introduction with his own, we might expect the essays to offer fundamentally different views of the journal’s purpose. However, “The Editors to the Reader” and “A Short Essay on Critics” align in a very central but surprising way: both accord reading the central place in the Transcendentalists’ project.

In “The Editors to the Reader” Emerson attempted to describe the philosophically diffuse movement known as Transcendentalism and to justify the *Dial*’s creation. He defined Transcendentalism as “the strong current of thought and feeling, which... has led many sincere persons in New England to make new demands on literature, and to reprobate that rigor of our conventions of religion and education which is turning us to

stone” (1.1).¹ Emerson’s definition is interesting. Scholars disagree over whether Transcendentalism was primarily a religious or social movement, but Emerson’s introductory epistle to *Dial* readers points to another possibility altogether. It implies that Transcendentalism was primarily a *literary* movement with religious and educational implications. “Sincere” New Englanders (i.e. Transcendentalists) would first “make new demands on literature” and thereby reform religious and educational institutions (1.1).

Emerson admitted that Transcendentalism, the “spirit of the time,” inspired its adherents to take up a variety of causes, “casting its light upon the object nearest to his [each person’s] temper and habits of thought” (1.2). Emerson highlighted five areas particularly dear to Transcendentalists: government reforms, marketplace/labor reforms, literature and art, philosophy, and religion (1.2-3). His list seems to give these causes equivalent weight, but Emerson devoted the rest of his letter to defending literary criticism and to announcing the *Dial*’s place in American literature.

In “The Editors to the Readers,” Emerson argued that the *Dial*’s creative and lively criticism would set the *Dial* apart from other journals. Sounding Edwardsian, Emerson called for “poetic” and “unpredictable” criticism to shed “a new light on the whole world” (1.3). For Emerson, criticism must avoid the pitfalls of academic writing—especially excessive “circumspection” and exclusiveness (1.3). Instead, literary criticism should be “serene, cheerful, adoring” and should consider “no less than all the world” its audience (1.3). Emerson promised that *Dial* critics would write accessibly and

¹ I will identify all subsequent quotations from the *Dial* parenthetically with volume and page numbers. All quotations from the *Dial* are taken from the four volume facsimile of the 1840-1844 *Dial* published in 1961 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961).

inclusively. He assured *Dial* readers, “we wish not to multiply books, but to report life” (1.4). *Dial* writers were not “practiced writers,” but friends who spoke the “discourse of the living” (1.4). In other words, the *Dial* would not become a place for dusty criticism, but a home for conversation between living, friendly readers.

Fuller’s revised introduction, “A Short Essay on Critics,” reiterated much of Emerson’s message in “The Editors to the Readers.” Fuller defended the role of critics, reviewing literature, while re-imagining the critic’s role and relationships to authors and readers. Fuller blamed hierarchical conceptions of reading for the problems with both critics and readers; she mocked contemporary periodical critics, calling them “oracles” and dictators who produced “indolent acquiescence of their readers” (1.8). Then Fuller turned her scorn toward readers:

the public, grown lazy and helpless by this constant use of props and stays, can now scarce brace itself even to get through a magazine article, but reads in the daily paper laid beside the breakfast plate a short notice of the last number of the long established and popular review, and thereupon passes its judgment and its content. (1.9)

Fuller imagined the *Dial* functioning as a virtual salon, a meeting room for friendly critics and self-reliant readers. Critics should not “stamp a work” for “luxurious readers,” Fuller argued, but stimulate “earnest inquirers” (1.8). In the essay’s conclusion, Fuller summed up the ideal critic: “He will teach us to love *wisely* what we before loved well” (1.11). Fuller’s ideal critic came alongside independent and passionate readers, teaching them to reject “ensoriousness” and “infatuation” and modeling “discernment” and “reverence” (1.11). Fuller argued that lay readers and critics had to balance personal enjoyment with reason when evaluating what they read.

Fuller's rhetoric effectively fused the Transcendentalists' antiauthoritarianism with their reverence for literary culture. In one paragraph, she tore down the authority of the critic and, in the next, reinstalled the critic by authorizing *all* readers and recasting the critic as an "expert" reader. She managed to justify both her job and the *Dial's* foray into criticism and to empower American readers.

Emerson's and Fuller's introductions converge and reveal the *Dial's* ultimate concern with working out the new Transcendentalist model of reading. From its opening pages, the *Dial's* editors and contributors argued that readers should radically change how they interacted with texts, authors, and other readers. Transcendentalists rejected hierarchical models of reading that located authority in texts, authors, or critics. Instead, they insisted that the individual reader, through an intuitive and universal connection with "Nature," could determine the meaning and value of literature. The *Dial's* contributors consistently celebrated this individually liberating model of reading and the authors and texts it opened up to them. But they also acknowledged that not all literature was equal and that good interpretations were not strictly personal. The best interpretations emerged dialectically, from sympathetic "conversations" between the author/text and the individual reader, and between individual readers and a community of readers. Thus Transcendentalist reading was simultaneously personal and communal, a conviction the writers of the *Dial* both argued and practiced in its pages.

1. The Transcendentalist Community and their *Dial*

By the time the *Dial's* first issue went to press in July 1840, the idea of a Transcendentalist journal had been discussed intermittently for half a decade. Joel

Myerson has thoroughly documented the history of the *Dial* in his 1980 *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial: A History of the Magazine and Its Contributors*.² Myerson explains that the *Dial* grew out of the “Transcendental Club,” a loose association of dissatisfied Unitarian ministers and their friends. The “Club” eventually included Emerson, George Ripley, Frederic Henry Hedge, George Putnam, Orestes Brownson, Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, John Sullivan Dwight, James Freeman Clarke, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and Fuller. Many club members later edited, contributed to, or supported the *Dial* in some way. The Transcendental Club met to discuss, often heatedly, topics including “American Genius” and the “Education of Humanity” (Myerson, “Calendar” 200; 201). The Transcendentalist Club members’ mix of opinionated personalities created disagreements that eventually drove members including Brownson and Putnam away (Myerson 22).

If Transcendental Club members squabbled with each other, it is not surprising that they developed even more contentious relationships with outsiders. Barbara Packer argues that the Transcendental Club was driven to form its own journal in the wake of the controversy generated by Emerson’s Divinity School Address, after which “established journals like the *Christian Examiner* were closed to the group” (112). Myerson surmises that original Transcendental Club members imagined they needed “a new magazine, primarily religious in content but also giving a good amount of space to literary and philosophical matters” (35). But Myerson argues that the disunity of the Transcendental

² Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Joel Myerson refer to *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial: A History of the Magazine and Its Contributors*.

Club explains why the *Dial* never became the theological journal the group imagined. He explains:

most of those who were left, as the *Dial* prepared for its first number, neither wished nor were prepared to write on theological subjects, since their writings, like most of Fuller's own private portfolio, were literary rather than theological in character. By being thus forced to fall back upon the only available help, the *Dial* was destined from the beginning to be mainly literary in tone and clannish in supporters. (43)

I contend that the *Dial*'s emphasis on literature is *not* a turn away from the Transcendentalists' religious project, rather that reading was the central activity that structured their religious philosophy. In other words, for Transcendentalists religious concerns were largely indistinguishable from literary concerns because they considered reading a spiritual activity no matter what the text. Through reading, Transcendentalists constructed their relationships with the Oversoul, Nature, and humanity.

Two names suggested in early discussions and correspondences, *The Transcendentalist* and *The Spiritual Enquirer*, hint at the *Dial*'s inevitable religious/philosophical bent, while the eventual metaphysical title shows its literariness (Myerson 32). Like its name, the list of potential *Dial* editors underwent several revisions. Hedge considered editing a journal of his own, but his project never materialized. In 1835, Emerson wrote to Thomas Carlyle asking him to edit a transatlantic literary journal, but Carlyle declined (Mott 703; Myerson 32). When Brownson offered to merge the Transcendentalists' proposed project with his own publication, the *Boston Quarterly Review*, Emerson, Alcott, and Fuller declined his offer, fearing that Brownson's journal would prove too narrow for their ambitions (Myerson

38).³ So the *Dial* remained hypothetical until 1839, when Fuller and George Ripley revived discussions of a Transcendentalist periodical in earnest. That fall, Alcott proposed the name “*Dial*” for their journal. Emerson found the sundial an apt metaphor for their project; he compared mainstream periodicals to “dead watches” marking “dead time,” while likening the Transcendentalists’ journal to a sundial resting in an Edenic garden “measuring no hours but those of sunshine” (“The Editors to the Reader” 1.4).

When Fuller assumed the *Dial*’s editorship in 1841, she was assisted by managing editor George Ripley, who oversaw the journal’s business affairs until he left to establish Brook Farm (Myerson 198). Fuller’s true editorial partner was Emerson, whose connections proved indispensable to the young project. Myerson explains that by 1841, the Transcendental Club, which had hoped for a journal to express their own “dissenting theological views,” could not agree on enough to unite around and contribute to the *Dial*, so the *Dial* lost its unified focus on theology (43). *Dial* contributors, Myerson explains, ended up being Emerson’s and Fuller’s friends, “who were for the most part not practicing ministers” (43). As Fuller struggled to fill pages throughout the first year, Emerson coaxed contributions from people Fuller had little direct influence over initially, such as Thoreau and Cranch (Myerson 42).

What they failed to procure from friends, Emerson and Fuller made up for with their own writing. Fuller contributed over 35 of her own entries to the *Dial*, a record surpassed only by Emerson whose articles, reviews, and poems totaled over 70. In addition to writing for every *Dial* issue, Emerson regularly edited contributors’ pieces.

³ For more about how the *Boston Quarterly Review* related to the *Dial* and the Transcendentalist movement, see Clarence Gohdes’ *The Periodicals of American Transcendentalism*.

Myerson believes that Emerson saw himself as the “chief editorial consultant to the *Dial*” during Fuller’s time as editor, and even “in effect Fuller’s second-in-command” (60). Ultimately, Fuller resigned two years after she began; episodes of possible depression and debilitating migraines prohibited her from editing while working another job, which became essential since she never received her promised salary (Capper 49; Myerson 74). However, after her resignation, Fuller continued to be a major contributor to and influence on the *Dial*. Upon Fuller’s resignation in March 1842, Emerson reluctantly decided to serve as the *Dial*’s editor.

According to Myerson, the announcement that Emerson took over editing the *Dial* renewed attention to the journal and spawned a wave of remarkably positive reviews in July 1842 (80). As editor, Emerson worked to increase the *Dial*’s coverage of transatlantic concerns; he published an account of Alcott’s visit with English reformers and convinced Charles Stearns Wheeler to send the *Dial* letters describing the intellectual life he experienced while visiting Germany (Myerson 84; 85). With Thoreau’s help, Emerson also began a series called “Ethnical Scriptures,” in which he ran reprints of eastern wisdom and religious literature. As the year went on, Emerson found his own writing and lecturing career competing for his time, so Emerson relied on Thoreau to edit the entire April 1843 *Dial* while he traveled (Myerson 88). By 1844, Emerson’s interest shifted even further away from the *Dial* as he was eager to publish his second volume of essays, some poetry, and continue a busy lecturing schedule (Myerson 95). Myerson believes that Emerson only “decided to finish out the *Dial*’s last volume because he wished to try, to the very end, to use the *Dial* for the promotion of his friends’ writings”

(95). So, on April 8, 1844, the last issue of the Transcendentalists' *Dial* was released to its dwindling audience (Myerson 97).

2. *Dial* Contents

As its early subtitle, "A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion," suggests, the *Dial* ran a wide array of articles. Long non-fiction essays composed most of its contents—for example, Parker's "The Divine Presence in Nature and in the Soul," and Emerson's "Thoughts on Modern Literature," as well as long book or author reviews like Fuller's "Goethe" and Thoreau's "Homer. Ossian. Chaucer." Under Fuller's tenure as editor, the *Dial* regularly featured reviews of art and music; see, for example, her reviews of the Allston Exhibition and *The Lives of Great Composers*. A more unusual genre that the *Dial* ran was excerpts from personal journals and diaries, including Charlie Emerson's "Notes from the Journal of a Scholar" and Cranch's "Musings of a Recluse." A few personal letters also made their way into the *Dial*, for example George Ripley's "Letter to a Theological Student."

The *Dial* frequently published short-fiction pieces that promoted Transcendentalist values. W. H. Channing's serialized short-story "Ernest the Seeker" sympathetically narrated one young man's conversion to Catholicism. Parker's parable "Truth against the World" pitted Paul, a misunderstood progressive, against an arrogant Pharisee, implicitly comparing the Transcendentalists to Paul. But by far, the most famous genre-defying original work in the *Dial* was Alcott's "Orphic Sayings" patterned after Goethe's work of the same title.

Many aspiring Transcendentalist poets also enjoyed publication in the *Dial*. In fact, the *Dial* was the first to publish Henry David Thoreau's short poem "Symphy," which Thoreau had shown to Emerson, his neighbor, a few years earlier (Myerson 39). Emerson himself, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Ellen Sturgis Hooper, Caroline Sturgis, and William Ellery Channing also frequently contributed poetry to the *Dial*. Helen Hennessy, a critic of the *Dial*'s poetry, identifies loneliness and Nature as the overwhelming themes of *Dial* poetry (71; 73). Historically, critics have been kinder to anti-Transcendentalist poets than to *Dial* contributors; Hennessy attributes the *Dial*'s "somewhat pathetic" poetry to the Transcendentalists' belief that "poetry was inspiration far more than craft" (71). She argues that "many good transcendentalists" made "many bad poets" (71). Nonetheless, the *Dial*'s surplus of mediocre poetry attests to their belief in universal inspiration and the importance of poetry.⁴

In addition to long book reviews and author biographies (such as Fuller's "Goethe"), the *Dial* ran a regular series of reading recommendations and reviews at the end of each issue. These sections ran under various names, including "Record of the Months," "A Select List of Recent Publications," "Editor's Table," and "Literary Intelligence." But overwhelmingly, the contents of the *Dial* centered on reading. Its long religious or philosophical articles usually responded to Unitarian writers or drew upon European Romantic authors for support. The *Dial*'s biographical articles summarized and

⁴ Hennessy explains the Transcendentalists' belief in universal inspiration: "Since poetry was inspiration far more than craft, and since all men are possessed of a heart, the transcendentalist doctrine proclaimed every man (provided he was properly attuned to the Oversoul) a poet" (71). She also summarizes the Transcendentalists' reverence of poetry: "In the transcendentalist aesthetic, the Poet was the chosen executor of the designs of the Oversoul" (70). Hennessy concludes that there "have been few more passive conceptions of the poetic process than Emerson's" (70).

extensively quoted recently published biographies. Literary criticism and reading recommendations merely capped off a periodical already full of discussions based on reading. In all, the *Dial* was a journal shaped by avid readers for the benefit of other readers.

Chapter 1: Sympathetic Conversations

In this chapter, I explain how Transcendentalists conceived of and practiced their theory of reading as conversation. The fact that they relied on conversation as their guiding metaphor for reading makes sense in light of their rejection of the hierarchical models of authority that structured the Unitarian church and the antebellum educational system. Transcendentalists rejected institutionalized authority in favor of intuitive personal authority. *Dial* contributors defended their shift in authority by revamping the traditional Christian doctrines of illumination and inspiration. Individual readers, empowered by intuition, were to engage in imagined conversations with authors. But the empowered reader had to observe the conventions of conversation, especially reciprocity and sympathy. By rejecting authority in the reading experience, Transcendentalists transformed reading from an isolating experience to an inherently social one, even for the solitary reader.

1. The Transcendentalist Rejection of Meddling Authorities

In the *Dial*, Transcendentalists reacted against forms of reading they perceived as authoritarian, especially those which limited authority for interpreting and determining the value of literature to an author, a critic, or a text. Transcendentalists, usually Harvard-educated and ordained Unitarian ministers, encountered these institutional models of reading in the university and the church. Thus, their anti-authoritarian rhetoric quite often took aim at those particular targets.

The “critic” manifested himself in a variety of forms to the Transcendentalists, but especially as the preacher/interpreter in the church, the scholar/teacher in the university, and the editor in the press. Most Transcendentalists were especially concerned with the power of professors and preachers in limiting readers’ powers, but some also showed keen interest in literary critics. Fuller, one of the most literary-minded and least religious Transcendentalists, especially resented the overgrown power of literary critics. Her “Short Essay on Critics” directly confronted the authority of American periodical critics by calling for an egalitarian relationship between readers and critics. Theodore Parker joined Fuller in critiquing literary and journalistic critics in his polemical 1841 article “The Pharisees.” Parker’s fundamental critique of “sleek” newspaper editors was that they considered their readers consumers to be pleased and gave them exactly what they wanted to hear, rather than making their papers places for a vigorous and thorough debate of current events and opinions (2.64-65). Although Fuller and Parker critiqued antebellum periodical editors for different sins, the former for their arrogance and the latter for their greed, both agreed that critics in the press enjoyed too much power and failed to live up to the responsibilities of the critic. In either case, critics actually discouraged the reader from reading much at all by either insisting or asking the reader to rely on them for digested versions of texts. Critics in the press practically cut off direct contact between an author/text and the ordinary reader.

Likewise, university professors functioned as important critics in many Transcendentalists’ lives. American universities at the time *Dial* contributors attended college enacted pedagogies based on imitation and recitation of classic reading and

proved, therefore, inhospitable to original thought or critical responses to texts. According to Daniel Walker Howe, Ivy League practices were not the result of theory, though. In *The Unitarian Conscience*, Howe argues that Unitarian educators professed progressive ideals for university curriculum, so “the discrepancy between their exalted educational ideals and their mediocre performance is sometimes painfully sharp” (262). Specifically, Howe notes that prominent professors and administrators at Harvard believed that good teachers would train students how to learn and make them curious, rather than simply doling out “facts” (Howe 257). The prevalent belief was that a student with well-cultivated critical faculties could “pick up” knowledge at anytime. Yet the Harvard curriculum centered on recitation and ignored teaching students how to research, thereby cutting off avenues to original thought altogether (Howe 264). According to Howe, the educational practices Transcendentalists resented were those receiving close scrutiny by Harvard leaders; Transcendentalists merely reacted more strongly and decisively than their professors did.

Dial writers frequently took aim at academics. In his “Lectures on the Times,” which was reprinted in the July 1842 *Dial*, Emerson lamented that in antebellum America thinking had become an “art,” when it ought to have been a “rage” (3.14). He critiqued thinkers, seemingly scholars, for standing between himself and truth: “The thinker gives me results, and never invites me to be present with him at his invocation of truth, and to enjoy with him its proceeding into his mind” (3.14). Emerson seems most disgruntled that even when a professor had something to say (which in many other places Emerson

doubted), he blocked his student from direct experience of that truth. Emerson sought unmediated knowledge.

William Ellery Channing joined Emerson in critiquing the scholars they studied under. In the *Dial*'s longest running fiction series, "The Youth of the Poet and the Painter," Channing took direct aim at the authority of the university. Channing's series is a fictional drama narrated through a series of letters between Edward Ashford, a young poet and college drop-out, and his friends and family. Channing attacked the pedagogy dominated by rote learning prevalent at American universities; his Ashford writes, "I recited some two or three lessons tolerably I believe, although I felt it was useless work" (4.177). In Channing's series, Ashford is the poet-hero, the rebellious and intellectually free man, the model Transcendentalist. Ashford speaks for the Transcendentalists when he defends his decision to leave college by explaining how lifeless and inauthentic he found academic life.⁵ "At College, I found we were treated, not only as machines, but to be set up or down, at the discretion of these tutors, who had merely to scratch down a mark, and thus decide our fates" (4.177). What Emerson and Channing complained about, George Ripley sought to remedy. His plans for Brook Farm, announced in the *Dial*, included a system of education defined in direct opposition to the kind of education they received at Harvard. Ripley declared, "It is time that the imitative and book-learned systems of the latter should be superseded or liberalized by some plan, better calculated to excite originality of thought, and the native energies of the mind" (353).

⁵ Francis Utley's "Thoreau and Columella: A Study in Reading Habits" describes Thoreau's longstanding "feud" with Harvard librarians, who he felt hoarded books (178). Utley argues that Thoreau's marginalia should be understood as retaliation.

Transcendentalists considered traditional education an obstacle to intuitive reading.

Emerson was hopeful about the future of American readership but admitted that “there is no fool like your learned fool” (“Thoughts on Modern Literature” 1.143). George Ripley, whose letter to a new seminary student was reprinted in the *Dial*, warned against reading and studying in order to find proof texts to support the status quo (1.183). And Fuller insisted that good literature was simply lost on “those fettered by custom, and crusted over by artificial tastes” (“Bettina Brentano and her Friend G nderode” 2.313).

Ironically, most habits Transcendentalists considered negative in readers stemmed from education, not a lack of it. The best readers, according to Fuller, were “those of free intellect and youthful eager heart” (2.313). The university served as an institutionalized critic, interfering in reading by teaching bad reading habits and discouraging readers from independently and creatively reading texts.

Similarly, the preacher, functioning as “critic” for his congregation, cut off direct access to the texts central to religion. In “The Pharisees” Parker noted that average parishioners would not read the Bible for themselves during the week, and were read to on Sundays (2.69). In the same article, Parker accused ministers of intentionally lying to their congregations, thinking one thing and preaching another (2.74). Essentially, Parker condemned preachers for being condescending critics, secretly savoring their own thoughts, but considering their churches unfit to hear complex and unorthodox “truths” (2.74). The essential task of the preacher was translation, representing the “Word of God” to his congregation. Ministers were the most pervasive and influential interpreters of Scripture in antebellum America. Professors of Divinity may have claimed the most

authority, but weekly sermons were the most common mechanism for dispensing criticism of the Christian scriptures to the largest audiences. The interpretations ministers provided contradicted the conclusions that Transcendentalists arrived at themselves. Thus, the Transcendentalists resented religious critics both for their conservatism in the pulpit and for their seemingly un-earned spiritual authority.

Whether they were reacting to real injuries or just perceived threats to their autonomy as readers, *Dial* contributors critiqued institutionalized religious and educational authorities. Their critiques frequently stemmed from the authorities' interference in their reading experiences. In other words, authorities such as preachers and professors took the shape of mediating institutions by interpreting texts for their parishioners and students in ways Transcendentalists resented. In fact, it may not be the specific interpretations, but the very existence of a buffering authority that the Transcendentalists resented most. *Dial* contributors wanted to clear the way between themselves and the authors and texts they read. In effect, the Transcendentalists wanted to limit, if not cut out, the middleman from their experiences as readers.

While the *Dial* most often took aim at interfering critics, it also resisted efforts to locate authority in an author or in the text itself. In the Transcendentalists' Romantic paradigm, distinguishing between an author and a text was not meaningful, because the text was simply the author's expression. However, in antebellum America, Scriptures inhabited a unique place of authority. So, even though the Transcendentalists usually ignored the text as a thing apart from the author, when it came to Scripture, they resisted any attempt to give canonical texts authority. Parker attacked preachers, calling them the

“Pharisee[s] of the Pulpit” for trying to persuade parishioners to accept the New Testament as unquestionably authoritative. He accused preachers of locating authority in the text by forbidding anyone to doubt the inspiration and infallibility of Scriptures (2.72). “The Bible is his Master, and not his Friend” (2.72). Transcendentalists, who wrote extensively on the topic of friendship, believed that true friendships were egalitarian and reciprocal. Although Parker acknowledged the problem of locating too much authority in the text, he was mostly alone among the Transcendentalists in addressing the text as an authority. This is probably because Parker’s articles were the most theological, and the interpretation of Christian Scriptures was the focus of heated controversy between Unitarians and evangelicals.

In general, however, Transcendentalists were expressivists who believed that inspired authors passively recorded Nature. Thus, they usually ignored the text in favor of the author. Emerson’s casual comment in “New Poetry” typifies the Transcendentalist attitude toward the text; he noted that as editor he included an excerpt of the poem (the text) because it “gives us a new insight into his [the poet’s] character and habits” (1.231). A text is the expression of an author, so “text” was only important for the Transcendentalists when it came to Scriptures, as we have seen with Parker, and in the case of translations, which inevitably impeded direct communication between the author and the reader.

Transcendentalists agreed that readers should not submerge their interpretations to an author’s intentions or to a text’s most literal meaning. Instead, the *Dial* promoted a creative process of reading. An early version of creative reading appears in Emerson’s

1837 speech “The American Scholar,” in which Emerson famously proclaimed, “One must be an inventor to read well” (59). Emerson, probably responding to the common pedagogical practice of recitation and imitation, critiqued readers who could only absorb the author’s thoughts and not produce any of their own. Emerson deeply valued and enjoyed reading, but worried that reading made readers passive by allowing them to rest in the thoughts of authors, rather pushing them to create their own thoughts. He insisted, “There is then creative reading as well as creative writing” (59). In order to read creatively, the reader must be able to see past the literal meaning of words, for “Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world” (59). Any author has only passing moments of pure inspiration, so even the greatest books house only brief records of inspiration (59). Thus, “The discerning will read, in his Plato or Shakspeare, only that least part, -- only the authentic utterances of the oracle; -- all the rest he rejects, were it never so many times Plato’s and Shakspeare’s” (59). In “The American Scholar” Emerson called for personal and creative reading; he asked for readers who were unimpressed by an author’s celebrity. The “world,” all of Nature, is the authority, not the author. In the *Dial*, contributors agreed with Emerson, arguing for and modeling creative reading. They freely questioned the authority of the author, often by voicing disagreements with him. Even the authors they loved the most were subjected to close critique.

Dial contributors resisted dogmatic authority at every turn. They critiqued domineering critics and submissive readers and hoped to reinvigorate readers, imbuing them with authority to read for themselves, to no longer rely on oppressive authorities.

Transcendentalists empowered readers by rehabilitating the traditional Puritan doctrines of illumination and inspiration, recasting them in light of the Romantic virtue of intuition.

2. Intuition and Reading

The traditional Christian doctrines of inspiration and illumination refer to the Holy Spirit's role in the production of sacred texts (inspiration) and in the reception of those inspired texts (illumination). For antebellum evangelicals and their Puritan predecessors, inspiration referred to the belief that God literally (even verbally) inspired the authors of Scripture. Similarly, illumination was the doctrine that the Holy Spirit acted while a believer read Scripture to help that reader gain the correct meaning of that text. According to Lawrence Buell, Unitarians at least paid lip-service to the doctrine of inspiration, but in reality they probably believed that inspiration was "indistinguishable" from regular mental activity (38). Candy Gunther Brown acknowledges that Transcendentalists were interested in "inspiration," but argues that they used that word very differently than evangelicals of the day. She contends that "Romantics perceived imaginative language as spiritually powerful because it evoked the same states of feeling in the writer as the reader," but that they rejected "the distinction between Word and words, sacred and secular, worldly and otherworldly, Holy Spirit and human spirit" (44). Similarly, Philip Gura argues that Emerson was intrigued by the possibility that human language was "a form of vatic inspiration," but that Emerson merged his understanding of "scriptural" and "natural" language" (77; 76). For Emerson, "within the language of nature there was an infinite variability of forms available to express man's thoughts, religious or otherwise" (Gura 77). Gura emphasizes that Emerson saw inspired language

outside particular denominations or even Christianity (77). So Transcendentalists used the words illumination and inspiration to refer to the spiritual power active in reading but released them from their tether to Christian metaphysics. Instead, they attributed reading's spiritual potential to a more universal agent, intuition.

Insistence on the authority of intuition was arguably the most important philosophical claim of Transcendentalism. Most scholars agree that Emerson's 1838 "Divinity School Address," which proclaimed the primacy of intuition over empiricism, marked the parting of ways between Transcendentalists and mainstream Unitarians. In this provocative speech, Emerson divested Unitarian ministers of their right to claim authority by declaring that every individual possessed a direct avenue to truth—intuition. Emerson proclaimed, the "doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely; it is an intuition" (79). Intuition is universal but personal. Emerson argued that truth could not be passed from person to person because it does not exist as a "thing" outside a person. Another person, no matter how authoritative, can use words to provoke another. "What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing" (79). He called individuals to accept only what their intuitions confirmed as truth and lamented that "the doctrine of inspiration," "the doctrine of the soul," lost out to "the base doctrine of the majority of voices" (79). By asserting the authority of intuition, Emerson paved the way for a reinstatement of inspiration.

Fuller and other *Dial* contributors show their solidarity with Emerson by rebuilding and reinvigorating the doctrine of inspiration around the force of intuition. In the *Dial*, the words inspiration and illumination were used rather imprecisely, so a reader might be inspired, an author might be illuminated, or either one just might be intuitive. But *Dial* contributors did invoke all three concepts. Not surprisingly, the theologian Parker contributed the most thorough treatment of this topic. In “The Divine Presence in Nature and in the Soul,” Parker reconstructed the traditional religious concept of inspiration to make room for pluralism and universalism; his goal was to argue that inspiration (prophecy) is ongoing and can occur in anyone, regardless of religion. Parker defined inspiration as “the presence of God in the soul,” a process that Parker insisted is direct, not mediated through the senses (1.62). Importantly, Parker did not identify the Holy Spirit as the agent of inspiration. Instead, he argued that inspiration occurs through intuition, the “direct and immediate perception of Truth” (1.63). Parker’s diction emphasizes the subjectivity of inspiration; it is intuitive, perceived, and felt. For Parker, the only “test” of inspiration was the “truth of the thought, feeling, or doctrine” (1.63).

Another innovation of Parker’s doctrine of inspiration is that it can occur to varying degrees. More orthodox formulations of inspiration would say that a person or a text is either inspired or not, never partially inspired. But Parker argued that inspiration could vary based on the “amount of fidelity in each recipient of inspiration” (1.64). And because inspiration varies from person to person, possibly from moment to moment, inspiration is not the same as infallibility. Parker noted that “inspiration cannot be infallible and absolute, except the man’s intellect, conscience, affection, and religion are

perfectly developed” (1.66). Sensuality was the greatest obstacle to being inspired (1.68). Parker closed his article in a sermon-like tone: “Now, as in the day of Moses, or Jesus, he who is faithful to Reason, and Conscience, Affection and Faith, will, through these, receive an inspiration to guide him all his journey through” (1.70). Parker’s construction of inspiration pits itself directly against empiricism by valuing reason, conscience, affection, and faith even as he acknowledges that natural revelation occurs. Parker’s greatest contribution was his insistence that inspiration is not an action of the Holy Spirit, limited to chosen saints, but available to everyone through an intuitive connection with the Universal Soul.

Even more pertinent to reading, however, is the Transcendentalists’ reworking of illumination. Parker’s construction of inspiration is only halfway toward a theory of reading that rests on inspired individuals. Parker addressed writing from the production end, that is, how inspiration operates in authors. J. A. Saxton’s *Dial* article, “Prophecy—Transcendentalism—Progress” made the connection between inspiration and illumination, between inspired author and inspired reader. Saxton brought a few important key terms into the mix, using prophecy nearly synonymously with inspiration, and inspiration interchangeably for illumination. This mixing was intentional and based on Saxton’s belief in the essential unity of the human mind. Saxton noted that in order for “prophecy” to work, the mind of the audience, whether listener or reader, must be able to receive it (2.85). In other words, “the prophet must address some common principle of the human mind, appeal to ideas already existing there, and produce conviction by giving form and a voice to the slumbering intuitions of the soul, which have but awaited the time

to awake into life” (2.85). As evidence, Saxton pointed to the persistent belief in Christianity despite the doubts empiricism tried to lodge against it. Employing language borrowed from Edwards, he argued that inspiration trumps “authority”: “The masses, though they have never seen by the glow-worm light of logic, have always believed in Jesus, as the Christ, and with a faith infinitely surer than authority, or tradition, or historical testimony can impart” (1.95). What the true prophet says or writes is already present in the mind of his audience (the believing masses). Essentially, whatever the writer accesses in moments of inspiration is the same thing that the inspired reader accesses intuitively. So, Saxton blurred the line between inspiration and illumination. Both require the “spirit of prophecy, the intuition of the true” (2.96). The author can be inspired, but so can the reader. In fact, Saxton argued that intuition replaced scholars and theologians as the authority on all “moral questions” (2.96).

Emerson’s 1841 *Dial* article “Thoughts on Art,” which echoed the claims of his “Divinity School Address” and Saxton’s “Prophecy—Transcendentalism—Progress,” more specifically applied intuition to reading and writing. Emerson invoked intuition in order to argue for the unity of inspiration and illumination, of writing and reading. In this article, Emerson described authors as almost completely passive, insisting that the “universal soul is the alone creator of the useful and the beautiful” (1.368). He emphasized the unity of reality, resolutely proclaiming there is only “one Reason,” one mind, and that every individual is an “inlet” to that mind (1.374). Emerson admitted that the purity of connectedness to the universal soul varies, so that “every work of art is a more or less pure manifestation” of the universal soul (1.374). He concluded that the

“delight” we experience in reading a book or observing a sculpture arises “from our recognizing in it the mind that formed Nature again in active operation” (1.374). Whether inspiration is pure or somewhat diluted, what is important is that for both the writer and the reader, the origin of the spiritual experience is the same—the universal soul.

3. Reading as a Sympathetic Conversation

If readers read intuitively, they have no need for an outside authority who determines the value and meaning of literature. So, the Transcendentalists needed a new way to imagine the relationships between the author, critic, and reader. Intuition collapsed the hierarchies of traditional models of reading. Thus, authors and readers were potentially equal. The fact that Transcendentalists understood authors as intuitively inspired is important because it means that the author does not have any claim to authority over an inspired reader. Further, a critic, who is first of all a reader, does not have any basis for claiming authority over another reader. In reading, the Transcendentalists saw a meeting of inspired agents: the inspired author speaking with the inspired reader. This new and egalitarian construction of reading required a new guiding metaphor and antebellum culture provided them with a fitting metaphor—conversation.

In *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation*, Peter Gibian explains why mid-nineteenth century America is appropriately called the “Age of Conversation” (7). Gibian believes that the verbal mode of conversation came into vogue as oratory declined, largely because of conversation’s democratic potential (22). Conversation, which had been a genteel art in the eighteenth century, became a widespread pastime in

the nineteenth. And as conversation made its way into the daily lives of the middle class, it also expanded beyond private life into public spaces and discourse (Gibian 25). Gibian notes, “Whether in elite salons or in working-class saloons... Americans everywhere seemed to be finding a new release in dialogic talk” (25).

Transcendentalists, in particular, embraced conversation, finding it well suited to their anti-authoritarian ideology. From 1839 to 1844, Fuller led conversations for Boston women on topics ranging from feminism to mythology. These famous conversations were recorded by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Caroline Healy Dall, whose published account, *Margaret and Her Friends*, transcribes a unique series that included men. Fuller’s interest in conversation influenced her writing, not just her teaching. In the *Dial*, Fuller published several “dialogues,” often between two readers or a reader and a critic.

But Fuller was not the only Transcendentalist invested in “conversation” as a pedagogical model and a writing form. Alcott’s teaching career was cut short after he published the controversial *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*, which recorded his experiment of “letting young children work to discover the truths of the Bible stories for themselves, in their own words, through group discussion, rather than simply learning to repeat the already revealed Truths forced upon them through the lectures of a teacher or the sermons of a minister” (Gibian 29-30). In the *Dial*, Alcott continued exploring and defending conversation. He insisted that humans share a basic need for conversation, without which “there is no great and sincere intercourse—souls do not meet” (“Days from a Diary” 2.431). Without conversation, individuals exist in isolation. “Sincerity in thought and speech can alone redeem man from this exile and restore confidence into his

relations. We must come to the simplest intercourse—to Conversation and the Epistle. These are most potent agencies—the reformers of the world” (2.431). Alcott believed the necessary spontaneity of conversation would safeguard its sincerity, making it a truly redemptive mode of discourse. Gibian points out that Transcendentalists like Alcott and Emerson viewed spontaneous conversation as an ongoing “Pentecost”—souls meeting other souls through the spiritual language of intuition (23). Transcendentalists believed that conversation was a mode of communication that channeled spiritual energy directly between two people. Further, for Alcott, “spontaneous, interactive talk offered a more powerful and more democratic means for establishing a true, heart-to-heart collaboration between speaker and audience” than the oratory forms of preaching or teaching (23). It should not be surprising, then, that Transcendentalists adopted conversation as their primary metaphor for reading in the *Dial*. By imagining reading as a kind of “spontaneous, interactive talk,” Transcendentalists hoped to democratize reading, establishing “a true, heart-to-heart collaboration between” authors and readers.

This is precisely the collaboration Fuller strived for in “A Short Essay on Critics” when she re-imagined the relationships between the three main agents in the reading triangle: the author, the critic, and the reader. Fuller’s rhetoric might seem conservative because she maintained distinctions between the author, critic, and reader at all. “The critic is beneath the maker,” admitted Fuller, “but is his needed friend. What tongue could speak but to an intelligent ear?” (1.7). The hierarchy Fuller set up does not describe authority, but the origin and direction of a message. In Fuller’s reading model, the author and the critic have distinct roles. The author is the “maker,” “divine,” “genius,” and the

critic a priest-like mediator between divinity and humanity (1.7). Fuller preserved the distinction between author and critic but emphasized the dignity of both and the mutual cooperation they require by casting authors and critics as friends. When Fuller dignified the critic, she implicitly dignified the reader. Although a critic mediates between author and “humanity,” the critic is first and foremost a reader. In Fuller’s model, the critic is just a more expert reader. So, by closing the gap between author and critic, Fuller simultaneously reduced the distance between author and reader.

After recasting the author/critic relationship, and with it the author/reader relationship, Fuller moved on to the critic/reader relationship. In the second half of “A Short Essay on Critics” Fuller emphasized the critic’s role as a fellow-reader, insisting that they must adopt a tone of friendliness instead of authoritativeness. Fuller also called for a new generation of readers who refused to be cowed by dictatorial critics. Good readers are “earnest inquirers” interested in what critics (fellow-readers) think about what they read but empowered to transform what had been a critical monologue into a conversation (1.10). Again, Fuller suggested friendship and companionship as models for the relationships structuring reading. The rest of the *Dial* attempted to enact the model of actual equality and imagined reciprocity between authors, critics, and readers that Fuller sketched out in “A Short Essay on Critics.”

Not surprisingly, Fuller put her conversational model of reading into practice quite thoroughly and robustly. Her intensity was not accidental, though; as a critic in the *Dial*, Fuller acted as a representative and ideal reader for her audience. In particular, Fuller modeled two characteristics necessary to a reader who imagines reading as a

conversation. As a reader, Fuller was both demanding and sympathetic. In Fuller's "Goethe," the lead article of the July 1841 *Dial*, the balance between her high expectations of the author and her generosity toward him are especially apparent.

Fuller demanded greatness, not just from the author's writing (the text), but from the author personally. As a literary reformer, Fuller seemed especially offended when she observed an author indulging lazy readers. Goethe's use of metatext particularly annoyed her since she considered verbal signposts unnecessary for discerning and thorough readers (2.32). She compared "declarations of sentiment on the part of the author" to the use of "sixthly, seventhly, and eighthly" in "old-fashioned sermons" (2.32). A good reader, according to Fuller, resents such guidance because she will "read a work so thoroughly as to apprehend its whole scope and tendency" and prefer not to "hear what the author says it means" (2.32). Beyond criticizing disappointing moments in the text, Fuller also expressed a sense of unmet expectations with her experience of reading Goethe in general. She wanted to feel "that very thing which genius should always make us feel, that I was in its circle, and could not get out till its spell was done, and its last spirit permitted to depart" (2.33-34). Reading Goethe's texts, Fuller remained outside the circle of genius.

But Fuller's disappointment with Goethe stemmed from something more complicated than her unmet demands on the text she read. Like most Transcendentalists, Fuller hardly distinguished between the author as a writer and the author as a person. The importance Transcendentalists placed on *ethos* underscores their view of reading as a personal activity. One does not merely read a text, but converses with a person. And as

conversationalists, whether face-to-face or imagined while reading, Transcendentalists demanded a worthy partner, an equal in intellect and morality. This seems to be Fuller's primary critique in "Goethe." Quite unequivocally, Fuller judged that Goethe's intellect and morality were not in the correct proportions; Goethe was "naturally of a deep mind and shallow heart" (2.2). A more particularly Transcendentalist critique Fuller leveled against Goethe was that he "had not from nature that character of self-reliance and self-control" (2.6). Fuller devoted several pages of her article to Goethe's biography, uncovering his problematic childhood and worldliness which she blames for his failure to create revelation, rather than art (2.34). In these moments, the demanding Fuller sounds a bit like the critics she condemned in "A Short Essay on Critics." But Fuller's demands on Goethe are mitigated by her sympathy for him.

Fuller encouraged sympathy for her troublesome author by contextualizing Goethe's shortcomings in his biography and, somewhat condescendingly, by arguing that he would probably agree with her assessment of him. Finding Goethe not entirely Transcendental, Fuller mused, "Perhaps Goethe is even now sensible that he should not have stopped at Weimar as his home, but made it one station on the way to Paradise; not stopped at humanity, but regarded it as symbolical of the divine" (2.29). And Fuller, after acknowledging what Goethe failed to achieve, was able to appreciate what he did. Even "if his genius lost sight of the highest aim, he is the best instructor [sic] in the use of means, ceasing to be a prophet poet, he was still a poetic artist" (2.21). Fuller noted particular texts and characters she loved; she also quietly applauded Goethe for what she read as his feminism, noting that he "always represents the highest principle in the

feminine form” (2.26). Despite her numerous disappointments, Fuller wrote, “I cannot hope to express my sense of the beauty of this book as a work of art” (2.33). In the end, Fuller deemed Goethe a worthy if imperfect companion in conversation.

In “Goethe,” Fuller’s behavior as a reader bordered on the audacious; she made great demands on the author and assumed an unconventional level of intimacy. She boldly told her readers, “when I think of Goethe, I seem to see his soul” (2.3). That is not the statement of a retiring admirer; when reading, and in most settings, Fuller insisted on intimacy and authenticity that exceeded the bounds of decorum. But Fuller justified her boldness, insisting that Goethe himself would want such a reader: “For the soul seeks not adorers but peers, not blind worship but intelligent sympathy” (2.5-6).⁶ “Intelligent sympathy” describes not only Fuller’s own approach to reading, but what could be considered the hallmark of the ideal Transcendentalist reader. Throughout “Goethe,” Fuller models the practices of an ideal Transcendentalist reader, balancing her demands (intelligence) with personal generosity (sympathy). Although the way this new model of reading was explained and defended varied among contributors, the basic tenet that the individual reader can and should consider herself an authority was celebrated in the pages of the *Dial*. Throughout the *Dial*’s nearly 1200 pages, writers wrote as if in conversation with the authors they read. Sometimes they “talked back” and sometimes they talked as friends. But no matter their tone, everyone responded to the authors they read.

Dial contributors turned to writing as a way to respond. Each contributor inevitably had different reading practices, but two characteristics seem to show up

⁶ Fuller’s call for “intelligent sympathy” strikes similar notes as her desire for critics who help readers “love wisely” in “A Short Essay on Critics” (2.11).

repeatedly. *Dial* contributors imagined the conversation of reading rather vividly, expressing feelings of having received something from the author and also of having something to say back. And secondly, they extended sympathy to the authors they “conversed” with, even if to varying degrees. The practices of a good conversationalist, taking turns and having sympathy, were the practices of a good Transcendentalist reader.

In the *Dial*, readers imagined their reading conversations as reciprocal. *Dial* contributors reported feeling a sense of agreement when they read, as if a friend had spoken for them or an author had “embodied in words” their own beliefs and feelings (George Ripley, “Brownson’s Writings” 1.30). Their sense of agreement fits with Emerson’s theory of intuition—that another person does not tell us something which we then accept, but that we recognize in others’ words truth found within ourselves.

Dial readers not only “heard” and intuitively agreed with what they read, but they also felt free to talk back. Imagined reciprocity frequently took the shape of written responses to reading. Some readers carried out their conversations in poetry. In the first issue of the *Dial*, Fuller and Clarke published poems directly addressed to authors, Richter and Dante, respectively (1.135-136). Alcott’s “Days from a Diary” records his personal responses to authors including Milton, Coleridge, and Emerson. In addition to his reflections on his reading, Alcott often copied long excerpts from his reading into his diary. In this way, Alcott’s diary (and thereby the *Dial*) became a print record of the virtual conversations he carried on with authors. All of the personal journals and diaries reprinted in the *Dial* record readers’ responses to imagined authors.

Although good readers sometimes reciprocated by disagreeing (as in Fuller's case), they were supposed to respond to authors sympathetically. Transcendentalists' interest in sympathy should be understood as a way of equalizing the author/reader relationship, not mere politeness or deference to the author's superiority. Thoreau explored the way "respect" prevented truly sympathetic relationships in his poem "Sympathy" (71). Of a friend, Thoreau wrote:

So was I taken unawares by this,
I quite forgot my homage to confess;
Yet now am forced to know, though hard it is,
I might have loved him, had I loved him less.

Each moment, as we nearer drew to each,
A stern respect withheld us farther yet,
So that we seemed beyond each other's reach,
And less acquainted than when first we met.

...

If I but love that virtue which he is,
Though it be scented in the morning air,
Still shall we be truest acquaintances,
Nor mortals know a sympathy more rare. (excerpted 1.71)

Thoreau understood respect as stern and alienating, but sympathy as uniting two people. Thoreau's distinction between respect and sympathy explains why Fuller was so insistent on critiquing someone as beloved as Goethe and why Charlie Emerson could address Shakespeare, "Oh my friend! Shall thou and I always be two persons?" (1.14). Only by eschewing debilitating respect could readers draw close to an author in sympathetic conversation.

For *Dial* contributors, being sympathetic meant trying to get as close as possible to the circumstances an author faced. They offered very specific and practical ways to

build sympathy for an author. Many recommended learning original languages to avoid relying on translations, which inevitably obscured direct conversation by inserting another's voice into it. George Ripley thus advised a seminary student to learn German (1.187). In addition to "speaking the same language" as the author, recreating the author's environment while reading helped the reader feel sympathy. S. G. Ward reported that reading Italian literature in Italy is ideal: "The Italian sonnet is another thing to me, since I heard the language day by day; and the wine and honey of the Italian prose, I find, were tasted in their true flavor till my eye became acquainted with the sky beneath which it grew" (1.386). These tips on reading vary from person to person, but the basic premise is the same. Each one of these suggestions attempted to close the distance between authors and readers, whether through language or space. By recreating the author's context as much as possible, the reader could participate in the author's experience of inspiration to a greater degree. Having a common experience would allow the intuitive reader to make better judgments when necessary and know when and how to contextualize the author's failures. But mostly, sympathy reduced the distance between the author and the reader.

On occasion, *Dial* contributors experienced imagined relationships with authors sexually. For example, Cranch imagined his experience of reading, conversing with Bettina erotically.⁷ In "Musings of a Recluse," Cranch recorded the "hours I bathed and floated in the sea of her beautiful thoughts" (1.190). He described reading Bettina's journals as a form of sensual immersion (1.190). Cranch and Bettina are not neutral partners in conversation, but highly gendered. Seduced by Bettina's prose, Cranch

⁷ Bettina (also known as Bettine) Brentano, friend of Goethe.

imagined an erotic charge between himself and the author. But Cranch cautioned other readers who might want to follow his lead in reading Bettina's journals; he warned that some readers might find the author offensive for her passionate account of a love affair with Goethe (1.192). Cranch recommended sympathy, for "when we have learned to love her, this thought becomes less revolting" (1.192). Cranch highlighted Bettina's virtues, her "youthful trust" that "permits her to expose her intimate heart's history to the multitude" (1.192). Cranch, like Fuller, modeled the sympathy that enabled the empowered reader to enjoy a morally flawed author even as he critiqued her.

Even if most records in the *Dial* did not rely on the metaphor of a sexualized relationship, the conversations recorded were usually quite intimate and possessive. Charlie Emerson addressed Shakespeare, "Oh my friend!" (1.13); Sarah Clarke called the poet "my Dante" (1.136); Ward admitted that he did not feel "immediate attraction" to Boccaccio, but that "my respect and liking for him grow each time I renew the acquaintance" (3.399); and even Emerson wrote of the "love" he and other Transcendentalists felt for Walter Savage Landor (2.263).⁸ It was this level of intimacy in actual conversations that made non-Transcendentalists such as Hawthorne nervous. According to Gibian, Hawthorne worried that conversation was "a psychological and sexual merging of two selves" that can "develop as a struggle for dominance" (39). For Hawthorne, "intimate conversation" led its participants beyond a merely intellectual give and take to a "marriage of minds, a total interpenetration of souls" (Gibian 39). Although conversational intimacy may have worried Hawthorne, it was just what

⁸ Emerson's "love" for Landor was somewhat less passionate than some *Dial* contributors' love for authors. He notes that his love stems "from sympathy" and a desire to protect a friend from criticism (2.263).

Transcendentalists were after. For them, reading was powerful because it was spiritual, intimate, and personal.

In the *Dial*, the Transcendentalists surprise us in the way they imagine reading. For all their rhetoric of self-reliance and individualism, reading, ostensibly one of the most solitary activities we do, turns out to be an inherently social activity. The Transcendentalist reader is solitary but not lonely.

Chapter 2: Authoritative Reading Communities

The Transcendentalist theory of reading we find in the *Dial* is essentially and thoroughly social. As a private activity, reading is imagined as a social conversation between the reader and author. But the social nature of reading runs much deeper than that imagined model. Transcendentalists insisted that good readings should emerge in the context of a community of readers and that reading should be a real conversation between intuitive readers. Theoretically, the intuitive community is a check to private interpretations; but, in practice, Transcendentalists accepted just about anything except traditional Christian doctrine and empiricist epistemologies. In fact, such openness was the Transcendentalists' overriding hermeneutic principle. For the most part, the *Dial* community enjoyed the practical results of having their own journal—being published, organizing and exerting economic power, and sharing new texts—more than they worried about establishing rules and defining limits for interpretation.

1. Intuition and “The Commonsense of the Human Race”

In the *Dial*, Transcendentalists celebrated the newly empowered individual reader, but their enthusiasm did not mean that they would embrace every individual interpretation. Instead, they argued that although individual readers had the authority to interpret and judge literature, that authority was diffused throughout a community of readers and ultimately grounded in Nature. As I have shown, because Transcendentalists considered Nature the primary source of authorial inspiration, they also believed it illuminated the intuitive reader. Therefore, even personal readings ought to bear some

level of compatibility with the interpretations of other intuitive readers. Since intuition is universally available, the greater community of intuitive readers could safeguard interpretation. Reading within a community of intuitive readers is a paradoxical way of preventing overly personal and “unnatural” readings without repealing the authority of the individual.

The Transcendentalists believed that the authority of the individual reader should always be in tension with the communal intuition of all readers. Saxton’s article “Prophecy—Transcendentalism—Progress” provides a good starting point for understanding how the authority of the individual reader and a broader community related. Saxton makes two points relevant to this topic. First, an author’s intended meaning or the apparent meaning of the text itself is not as important as the meaning a reader arrives at intuitively. Second, an individual understanding can be checked by the “commonsense of the human race” (2.96). Saxton critiqued the tenets of German Higher Criticism for interpreting the Old Testament too literally, arguing that sensationalist epistemology undermined, rather than defended, Christianity (2.83). “Instead of being a revelation to the individual mind,” Saxton argues, Christianity has become “a conclusion of logic...instead of a self-evident truth, whose witness is always the same, and always accessible, amid the ambiguities and mutations of language, the revolutions of literature, and convulsions of empires” (2.83). Saxton argued that Higher Criticism had stripped the Christian scriptures of their authority, so, under the logic of empiricism, average Christians had no reason to believe the claims of Christianity except for the authority of their ministers (2.95). Then Saxton pointed to the persistence of belief in Christianity,

despite the advances of hermeneutics, as evidence for the intuition of ordinary people. He declared, “This is the spirit of prophecy, the intuition of the true, the faculty of discerning spiritual truth, when distinctly presented; which gives ‘the ultimate appeal on all moral questions, not to a jury of scholars, a hierarchy of divines, or the prescriptions of a creed, but to the commonsense of the human race’” (2.95-96). Saxton commended laymen for intuitively knowing the truth. Saxton’s language here is very democratic, pitting academics against the intuitively faithful masses. Saxton made the radically egalitarian claim that the intuition of the masses is the authority on all questions of morality.

Saxton’s model is not completely individualistic. Authority is not eradicated, but relocated from the institutions of elite education to the universal intuition of mankind. With this rhetoric, Saxton appealed to the democratic American impulse while retaining a way to critique overly personal or eccentric interpretations. Further, Saxton couched his claim in the language of Romanticism—this is not a bald social contract at work, but a consensus of the intuitive public. Tying private intuition to universal intuition means that there is a standard by which interpretations can be judged, but that standard is neither private nor fixed.

Even extreme interpreters were welcomed by the Transcendentalists who saw themselves enacting the founding principles of Protestantism. Interpretation was one of the key post-Reformation debates; when the Pope or a council no longer decided interpretation, who should? The Transcendentalists were keenly aware of this problem. In a review of John A. Heraud’s *The Life and Times of Giolamo Savonarol* the

anonymous editors celebrated Savonarola for his independent and intuitive reading of Scripture. They asserted, “So far as Savonarola claimed the right of interpretation for himself, he may be considered as essentially a Protestant” (3.537). More locally, the Transcendentalists faced the problem of Jones Very. Buell argues that for Transcendentalists, inspiration was “not the road to Damascus or the Pentecostal fire, but a very natural thing, as natural as breathing, but also mysterious and involuntary” (63). But, Very’s enthusiastic embrace of Emerson’s call to intuition led him into a sort of evangelicalism. Very, while a Greek tutor at Harvard, told his classes that he was infallible, a direct channel of the Holy Spirit, and even tried to convince Elizabeth Peabody that he was the second coming of Christ (Packer 70). This incident inevitably gave Emerson and other Transcendentalists cause for concern about the misuse of personal authority. Still, Fuller included a positive review of Very’s *Essays and Poems* when it went to print in 1841. Their consistent tolerance, even of someone as extreme as Very, indicates the Transcendentalists’ hesitance to trample any individual’s reading authority, especially when it came to scriptures. The *Dial* avoids prescriptive language; instead, Transcendentalists worked to keep interpretation open.

2. Open and Ongoing Interpretation

The *Dial*, though written by opinionated and vocal contributors, overwhelmingly supports the ongoing and open interpretation of new and canonical texts. *Dial* contributors seemed to have three main concerns with interpretation: they argued that it takes time (sometimes centuries) to arrive at mature understandings of texts, that the more people who participated in interpretation the better, and that experiencing meaning

was to be preferred over describing, determining, or dissecting it. These arguments were both a reaction to Unitarian epistemology and a defense of their own aesthetic.

For Transcendentalists, public conversations modeled how a community in conversation could engage in ongoing and open interpretation. The 1842 *Dial* article “English Reformers” printed an anonymous letter proudly recording a public conversation that took place in London when Alcott visited the school he inspired, the Alcott-House. The correspondent described the meeting in egalitarian language: “We aimed at nothing less than to speak of the insaturation of “Spirit and its incarnation in a beautiful form. We had no chairman, and needed none. We came not to dispute but to hear and to speak” (3.241). The interactions the author described were conversational and anti-parliamentary. Importantly, their conversational model of meeting allowed participants at the Alcott-House to practice opening the meaning of language: “When a word failed in extent of meaning, we loaded the word with new meaning. The word did not confine our experience, but from our own being we gave significance to the word” (3.241). Although this letter from London records oral behavior, an actual conversation, metaphorically its goals can be applied to reading.

The Transcendentalist practice of opening meaning through communal reading is difficult to capture in print, simply because each *Dial* article was authored by an individual. So there is no explicitly dialogical writing about reading, except for the fictional pieces such as Fuller’s dialogues and “Ernest the Seeker.” But the *Dial* itself, as a body of writing, exhibits this conversation, the multiplicity of voices. As an inherently

collaborative effort, the *Dial* demonstrates the Transcendentalists' belief that good readings take place within a community.

Another common refrain in the *Dial* is that it takes time, sometimes generations, to realize the manifold meanings of literature. For instance, in "The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain," Fuller reflects on her own personal experience with interpreting the English expression, "He was fulfilled of all nobleness" (1.299). She notes that because "Words so significant charm us like a spell long before we know their meaning," she had "only lately learned to interpret" the phrase (1.299). Fuller recorded that, over time, she had learned to distinguish between "nobleness" and "the fulfillment of nobleness" (1.299). In other places in the *Dial*, Fuller argued that generations, as well as individuals, needed time to understand good literature. In "Menzel's View of Goethe," Fuller argued that early readers and critics of Goethe were not ready to understand him and undervalued his works as a result. The passage of time, she pointed out, changed readings of Goethe: "as the hours mature the plants he planted, they shed a new seed for a yet more noble growth" (1.340). Fuller's rhetoric of the organic plant makes her argument for her; of course an early reader will misunderstand—a text is a seed that must grow in the minds of generations. She continued "A wider experience, a deeper insight, make [sic] rejected words come true, and bring a more refined perception of meaning already discerned" (1.340). Even if an entire generation rejected an author's message, the next would not be wrong if it embraced it. Fuller called Goethe a "prophet of our own age, as well as a representative of his own" and she wondered "whether the revolutions of the century be not required to interpret" him fully (1.340). Fuller argued that the reader must

mature with a text to read well; but she also implied that this maturation took place outside of the individual. By speaking in terms of centuries, Fuller showed that the best reading takes place collectively, within and across generations of readers.

Emerson's rhetoric of "ages" and "generations" is similar to Fuller's. Emerson employed this language in many of his published writings and lectures, especially "The American Scholar," but in the *Dial* it is also noticeable in his "Thoughts on Modern Literature" and "Lectures on the Times." In "The American Scholar," Emerson distinguished several "ages" and pointed out the achievements of successive ages. But then he proclaimed, "Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this" (56-57). By contextualizing the successes of previous ages in terms of achieving independence from their precedents, Emerson argued for a fundamental change in the way the current generation related to posterity. In "Thoughts on Modern Literature," Emerson picks up his language of ages or generations. He evaluated the "library of the Present Age" and found a "vast carcass of tradition" (1.141). He scolded, "Men seem to forget that all literature is ephemeral, and unwillingly entertain the supposition of its utter disappearance" (1.140). But he insisted, "Literature is made up of a few ideas and a few fables. It is a heap of nouns and verbs enclosing an intuition or two" (1.140). Emerson emphasized that literature, even the best, was impermanent, a shoddy house for transcendent truths. He argued that each generation must enter the ongoing conversation that circles around history, improving "truth" intuitively. Emerson made an interesting move by placing classic texts in "the library of the Present Age" (1.141). He was pleased

that the publishers of his day perpetuated “the wisdom of the world” (1.141). “How can the age be a bad one, which gives me Plato and Paul and Plutarch, St. Augustine, Spinoza, Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher, Donne and Sir Thomas Browne, besides its own riches?” (1.141). Emerson reclaimed classic literature for his own generation, without promising to read it in the same way previous generations had read it. For Transcendentalists like Emerson, reading was deeply social, even historical, because a reader conversed not only with his peers, fellow living readers, but also with readers in previous generations.

3. The *Dial* Community

At least theoretically, Transcendentalists believed in the authority of the universal reading community, George Ripley’s “commonsense of the human race.” This means all readers, but in practice, it usually included only other Transcendentalists. Except for a few European sympathizers and Unitarian friends, the *Dial* community was largely composed of Transcendentalists who participated as editors, contributors, or readers.

Emerson attempted to expand the community of the *Dial* during his tenure as editor. He commissioned Charles Stearns Wheeler to be a sort of foreign correspondent for the *Dial*; in two letters published in the *Dial*, Wheeler reported on intellectual life in Germany. His “Letter from Germany” and “Letter from Heidelberg” record important lectures that American Transcendentalists longed to attend personally. But Wheeler did not actually broaden the participation of Europeans in the *Dial*; he merely reported from Europe for American readers. Charles Lane was the only European contributor to the *Dial*; he also frequently reviewed the *Dial* in his own English newspaper, the *Union*

(Myerson 81). Aside from the readers of the *Union*, few Europeans read the *Dial*. Myerson writes that the *Dial* had six British subscribers when Alcott visited in 1843 (83) and that the London Library held an anonymously donated subscription (94). If Emerson could not persuade his European friends (especially Carlyle) to contribute directly to the *Dial*, he tried to force their participation by initiating a new section called “Intelligence,” which often included details from sympathizers through their correspondences with Emerson or other *Dial* contributors. In the October 1842 “Editor’s Table,” Emerson thanked his European friends for their involvement in that issue but admitted that although they provided “sources” for the articles that ran in that issue, he was unable to actually print any of the submissions he had received from English contributors at that time. Even Heraud, whose *Monthly Magazine* was a model for the *Dial*, appeared only tangentially within the *Dial*. In that same “Editor’s Table,” Emerson announced Heraud’s upcoming lecture tour in Boston. As much as Emerson wished for Heraud and his European friends to become active in the *Dial*, the closest he could come was mentioning his European friends in his “Intelligence” and book review sections. Emerson beckoned, but Europeans by and large declined to participate in the *Dial* conversation.⁹

Outside of Boston, the Transcendentalists had mostly acrimonious conversation with other Americans, and particularly with the religious and literary presses. The *Dial* received mostly negative attention from the American press; its frequent reviewers included undergraduate literary journals such as *Yale Literary Magazine* and the

⁹ Emerson thanked those he calls “English correspondents” for sending him books and copies of English newspapers including Heraud’s *Monthly Magazine* and the *London Phalanx* as well as several other books (3.416).

Dartmouth, but also regular reviews from the *Western Messenger*, the *New Yorker*, the *Boston Morning Post*, the *Christian Examiner*, and *Graham's Magazine* (Myerson 52-70). Horace Greeley's *New-York Daily Tribune* proved to be the *Dial*'s only reliable friend in the press. *Dial* writers shot back with negative reviews of their own, especially taking aim at Unitarians who ran anti-Transcendentalist articles in Unitarian journals.

Despite their rhetoric authorizing the universal reading community, in the *Dial*, Transcendentalists practiced a local conversation, a reliance on the "commonsense" of fellow Transcendentalists. The *Dial* grew out of an existing conversation within the well-organized Transcendentalist reading community. In *Three Centuries of Harvard*, Samuel Eliot Morrison described a very early kind of reading community to which many Transcendentalists belonged. Morrison described the growth of "club libraries" at Harvard while the Transcendentalists attended university (202). These clubs, the most famous of which was and is The Hasty Pudding Club, supplemented the Harvard library by keeping books in the room of a lay-librarian, usually an undergraduate (202). In the course of his research, Morrison learned that "Emerson, who did not belong to Hasty Pudding, organized an undergraduate book club which took in periodicals and popular novels" (202). The Transcendentalists continued their practice of sharing books after they graduated. Their personal journals and correspondences record a continuous web of shared books, mailed from one friend to another, and shared responses to reading. W. H. Channing's *Dial* piece "Earnest the Seeker" fictionalized the common practice of sending a friend one's journal, and reading that journal aloud with family. Likewise, the public conversations led by Fuller and others regularly centered on reading, whether of each

other's writings or classic texts (like the mythology Fuller was so fond of). Sophia Ripley's *Dial* article "Woman," for instance, is a revision of the paper she originally wrote and read in one of Fuller's conversations (Myerson, *Transcendentalism* 280-28). Before the *Dial*, the Transcendentalists were a well-organized reading community. The *Dial* simply gave their conversations an audience and the authority of print.

The *Dial* became the Transcendentalists' virtual salon, the public space for their conversations about reading that was unlimited by time and geography. One could say that the *Dial* made Hedge's living room or Peabody's bookshop larger and more inclusive. Yet, in many ways, the *Dial* was not much different from their own salons. Although the conversations were more structured and detailed, the participants were largely familiar faces. In a letter to Charles Newcomb, Fuller hoped that the *Dial* would always remain a "common ground of friendship" (76).

Over time, forty of Fuller's and Emerson's friends contributed to the *Dial*, a relatively small number considering that the *Dial* spanned four years and sought to be a place for conversation between diverse participants. Despite George Ripley's claim in the *Dial* prospectus that the "pages of this Journal will be filled by contributors, who possess little in common but the love of intellectual freedom, and the hope of social progress, [and] who are united by a sympathy of spirit," *Dial* contributors were overwhelmingly similar ("Prospectus" 290). Myerson's *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial* provides a helpful biography of each *Dial* contributor. Most were born in New England in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Only ten were women. Of the men, only seven did not attend Harvard College or Harvard Divinity School for at least part of

their education.¹⁰ Most of those went on to become Unitarian ministers. All of these contributors were white. And while not all strictly endorsed Transcendentalism, most did. The most active participants in the conversation of the *Dial*, its editors and contributors, were by and large a well-acquainted group.

The more mysterious members of the *Dial* community are its readers. Of course, its writers were its chief readers, but Myerson notes that when Emerson succeeded Fuller, the *Dial* had only 300 paying subscribers (74). Fuller's biographer, Charles Capper provides a helpful composite of *Dial* readers. According to Capper, the largest group of *Dial* readers lived in or around Boston, with smaller numbers reading in rural Massachusetts, Providence, Philadelphia, and New York (4). Capper also found evidence of the *Dial* being sold and read in "literarily aspiring" Southern cities, as well as in St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Louisville, places Fuller's "liberal Unitarian minister friends preached" (4). During the summer of 1841, Alcott, ever zealous, traveled to Vermont to distribute copies of the *Dial* to "unlettered farmers" (Myerson 65). More appropriately, Emerson sent copies of the *Dial* to Carlyle and to young poets hoping to encourage their contributions (Myerson 64). But Capper finds that "anecdotal reports" indicate that the *Dial*'s most enthusiastic readers (those who probably subscribed) were "bookish, high-minded, restless Unitarian young people fascinated with New England's radical reform causes and enthralled by German, French, and English Romantic authors, above all Carlyle" (4).

¹⁰ According to Myerson, George Curtis did not attend college at all (141); William Greene attended West Point (155); whether or not Charles Lane did is uncertain (169); John Mackie attended Brown and Andover Seminary (179); Charles Newcomb also attended Brown (180); Benjamin Presbury was a tailor and gold speculator (197); Thomas Stone attended Bowdoin (205); and whether or not William Tappan attended college is unknown (208).

Given the *Dial*'s limited circulation, it may be surprising that the Transcendentalist community bothered with a journal at all. Obviously, they had high aspirations for the *Dial* that never came to fruition. But, for Transcendentalists, the *Dial* was not a failure insofar as it served them well as a community of readers. The editors of the *Dial* believed that print media produced a better-quality conversation than face-to-face talking and personal correspondence. In a note to contributors, Fuller argued that readers would "find in the *Dial* expressions of sentiment and opinion on those points probably more satisfactory than any which could be rendered in a private correspondence" (2.136). Fuller's brief note was directed toward readers who had written to disagree with views expressed in the *Dial*. She defended her decision not to reply personally by arguing that the *Dial* articles, because they were committed to print, spoke better than a personal letter could (2.136). The *Dial* also served its reading community by reprinting texts unavailable in America and by organizing its readers' power as consumers. Further, the *Dial* gave the Transcendentalist community, shut out from American periodicals, a place to be published and the opportunity to confront their critics.

The *Dial* provided a place for people to read common texts together. Most obviously this is the text of the *Dial* itself. But more significantly, the *Dial*'s book reviews are filled with long excerpts of texts, often unfamiliar to American readers. For example, Fuller's long book reviews contain more excerpts from the author than commentary on the author. In both "Goethe" and "Bettina Brentano and her Friend Gunderode" excerpts from the primary sources fill most pages. Although long quotations

were common in nineteenth-century book reviews, Myerson suggests that extended excerpts appear in the *Dial* in part because Fuller struggled to fill all of her pages (Myerson 69). The result was that each *Dial* reader read the same texts and, quite often, those texts were otherwise unavailable to American readers. Sometimes, *Dial* critics helped the community by translating for each other. Fuller, in particular, translated Goethe for readers who would otherwise be unable to read him. In addition to excerpts from Goethe and other European authors, the *Dial* published poetry and works of short fiction by the Transcendentalists and friends. In this way, the *Dial* served not only as a place for conversation about reading, but also a way for readers to enjoy new texts together.

By devoting so many pages to recommending books, the *Dial* functioned as a friendly critic. Nearly every issue of the *Dial* ended with a book review section, which, throughout its run, was called by several names: “Notices of Recent Publications,” “Critical Notices,” “New Books,” and “Literary Intelligence.” By reviewing and recommending, the *Dial* functioned as Fuller thought a friendly critic ought to. In her fictional dialogue “Festus,” Fuller used the voice of her character Laurie to argue that a good reader responds to what he has read, not only for himself but also for others. Laurie, sounding much like Fuller, pontificates: “When a great thought has been expressed, a proportionate receptivity should be brought out. The man who hears occupies a place as legitimate in the unfolding of the race, as he who speaks” (2.232). Laurie argues that it is the duty of a friend, as well as a critic, to share good books (2.232). In “Festus” Fuller argued for the responsibility of the reader, both to the author and to other readers.

Fuller's insistence that critics recommend good books is practical, not just friendly. While the *Dial* provided a more formal way for friends to recommend books to other friends, it also helped them to band together economically, to use their buying power to pressure publishers into expanding their offerings in America, something that word of mouth recommendations struggled to achieve. Fuller's Laurie argues that a good reader should recommend books to others in order to drive up demand for that book. Laurie notes, "It is very difficult to get a copy of the work, and I wish curiosity enough might be excited to cause its republication" (233). In his reasoning, Laurie sounds suspiciously like the real-life Fuller. Emerson, like Fuller, hoped the *Dial* would facilitate better conditions for publishing in America. In an 1841 review of John Edward Taylor's *Michael Angelo*, Emerson wrote, "We welcome this little book with joy, and a hope that it may be republished in Boston. It would find, probably, but a small circle of readers, but that circle would be more ready to receive it and prize it than the English public, for whom it was intended" because it expressed views "very commonly received among ourselves" (1.401). Emerson appealed to an elitist regionalism to argue that Boston readers would appreciate Taylor more than British readers, and therefore deserved access to better publications. Encouraging economic solidarity among readers was an important function of the *Dial*, one that argues for its value even as a short-lived project.

The *Dial* organized the Transcendentalist community and gave members a place to be published. In fact, Myerson argues that in the last year of its run, Emerson continued the *Dial* only because he believed that it was the only venue in which some of his friends could publish (95). Because Transcendentalists had been excluded from

mainstream American periodicals, the *Dial* was important as a place where Transcendentalists could speak for themselves and defend their movement. In the April 1843 edition of the *Dial*, Lane undertook the delicate task of defending Alcott from criticism under the guise of reviewing several of Alcott's controversial publications, including *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*, *Record of a School*, and *Spiritual Culture; or Thoughts for the Consideration of Parents and Teachers*. Lane generously compared Alcott to a misunderstood Old Testament prophet, writing that as if by "law, the native prophet is unhonored; the domestic author is neglected" (420). Lane appealed to his audience's nationalism, knowing that they were uneasy about America's apparent literary inferiority, and used that discomfort to argue for interpreting Alcott's offensiveness as a sign of his genius. Lane then gave a surprisingly positive review of Alcott's works that sought to render them more palatable.

Another similarly interesting instance of the Transcendentalists banding together as a reading community can be seen in James Freeman Clarke's review of *Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation*, an anonymous book that the author dedicated to William E. Channing in hopes of converting him to evangelicalism. Clarke spoke for all the Transcendentalists when he thoroughly critiqued the book's logic and defended Channing's theological positions.

Ultimately, Transcendentalists' judgment of literature came down to whether or not they believed it fulfilled the goals of reading. George Ripley hoped that Cousin's new translation of Plato would "diffuse more widely the pure love of beauty, the spirit of contemplation, and the clear perception of moral good, which alone can save our age!"

(“Select List of Recent Publications” 1.2). These were indeed high hopes for a translation, but Transcendentalists believed that reading had a millennial function. Specifically they believed that reading could save society by transforming the individual reader through spiritual experiences, by serving as a conduit of Nature, and by promoting sympathy within society.

Transcendentalists believed that reading could transform culture one reader at a time. In “Social Tendencies,” Lane wrote, that literature ought to “purify and elevate men,” according to Lane, but it cannot because “itself needs too much to be purified and elevated” (4.80). Lane critiqued popular literature for confirming moral languor instead of fulfilling its prophetic role of spurring readers on to moral progress. The process of improvement through reading seems mysterious, but Transcendentalists, at least in part, believed that literature’s power derived from its unique connection with Nature. Lane argued that literature was a “telescope which takes the whole firmament within its visual field” but that too often “its lenses are constructed of paper instead of glass; a semitransparent shade, reflecting its own imprinted errors; not a lucid medium transmitting pure light” (4.79). For Transcendentalists, good literature exposed its reader to the direct “light” of Nature, but mere literature disrupted the individual’s experience of that light. The natural imagery employed by *Dial* contributors makes sense in their Romantic worldview, but also shows their indebtedness to American religious rhetoric, especially the legacy of Jonathan Edwards’s doctrine of divine light. The language the Transcendentalists used emphasizes their belief that reading was transformative because it was a spiritual experience.

Individual progress influenced the larger community through personal relationships. J. S. Dwight and Alcott were both particularly interested in how reading shaped families. In "Ideals of Every Day Life, Home," Dwight argued that reading, both together as families and individually, should be a central activity in the home in order to bring about collective and "self-improvement" (1.452). And he insisted that "reforming one's own little world is the way to reform the great world quickest" (1.459). The Transcendentalists believed in Dwight's model of individual and group reading leading to personal and social improvement, no matter how large or small the community. That is why the Transcendentalists could elevate literature to such a prominent place in their lives; they read not to the exclusion of pursuing religious and social reform, but as a means of stimulating personal and communal progress.

Chapter 3: The *Dial*'s Role in Canon Formation

The Transcendentalists' belief in universal intuition changed not only how they read, but also what they read. In "The Transcendentalist," printed in the January 1843 *Dial*, Emerson explained that Transcendentalists' confidence in intuition should change the way they evaluated literature. Emerson argued that because Transcendentalists believed in "the whole connexion of spiritual doctrine," or that Reality existed outside the purely physical world, they should judge literature by the extent to which it shows evidence of inspiration (3.300). Nature can inspire any mind, whether a reader's or an author's. So, a Transcendentalist reader, Emerson argued, should rely only on intuition to judge a text (3.300). Emerson proclaimed "the spiritual measure of inspiration is the depth of the thought, and never, *who* said it" (3.300). Emerson insisted that readers should judge texts by "the depth of the thought" they contain, not just the judgment of London reviewers (3.300). When antebellum readers limited themselves to familiar authors, the Transcendentalists argued, they missed out on new ideas.

1. Books in the *Christian Register* and the *Dial*

In order to establish what the Transcendentalists actually read and to evaluate how much they read outside familiar Unitarian favorites, we can compare the *Dial*'s book reviews with the book advertisements in the *Christian Register*, the main journal of Unitarianism and the *Dial*'s chief competitor, during the same month, January 1842. In the second issue of the *Dial*, Fuller ran the first formal review section, which was entitled "Record of the Months." This section began with several long book reviews and ended

with a “Select List of Recent Publications.” In the “Select List,” the editors listed 33 recently published works, but wrote short reviews in only some cases.

The *Dial*'s first recommendations included many lectures and sermons that had been published recently either in volumes or in newspapers. The editors' recommendations of George Simmons' “Two Sermons on the Kind Treatment and on the Emancipation of the Slaves” and Thomas P. Rodman's “A Discourse on Liberty, delivered before an Assembly of the Friends of Emancipation” highlight the Transcendentalists' support of the abolition movement (1.265). The list of recommended speeches also included “Oration before the Democracy of Worcester and Vicinity” by Orestes Brownson (1.265).¹¹

Poetry constituted a relatively small portion of the *Dial*'s recommended works. Goethe's *Faust*, not surprisingly, makes the list (1.265), but sits alongside lesser known poetry such as *Airs of Palestine, and other Poems* by John Pierpont (1.264) and *Poetry for the People and other Poems* by Richard Monckton Milnes (1.266). Victor Hugo's *The Last Days of a Condemned*, about a man on death row, was the only novel recommended in the January 1842 “Record of the Months” (2.266). In the first “Select List of Recent Publications,” Fuller included *Two Years Before the Mast. A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*, which was published anonymously by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. who left Harvard to become a sailor (1.264). For the most part, these works were listed without comment.

¹¹ Other reviewed lectures and sermons included: “A Discourse on Liberty, delivered before an Assembly of the Friends of Emancipation” (1.265); “Remarks on the Bunker Hill Monument, addressed to the Ladies engaged in getting up the Fair for its Completion” (1.265); “Materialism in Religion; or Religious Forms and Theological Formulas. Three Lectures” by Philip Harwood (1.267); and “Professor Walker's Vindication of Philosophy” (256-260).

The January 1842 “Record of the Months” also recommended non-fiction works on theology and church history. The longest book review was devoted to *The Words of William E. Channing*, a collection of theological works written by the Transcendentalists’ hero. (1.246). Books about Quakers and the Reformation also showed up on the *Dial*’s list.¹² Other recommended non-fiction works included de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, which had only recently been translated into English (1.266), as well as a large body of “reform” literature that addressed issues including educational practices, slavery, problems facing the working classes, unionization, and even anti-Semitism.¹³

Many of the works listed while Fuller edited were not in English at all. She recommended many recent translations of French authors (such as de Toqueville and Cousin), as well as German authors, especially Goethe.¹⁴ A good amount of un-translated literature, including a German history of English Drama, made it onto her recommended list as well (1.272).

Although the *Dial* favored European authors, Fuller’s first list of recommended works also demonstrated a bias toward books written, edited, or published by their own

¹² Church history selections included: *Early days in the Society of Friends, exemplifying the Obedience of Faith in some of its First Members* by Mary Ann Kilty (1.271); *The Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Popes of Rome, during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* by Leopold Ranke (1.266); *The Life of Luther* (1.266); and *The Protestant Exiles of Zillerthal; their Persecutions and Expatriation from the Tyrol, on separating from the Romish Church and embracing the Reformed Faith* (1.271).

¹³ For example, “The Laboring Classes” by O. A. Brownson (1.265), “A Collection of the Political Writings of William Leggett” (1.265), “Social Destiny of Man: or Association and Reorganization of Industry” by Albert Brisbane (1.265), *The Universal Tendency to Association in Mankind* by John Dunlop (1.266), *Account of the Recent Persecution of the Jews at Damascus* by David Solomons (1.267), *The Fine Arts in England, their State and Prospects, considered relatively to National Education* by Edward Edwards (1.267), *The Law and Custom of Slavery in British India* (1.265), and “A Discourse on Liberty, delivered before an Assembly of the Friends of Emancipation” (1.265).

¹⁴ Works translated from the French included Cousin’s translation of *The Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Popes of Rome, during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* by Leopold Ranke (1.266). Recent translations from German included *The Life of Luther* (1.266), “Faust; A Dramatic Poem, by Goethe” (1.265), and *Goethe’s Theory of Colors* translated by Charles Lock Eastlake (1.267).

publishers and their friends. The January 1841 recommendations included Orestes Brownson's speeches "The Laboring Classes" and "Oration before the Democracy of Worcester and Vicinity" (1.265) and *Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature*, which George Ripley edited (1.264). Jeremy Bentham's *Theory of Legislation*, published by Weeks, Jordan, and Co.—publisher of the *Dial*—also appeared on the *Dial*'s list (1.265).

The lists of advertised books in the January 2, 1841, *Christian Register* is strikingly different from the *Dial*'s lists of recommended books. For one, it is a list of paid advertisements, so their presence on the page is part endorsement and part revenue-generating. Overall, the *Christian Register* lists many more books than the *Dial*. More particularly, the *Christian Register* lists far more poetry, more women authors, and more American and British authors than the *Dial*. For example, in the January 2, 1842, issue of the *Christian Register*, ads for Joanna Baillie's *Fugitive Verses* and "Mrs. Norton's" *The Dream and Other Poems* run alongside an ad for Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*. While the *Christian Register* advertised Halleck's *Selections from the British Poets* and Bryant's *Selection from the American Poets*, French and German authors were rare. And, not surprisingly, the *Christian Register* advertised many explicitly Christian texts, including various editions of the Bible, prayer books, sermon collections, and Bible geography texts. The only overlap between the *Dial* and the *Christian Register* is a notice of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Grandfather's Chair*.

2. Ranking Literature in the *Dial*

By reading outside the favorite authors and texts of Unitarianism, the Transcendentalists faced new interpretive challenges. *Dial* writers rejected the

hermeneutical standards of Unitarianism, but were still working out their own matrix for judging literature. Within the *Dial*, writers debated how to rank literature and arrived at similar, but not always precisely the same, conclusions.

Charlie Emerson's "Notes from the Journal of a Scholar," published posthumously by his brother Ralph Waldo Emerson, gives probably the *Dial*'s most explicit hierarchy of literature. Charlie Emerson disagreed with the common conception of authors as creators. For the Transcendentalists, only Nature truly created. Instead, he defined authors as "*witnesses of facts*" ([italics mine] 1.13). He then ranked literary genius. The best authors "stated the facts as they are," with "Homer, Socrates, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, and perhaps Goethe" populating the highest level of authors (1.13). Beneath them were Plato, Epicurus, Cicero, Luther, Montaigne, and George Fox who "state things as they believe them to be" (1.13). And finally, Charlie Emerson noted Aristotle, Lucretius, Milton, and Burke who "take a side, and defend it" (1.13). In short, Charlie Emerson judged authors by the extent to which he thought their works recorded Nature.

Ralph Waldo Emerson offered a slightly different rubric for ranking literature in "Thoughts on Modern Literature." Emerson distinguished between three genres of literature: "The highest class of books are those which express the moral element; the next, works of imagination; and the next, works of science" (1.138). But beyond those distinctions of genre, Emerson seemed most concerned with the extent to which texts evinced inspiration. He argued that literature's significance is proportional to its beauty and its lack of "pollution" through "any wilfulness [sic] of the writer" (1.139). Emerson

believed that because pure writing “flowed” through an author’s mind, it belonged to Nature, not the author (1.139). Pure literature, for Emerson, existed outside the author “and shared the sublimity of the sea and sky” (1.139). Great literature sprang from Nature and was part of Nature.

Most Transcendentalists subscribed to a highly expressivist theory of language. In fact, Lane described human language through the Greek concept of *logos*: words are “sacred types of the divine oracle so near akin to that word which in the ever beginning is” and “the mode in which the loftiest and purest must utter themselves to the common understanding” (“Social Tendencies” 4.80). Fuller conceptualized language similarly, writing in her “Short Essay on Critics,” “Nature is the literature and art of the divine mind” and “human literature and art the criticism” on Nature (1.7). The Transcendentalists believed that “the divine mind” is the purest agent and Nature is the purest literature, but that human literature participates in that divinity to varying degrees. They attributed the best works to genius and snubbed what did not please them as “mere” literature.

“Mere” literature, according to the Transcendentalists, failed not because it was patently bad or artistically flawed. Transcendentalists especially denigrated literature that met conventional literary standards but lacked moral depth. “Of mere literature,” Lane wrote, “there is no hope” (“Social Tendencies” 4.79). “Logical acumen, argumentative force, fluent expression, prompt wit” are considered literary qualities, but Lane labeled texts with *only* these qualities “mere literature” because they “do not ensure moral

rectitude” (4.79). Even conventionally respected literature could fail if it did not promote moral progress in some way.

Although Transcendentalists expected intuition to guide readers in properly judging literature, *Dial* writers offered a few tangible tests. Contributors agreed that inspired authors should write out of conviction, not for money. In “Prophecy—Transcendentalism—Progress,” Saxton insisted that true reform and prophecy, which he equated with poetry, never began with greed. He wrote, “The great ideas, in which reforms and revolutions have originated, have not resulted from any calculation of profit and loss” (2.110). Lane decried American authors for writing for profit; he claimed that the “degeneracy of literature taints the age. Instead of reclaiming men to uprightness; instead of stirring them once more to their feet; it accepts the wretched price of bread to confirm them in ignoble indolence of heart” (“Social Tendencies” 4.78). The Transcendentalists’ insistence on valuing authors who were not popular enough to gain wealth from their writing opened the door to reading little-known and unpopular authors.

The Transcendentalists also argued that readers should look for authors with a particular kind of authority: experience. Manual labor and personal experience, not renown, should commend authors to readers. To Transcendentalists, except Fuller, genius connoted heartiness and masculinity. In “Life in the Woods,” Lane argued that manly experience was superior to gentility because it connected the individual with Nature in a more robust way than education. According to Lane, the uncivilized man “holds an immediate intercourse with nature herself” (4.416), but an educated person “compiles a book from external observation only, and writes of feelings he never felt, and of

experiences he never did or can experience” (4.417). Lane considered urbanity unmanly and unauthentic.

The title of Hedge’s *Dial* article, “Art of Life—The Scholar’s Calling,” makes obvious the Transcendentalists’ belief in the mutuality of thinking and living. Disgusted with the low state of American literature, Hedge derided it as unmanly. He wrote, “The time has come when good words are no longer of any avail. Book-teaching has become effete” (1.181). Institutional education failed because, “All truth must be lived before it can be adequately taught or known” (1.181). Although Lane and Hedge’s statements resonate with the Transcendentalist rhetoric of self-reliance and experience, their insistence on personal experience directly challenges their belief in the inspiration of Nature. On the one hand, Transcendentalists insist on authorial passivity during inspiration; on the other, they maintain that only an active author can be inspired by Nature.

Another test for literature seems to be paradoxical for *Dial* writers. *Dial* contributors insisted that good literature should not be blatantly didactic. An anonymous reviewer complained that too “large a portion of even the good poetry of our time is either over-ethical or over-passionate” and that poetry was too “deeply tainted with a sentimental egotism” (3.273). Transcendentalists preferred nuanced and ambiguous writing because they resented dogma. Throughout the *Dial*, contributors make the case for interpretations that allow for manifold, even metaphorical, meanings. In “German Literature,” Parker argued that German authors produced literature superior to British authors because they were more subtle. He quoted Alcott, who said, “Most works, since

the days of Milton, require little thought; they want depth, freshness; the meaning is on the surface” (1.326). Alcott resented that British texts did not “require a serene and thoughtful spirit, in order to be understood” (1.326). Parker preferred literature without obvious moral meanings (he recommended Sophocles, Herder, Schiller, Goethe, Milton, and others) over blatantly didactic texts (1.326).

Cranch made a similar point when introducing his own poem “Correspondences.” In his preface, he argued that even though he wrote the poem in response to reading Swedenborg, that did not mean that the poem had to be interpreted that narrowly. He wrote, “I am no Swedenborgian, nor must the following lines be broken down to a dogmatic meaning” (1.381). Fuller agreed with Parker and Cranch. In “A Dialogue. Poet. Critic.,” Fuller argued against a closed meaning of a text. She relied on natural and musical diction to illustrate “meaning.” She imagined the thoughts of a poet: “I do not wish to hear in prose the meaning of my melody. I do not wish to see my seed neatly put away beneath a paper label” (1.495). Like music, meaning, for Fuller, is understood at a personal and emotional level; and like a seed, Fuller saw the meaning of her own words as organic and growing, not static. As in “Goethe,” Fuller used the wishes of the author to argue her point; in this case, she argued that readers should read the way all good authors want their texts to be read—creatively and personally.

Fleeing from dogma, which limited meaning, Transcendentalists created a new aesthetic by translating their epistemology of intuition into an aesthetic that prioritized beauty over truth. For Transcendentalists, truth and beauty were the same thing, but the shift in sensibility is clear—they were less interested in explaining, defending, and

defining truth than in *experiencing* it through beauty. A reviewer of Tennyson's *Poems* admitted, "it was not of aim or meaning we thought most, but of his exquisite sense for sounds and melodies" (2.273). Rather than using their authority as an intuitive reading community to arrive at particular interpretations, the *Dial* community used it to argue for valuing beautiful over instructive literature.

But the *Dial* exposes a tension in the Transcendentalists' beliefs. The way Transcendentalists interpreted texts contradicts their professed preference for anti-didacticism. Transcendentalists worked to find Transcendental themes and meanings in texts that did not seem to intend any. Fuller, in particular, led the way in a sort of metaphorical interpretation. In "Goethe," Fuller insisted "there is but one great poetic idea possible to man, the progress of a soul" (2.21). Her interpretive model echoes the Transcendentalist's overall interest in self-culture, or individual spiritual progress. Lane critiqued "civilization" for giving the impression of, but not securing, "vital progress to the soul" ("Life in the Woods" 4.424). When texts failed to model the soul's progress, Fuller looked outside the text to the author's biography for evidence of such growth, as she did with Goethe. Fuller found the beginning of *Faust* in line with her expectations of great literature: "Faust, had it been completed in the spirit in which it was begun, would have been the Divina Commedia of its age" (2.21). But as it was, all of Goethe's works other than the first part of *Faust* she demoted to "mere chapters to this poem, illustrative of particular points" despite their "miraculous beauty" (2.21). So Fuller re-centered her reading of all of Goethe's works around one section of *Faust* and relegated the rest to the periphery.

Fuller also advocated an anagogical reading of individual characters and authors. She encouraged her readers to read Faust as an allegory for society: “With the progress of an individual soul is shadowed forth that of the soul of the age” (2.22). If a character or an author failed, then a moral lesson about society’s failings could be drawn. If a character or an author succeeded, then Fuller instructed them to be read as models for self-progress. Creative interpretation was Fuller’s way of reclaiming books and characters that did not illustrate self-culture. But Fuller’s hermeneutic contradicted the Transcendentalists’ belief in valuing beauty for its own sake. She admitted that Goethe’s other works displayed “miraculous beauty” but still relegated them to footnotes of *Faust* (2.21). Fuller’s own method of interpretation evolved significantly after the *Dial* ended.¹⁵

Tensions within Transcendentalist literary theory between anti-didacticism and anagogical interpretation and between the authority of experience and the inspiration of Nature highlight the diversity within the Transcendentalist movement in the early 1840s. These paradoxes also hint at the interpretive challenges the Transcendentalists faced by abandoning Unitarian hermeneutics and reading unfamiliar texts.

3. Non-Christian Scriptures

The Transcendentalists’ early interest in non-Christian scriptures best demonstrates their curiosity and unwillingness to be restrained by the traditional Boston

¹⁵ See Christina Zwarg’s 1995 *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading*. Zwarg argues for Fuller’s importance as an American feminist and shows how “Fuller initiates her ‘feminism’ through her reading—which is to say, through the activity of translation and literary criticism, shifting only then to a theory of history as an act of reading” (8). While Zwarg demonstrates the centrality of reading to Fuller’s project as a career journalist, my thesis focuses on an earlier period in Fuller’s life. I argue that in the early 1840s, Fuller’s interpretive method was still closely tied to a more individual notion of self-culture and that only the act of publishing gestured toward her later interest in social reform.

Ivy League library. While Emerson edited the *Dial* he made “Ethnical Scriptures” a regular feature, prompted by Thoreau. In the July 1842 issue of the *Dial*, Emerson announced the new series, which would include “selections from the oldest ethical and religious writings of men, exclusive of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures” (3.82).

Emerson hoped for the production of a work that collated the various ethnic and historical scriptures with each other (3.82). During its run, “Ethnical Scriptures” included excerpts from sayings of Confucius, Charles Wilkins’ 1787 translations of the *Heetopades of Veeshno Sarma*,¹⁶ Sir William Jones’ 1799 translation of the Hindu *Laws of Menu*,¹⁷ the Persian *Desatir*, and other recently translated texts. Emerson also printed excerpts from the Buddhist scripture “The White Lotus of the Good Law” in an article entitled “The Preaching of Buddha” (4.391-401). Except for brief introductions, these excerpts of eastern religious texts ran without commentary.

The Transcendentalists were also interested in a more local sectarian scripture, the Shaker’s new scripture *Sacred Roll and Book*. Priscilla Brewer’s article “Emerson, Lane, and the Shakers: A Case of Converging Ideologies” describes the Transcendentalists’ fascinating relationship with nearby Shakers. In January 1844, just months after Fruitlands disbanded and after writing “A Day with the Shakers,” for the *Dial*, Charles Lane joined the Harvard Shaker community (269). He wrote his 1844 *Dial* article, “Millennial Church,” a review of their *Sacred Roll and Book*, while living in the Shaker

¹⁶ “Veeshnoo Sarma” ran in the July 1842 *Dial*. Ellen Raghavan and Barry Wood note that “Charles Wilkins’s 1787 translation of *The Heetopades of Veeshnoo Sarm*, a large collection of fables and aphorisms, had been excerpted by Emerson for the *Dial*” (95).

¹⁷ The *Laws of Menu* appeared in the January 1843 *Dial*. According to Raghavan and Wood, “What Thoreau describes as the Laws of Menu refers to *Institutes of Hindu Law; or, The Ordinances of Menu, According to the Gloss of Culluca*, which was translated in Volume 3 of [Sir William] Jones’s *Works*” (95).

community. Lane's *Dial* article was the first time the Shakers allowed *Sacred Roll and Book* to be circulated outside the community (Brewer 269). In fact, Brewer argues that Lane wrote "Millennial Church" as a "Believer," not as an outsider, and that community elders censored his article (270). No one except Lane wrote about Shaker texts for the *Dial*, but their very inclusion in the journal showcases the Transcendentalists' pluralism and Emerson's courage as an editor.

4. Classical Authors

Classic authors constituted the most revered and least controversial group of authors in the *Dial*. In part, their love of classical literature constituted a perpetuation of preferences the Transcendentalists learned at Harvard. According to historian Charles F. Thwing, when Emerson and his friends attended Harvard, the curriculum emphasized classical authors (300). Thwing lists Butler's *Analogy* (300), Paley's *Evidences* (300), Stewart's or Brown's *Philosophy* (300-1), and Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (301) as standard Harvard texts.

But the Transcendentalists especially revered classical poetry. Charlie Emerson compared Homer's writings to Nature itself in "Notes from the Journal of a Scholar" (1.13). He insisted, "Homer never mistakes. You might as well say, there was untruth in the song of the wind" (1.13). Charlie Emerson called Homer an "achromatic glass," because he "writes from no theory as a point of vision. He tells us what he sees, not what he thinks" (1.13). Thoreau esteemed Homer for a different reason. It seems that Thoreau liked poets best who were decidedly *not* Christian: the "Iliad is not Sabbath but morning reading, and men cling to this old song, because they have still moments of unbaptized

and uncommitted life, which give them an appetite for more. He represents no creed nor opinion” (4.298).

Thoreau heralded Chaucer for similar reasons. He pointed to Chaucer as utterly sincere and spontaneous, calling him “natural and cheerful” and “the Homer of the English poets” because he appeared to write without relying on any precedent (4.298). Thoreau acknowledged Chaucer’s reputation for crudeness and admitted that “there are many poets of more taste and better manners...but such negative genius cannot detain us long; we shall return to Chaucer still with love” (4.303). Thoreau considered Chaucer’s bad “manners” a sign of his “genuine humanity” (4.301) and his “vigorous Saxton tongue” an indication of his sincerity (4.299).

To twenty-first-century readers, the Transcendentalists’ inclusion of Ossian in their list of favorite authors is puzzling. Even when they were first published in the 1760s, the legitimacy of the Ossianic poems was doubted (Carpenter 406). Still, the faux-epic poems attributed by their “translator,” James MacPherson, to Ossian, a supposed third-century Gaelic poet, appealed to European and American audiences (Carpenter 405-406). In his *Dial* article “Homer. Ossian. Chaucer.,” Thoreau, who certainly knew of the Ossian controversy, compared Ossian to Homer, Pindar, Isaiah, and “the American Indian” and praises *The Genuine Remains of Ossian* for capturing the universal, rather than the local and particular (4.293). Thoreau writes, “In his poetry, as in Homer’s, only the simplest and most enduring features of humanity are seen, such essential parts of a man as Stonehenge exhibits of a temple” (4.293). Thoreau likens the poetry of Ossian to a thunderstorm compared to what he termed the “pleasant English verse” of Dryden,

Pope, and Gray (4.297). Thoreau was the only *Dial* contributor to write about the poetry of Ossian, but his inclusion of the forged poetry highlights the Transcendentalists' preference for manly, epic literature.

Shakespeare, another undisputed "great" of the *Dial*, was unabashedly worshipped by *Dial* critics who invoked his name as a touchstone, a point of comparison against which other works were judged. No *Dial* contributors offered any critiques of Shakespeare or extended treatments of his works. Rather, Charlie Emerson's "Notes from the Journal of a Scholar" shows how his reading of Shakespeare reinterpreted his everyday life as an experience of the infinite. When reading Shakespeare, Charlie Emerson described a feeling of coexistence: he felt that "Humanity was indeed one, a spirit continually reproduced, accomplishing a vast orbiting, whilst individual men are but the points through which it passes" (1.14). Charlie Emerson intuitively identified with Shakespeare's characters: "I, who am Charles, was sometimes Romeo. In Hamlet, I pondered and doubted" (1.14). He argued that great literature, like Shakespeare's, removes readers from the monotonous "Present" and reminds us of the "long and varied past" (1.14). Then, "We recognize it all. We are no more brief, ignoble creatures, we seize our immortality, and bind together the related parts of our secular being" (1.14). For authors as revered as Shakespeare, the Transcendentalists had only praise and the hope that an American Shakespeare would appear.

Surprisingly, Milton, the great Puritan poet, plays a similar role in the *Dial*. He is also most frequently used as a touchstone for other works and invoked to support Transcendentalist arguments. For example, Emerson quotes Milton at length in his

“Lectures on the Times” (3.9). In *The New England Milton: Literary Reception and Cultural Authority in the Early Republic*, Kevin Van Anglen argues that Emerson revered Milton, like Shakespeare, as an “exemplar of the Aristotelian virtue of ‘humanity’” (151). Despite Milton’s Puritanism, the Transcendentalists latched on to his antinomian rhetoric. But in doing so, Van Anglen notes that in the *Dial* the Transcendentalists “treat Milton the same way Unitarian periodicals had done a decade or two earlier” (182). Milton, in fact, represents a continuation of Unitarian reading preferences, even though the Transcendentalists tried to claim him as their own champion.¹⁸

5. Romantic Authors and Poetry

Thomas Carlyle was arguably the author who exerted the most direct influence on the growth of the American Transcendentalist movement. Although Goethe and other Romantic German writers are now considered canonical, Packer notes that when Carlyle’s essays on German literature influenced American university students to learn German, the language and literature were still considered outside the mainstream of university curriculum (40-41). The *Dial* ran two major reviews of Carlyle. In the July 1841 “Notices of Recent Publications,” an anonymous review recommended Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (2.131-133). The critic finds some faults with Carlyle’s book, “Yet let thanks, manifold thanks, close this and all chapters that begin with his name” (2.133). Two years later, Emerson reviewed Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (4.96-102). According to Packer, “Nearly every one of the first-generation

¹⁸ For a thorough discussion of Milton in Transcendentalist writings, especially the *Dial*, see Van Anglen’s chapter “The Transcendentalist Milton” in *The New England Milton*, pages 151-188.

Transcendentalists confessed a debt to Carlyle” (35). Packer argues that Carlyle’s influence on the Transcendentalists was at least partly responsible for the “expansion of the literary universe” that took place in antebellum America (41). The most enduring author whom Carlyle, through the Transcendentalists, inserted into the American canon was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Dial contributors disagreed about Goethe more than any other author yet seemed unable to stop talking about him. Consequently, they devoted more *Dial* pages to Goethe than to any other author. In “Thoughts on Modern Literature,” after finding most of the well-known Romantics lacking, Emerson declared that Goethe “of all men” “has united in himself...the tendencies of the era” (1.151). Emerson described Goethe with his language of “representative men.” Goethe epitomized and surpassed his own era: “Whatever the age inherited or invented, he made his own” and “Of all the men of this time, not one has seemed so much at home in it as he” (1.151). But Fuller’s “Goethe” shows that even as Emerson awarded him position of reigning genius of their own age, Fuller was unafraid to critique him severely. The vigorous debate over Goethe in the *Dial* served the German author well; the Transcendentalists introduced Goethe into an American current of literary criticism and secured him a place in the American literary canon.

Goethe’s nationality may have appealed to the Transcendentalists, who were troubled that Byron, Shelley, Carlyle, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, like most of their favorite authors, were British. In the April 1844 *Dial*, Emerson printed his lecture “The Young American,” in which he lamented “that our people have their intellectual culture

from one country, and their duties from another” (3.484). He charged America with sending its students “to a feudal school to learn democracy” (3.484). Emerson pointed out an important distinction between the Romantics and other British authors, though. At Harvard, they read authors including Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Dryden, Pope, Butler, Locke, Paley, Blackstone, and Stewart, but they chose the Romantics for themselves (3.484). Despite their nationalism, the Transcendentalists returned again and again to British romantic poets in the *Dial*.

Part of the reason the Transcendentalists celebrated the British Romantics was because they wrote poetry, a genre they valued because they believed it opposed conventionally authoritative language. Channing’s fictional Ashford captured the Transcendentalists’ view of poetry as utterly opposed to institutional language. Explaining why he detested college so, he wrote, “The collegians seemed lost in the microscopic side of learning; and I felt I could see no poetry there” (4.178). Transcendentalists loved poetry because they felt that it was in some way more spiritual, more natural than prose. In her “Essay on Critics,” Fuller described the universe as “a scale of infinite gradation” (1.7). “Religion,” the highest grade of the universe is expressed in two “modulations”: “poetry and music” (1.7). Saxton stated it more explicitly, insisting “Poetry is prophecy, and the poet is a prophet. For what is poetry...but the faculty of insight of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True” (1.86). With such high expectations, it is little wonder that *Dial* critics subjected Romantic poets, especially Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, to severe scrutiny.

The *Dial's* treatment of Shelley serves as a good example of the ongoing debate over Romantic poets. In "Thoughts on Modern Literature," Emerson belittled Shelley for only possessing a "poetic mind" and writing "imitative" poetry (1.150). But John Mackie, in a glowing review of Shelley, wrote that "love of the beautiful" was a "characteristic of Shelley's genius" (1.492). Mackie insisted that "No eye was quicker to detect, or slower to turn from, the beauty" (1.492). Fuller also esteemed Shelley. In her *Dial* article "The Great Lawsuit," Fuller argued, "Shelley...like all men of genius, shared the feminine development" (4.42). Fuller attributed his poetic success to his feminine characteristics: "He, too, abhorred blood and heat, and, by his system and his song, tended to reinstate a plant-like gentleness in the development with energy" (4.42).

6. Women Authors

Only Fuller seemed attentive to women authors. Although the *Dial* regularly published women Transcendentalists like Fuller, it only occasionally reviewed books by women authors. A critic gave a mixed review of Harriet Martineau's *The Hour and the Man* in the July 1841 "Notices of Recent Publications" (2.134). Even Sophia Ripley's *Dial* article "Woman," which critiques the entire poetic tradition for celebrating images of femininity that undermine women, does not recommend a woman poet. In "The Great Lawsuit," women authors received their highest praise from Fuller, who lauded Mary Wollstonecraft and George Sand for being women "rich in genius, of most tender sympathies, and capable of high virtue and a chastened harmony" (4.29). But in another *Dial* article, Thoreau implied that women simply could not possess the same quality of genius as men. He praised Chaucer's later works for "a simple pathos and feminine

gentleness” but seemed uneasy with that characterization (“Homer. Ossian. Chaucer.” 4.302). So he added, “We are tempted to say, that his genius was feminine, not masculine. It was such feminineness, however, as is rarest to find in woman, though not the appreciation of it. Perhaps it is not to be found at all in woman, but is only the feminine in man” (4.302). One wonders what Fuller thought of Thoreau’s implication that good writing bore evidence of a sensibility so feminine that women could only appreciate it, but not produce it. Clearly, the Transcendentalists did not have a unified vision of supporting female authorship, except among their own ranks.

7. Novels

Novelists, like women authors, received little credit from *Dial* critics. Although the antebellum period saw the increasing popularity of the novel, Transcendentalists responded unenthusiastically to the genre, which was “supposed to be the natural fruit and expression of the age” (Emerson, “Europe and European books” 3.519). An anonymous reviewer of Harriet Martineau’s novel *The Hour and the Man* gestured toward welcoming the novel, writing, “This novel deserves a place in the next rank to those which made the modern novel no unworthy successor to the ancient drama” (2.135). Yet, the reviewer critiqued the novel as “not well managed” and insisted that the characters “are not real live men, but only paper sketches of such; but in this Miss Martineau only shares the failure of her contemporaries” (2.135). Within one paragraph, the review denigrated the current state of novelists, making the earlier comparison of the novel to ancient drama sound half-hearted and ambivalent.

Although the *Dial* rarely mentioned novels, the genre received sustained attention in Emerson's "Europe and European Books," where he spoke for all Transcendentalists, "us, who do not read novels" (2.519). In this article, Emerson divided novels into two basic categories: novels of costume or circumstance (bad) and novels of character (good). In the ever popular first category, "novels of *costume* or *of circumstance*," the author presents a "hero, without any particular character" in "a very particular circumstance; he is greatly in want of a fortune or of a wife, and usually of both, and the business of the piece is to provide him suitably" (2.519-520). Emerson considered readers "sleepy and foolish" for being "caught in that old foolish trap" (2.520). He argued that although the hero ostensibly triumphs, in reality all the hero gains is "property" (2.520). Further, the reader gains nothing, neither a "noble thought," nor "one sentiment from the heart of God" (2.520). Formulaic novels of circumstance excluded the reader from any meaningful experience. Thus, Emerson offered this devastating critique: "there is but one standard English novel, like the one orthodox sermon" (2.520). Novels were predictably one-dimensional.

Emerson argued that these novels appealed primarily to the imitative middle class. He condescendingly admitted, "We have heard it alleged, with some evidence, that the prominence given to intellectual power in Bulwer's romances had proved a main stimulus to mental culture in thousands of young men in England and America" (2.518). He elaborated that "The effect on manners cannot be less sensible, and we can easily believe that the behavior of the ball room, and of the hotel has not failed to draw some addition of dignity and grace from the fair ideals, with which the imagination of a novelist has

filled the heads of the most imitative class” (2.519). Overall, Emerson seems to be critiquing the plot of the typical romance novel and its overly status-conscious readers.

Emerson spent less time on the second and better class of novel, the “novel of character,” which he believed was exemplified by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (2.520). Unlike romances, this kind of novel “treats the reader with more respect” by providing a less dependable plot line (2.520). The protagonist’s character development is the focus of the novel, allowing the reader to become “a partaker of the whole prosperity” (2.520). Emerson judged these novels good because “Every thing good in such a story remains with the reader, when the book is closed” (2.520). Emerson concluded that novels should not offer their readers vicarious wealth or romance, but examples of personal moral development. In this, he sounds much like Fuller when she argued that the great theme of literature is the “progress of the soul.” It is not surprising, then, that Transcendentalists found novels generally disappointing. Their preference for the theme of moral progress inevitably prejudiced the Transcendentalists against works with conventional plot resolution.

8. American Authors

Like novels, the uniquely American genre of short stories went largely unnoticed in the *Dial*. Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of only a handful of non-Transcendentalist American authors to receive critical attention from the *Dial*. In the January 1841 *Dial*, Fuller recommended Hawthorne’s *Grandfather’s Chair* in the reviews that ended the issue (1.405). Although Fuller enjoyed Hawthorne’s children’s writings, she hoped he would “write again to the older and sadder, and steep them in the deep well of his sweet,

humorsome musings” (1.405). In July 1842, the reviews included Hawthorne’s *Twice-told Tales* (3.130) and *Biographical Stories for Children* (3.131). The reviewer (either Emerson or Fuller) of Hawthorne’s *Twice-told Tales*, shows a marked preference for the more realistic tales. The critic insisted, “it is in the studies of familiar life that there is most success. In the mere imaginative pieces, the invention is not clearly woven, far from being all compact, and seems a phantom or shadow, rather than a real growth” (3.130). The reviewer believed that Hawthorne’s “genius” would have been “fully roused to its work” if he had drawn from his “own life” (3.131). Although the Transcendentalists preferred Hawthorne’s “Gentle Boy,” they looked forward to Hawthorne’s future works (3.131).

Fuller also recommended Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*, an autobiographical work chronicling Dana’s adventures as a sailor after leaving Harvard (1.264-265). Fuller commended Dana’s “simple narrative, stamped with deep sincerity,” which she believed could “lead to reflections, which mere argument and sentimental appeals do not call forth” (1.265). She hoped the book would show the need for reform of American capitalism by “open[ing] the eyes of many to the condition of the sailor, to the fearful waste of man, by which the luxuries of foreign climes are made to increase the amount of commercial wealth” (1.265). Fuller believed that books exposing social problems would promote reform by helping readers sympathize with Americans of a different class. Fuller argued that *Two Years before the Mast* would “serve to hasten the day of reckoning between society and the sailor” (1.265). In a similar moment, Fuller recommended two works she described as “prison literature:” *The Envoy from Free*

Hearts to the Free and “A Voice from the Prison” (1.404). The second was a compilation of letters and journal entries from a previously wealthy man who served time in a Massachusetts debtor’s prison (1.405). Fuller believed that “the testimony, he has here left on record against some of the most crying evils of the day, cannot fail to produce a deep impression” (1.405). Although Transcendentalists were frequently criticized for refusing to join American reform movements, the *Dial*’s book reviews demonstrate their belief in reading as a powerful tool of social reform.

The rest of the American authors noted in the *Dial* were fellow Transcendentalists. Many recently published Transcendentalists showed up in the *Dial*’s notices of new books, and a few received sustained attention in longer book reviews. Brownson, who did not contribute to the *Dial*, received high praise from George Ripley. Ripley believed Brownson’s *Writings* would “stimulate them [non-church goers] to further inquiry; they may find an aspect of religion, which they had not considered before; and new thought may at length give birth to new faith” (1.46). The *Dial*’s review of Alcott’s works is also noteworthy given how controversial Alcott was both within and outside the Transcendental movement. By far, the most famous, genre-defying original work in the *Dial* was Alcott’s “Orphic Sayings.” Packer notes that Emerson and Fuller published Alcott’s take on Goethe’s “Orphic Sayings” only out of desperation and an attempt to placate Alcott (115). Alcott’s “Orphic Sayings” “quickly became not only famous but hilarious” (116). “Transcendentalist writing,” Packer explains, “was always in danger of either rising unballasted into the clouds in its pursuit of the Idea or descending into obscurities in its drive to solve the mysteries of existence” (116). Packer

writes that Alcott's "Orphic Sayings" "does both at once" (116). Myerson attributes American critics' ridicule of the *Dial* to Alcott's "Sayings" (53). Overwhelmingly, reviews of other Transcendentalists' works in the *Dial* sound overly positive to the modern reader.

At its core, the list of authors the Transcendentalists preferred is different than the Unitarians'. The contents of the *Dial* show that they preferred German to English, Transcendentalists to Unitarians, and almost anything to theological texts. Perhaps the most progressive moves the *Dial* community made were canon formation—they led the way in including non-Christian scriptures and German literature. But by looking for texts that evinced their distinctive theme, "the progress of the soul," Transcendentalists excluded more works than they embraced.

Conclusion

The *Dial* is the Transcendentalist manifesto on reading. Establishing a non-authoritarian understanding of reading was essential to achieving the Transcendentalists' goal of resisting the problems they saw in Unitarianism. W. D. Wilson's 1841 *Dial* article "The Unitarian Movement in New England" argued that Transcendentalism's essential disagreement with Unitarian theology was over epistemology. The Transcendentalists, indebted to Kant and German philosophy, hold to a Platonic world known intuitively, whereas Unitarian theology accepted Locke's sensual world and epistemology. Their divergence in epistemology necessarily led to a disagreement about the value and experience of reading. Is reading just another activity that transmits knowledge through the senses or does reading connect the reader to something greater than the words on the page?

Wilson accused Locke, and with him the Unitarians, of stripping reading of its value. He insisted that materialism "took from the books that stimulating and nourishing influence which they should have exerted upon the minds of their readers" (1.422). Wilson appealed to Paul who "speaks of a 'spiritual discernment' of things, which cannot be a function of any one of the five senses" (1.431). The Transcendentalists saw a problem of psychology as what caused Unitarians to misuse reading; reading and learning must involve some concept of spirit or soul, something outside of the five senses, in order to account for "spiritual discernment." Transcendentalism, then, needed a theory of reading that accounted not only for the intellectual, but also for the spiritual aspects of

people. In the *Dial*, Transcendentalists worked together toward a theory of reading that understood it as an activity of the Soul.

Historians attribute the *Dial*'s short career to its persistent financial difficulties. According to James Mott, when the first issue went to print, the *Dial* claimed only 30 subscribers, and during its entire career its "circulation never exceeded three hundred" (704; 702). Despite its posthumous critical attention, during its lifetime the *Dial* failed to receive enough financial support to keep it solvent. When Fuller began her post as editor she was promised an annual salary of \$200, most of which she never received. In late 1841, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, an occasional contributor to the *Dial* and the host of the Transcendentalist "conversations" in Boston, took over publishing after the *Dial*'s first publisher, Jordan & Company, failed. But subscriptions continued to decline. So in 1843 Emerson turned publishing over to James Monroe, a more experienced businessman and the publisher of Emerson's own books, hoping for a reversal of the periodical's declining revenues (Myerson 90). Still, during its final year, the *Dial* incurred far more expenses than it made up for in subscriptions. After the April 1844 edition was published, Emerson was forced to close shop in order to avoid taking on even more personal debt on account of the *Dial*.

But perhaps the Transcendentalists would have preferred a short-lived project. By their own standards for judging literature, the American press's mocking of the *Dial*'s esoteric themes and unreadable style argued for the journal's prophetic voice. And its financial failure only underscored the selfless sincerity of its authors. Like Brook Farm and Fruitlands, the *Dial* was an unsustainable experiment in organizing a community of

people who, above all, valued independence. Ultimately, Transcendentalists were unwilling to speak in conventional language about conventional topics, and so could never cultivate a large enough audience to sustain their project.

The *Dial*'s dissolution did, of course, not end the Transcendentalists' interest in reading. Ten years after the final *Dial* ran, Thoreau revisited its great theme in *Walden*. Not surprisingly, the young man who had assisted Emerson with the *Dial* series "Ethnical Scriptures," years later still urgently made the case for an expanded canon. In "Reading," Thoreau lamented that Concord, such a literate community, took so little advantage of reading by limiting itself to textbooks, novels, and newspapers. He asked, "Why should we leave it to Harper & Brothers and Reading & Co. to select our reading?" (187). Like Fuller and Emerson in the *Dial*, Thoreau urged New England to "act collectively" to demand better books in libraries and better education in order to promote more meaningful reading (187). And Thoreau noted the essential way reading influenced individuals and communities: "we learn to read only as far as Easy Reading... and our *reading*, our *conversation* and *thinking*, are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins" ([italics mine] 185). What Thoreau encountered in the *Dial* remained with him—that how and what an individual reads fundamentally shapes the thoughts and interactions of the larger community. In fact, Thoreau believed that books could replace churches as the central location for spiritual rituals. He called to the New England Christian, "Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster then, and through the liberating influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let 'our church' go by the board" (186). And "communion" was how Thoreau imagined reading. In *Walden*,

Thoreau reaffirmed a central message of the *Dial*: that good reading was a conversation between an inspired author, who “speaks to the intellect and heart of mankind,” and an intuitive reader “who can *understand*” (181).

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