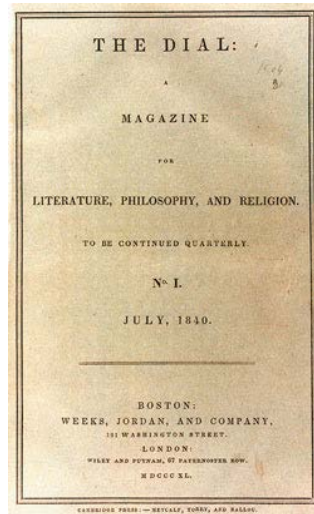


INTRODUCTION



The Dial (1840-44)

The New England society wherein the Transcendentalists came of age, in the 1830's, was already embarked upon an industrial revolution which was rapidly transforming the rural region into an economy of factories and investment, which was demoting its remaining country population to the status of vestigial survivals from a vanished order....

Even so, the public life of New England professed to be still concentrated upon religion. Two or three of those who eventually played a part in the Transcendental drama--Alcott, Sylvester Judd, Brownson--came into it from orthodox Calvinist backgrounds, but most of the actors were children of Unitarianism, and the others went through a preparatory Unitarian phase.

This liberal theology served, ironically, in their development, as it definitely did not in the lives of their fathers (except perhaps for Channing), as a liberation from all theological concern. While it is entirely fair to say that in their new-found pursuits, they generally re-enacted the spiritual patterns of Puritan behavior, still we must recognize that most of them aspired to escape from the clutch of the old preoccupation, to expend themselves not in the vindication of any doctrine whatsoever, but in the creation of an American literature....

Emerson quietly though emphatically withdrew from all churches by resigning his pulpit at the Second Church in 1832 (though occasionally thereafter he did preach in such churches as would invite him). Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott simply left organized Christianity to one side, while Thoreau, serving notice on the selectmen of Concord that he resigned from all societies he had never joined, viciously attacked the churches and devoted himself to rendering pure Nature into pure prose.

Under such leadership, the like-minded got themselves sufficiently, though with difficulty, together in 1840 to issue, in July, the first number of their quarterly, *The Dial*. Margaret Fuller served as editor for two years, and Emerson finished out the job for two more. The magazine never made any money, and never attained more than three hundred subscribers. (Copies of the original now fetch fantastic prices in the rare-book market.) Judged by modern standards of journalism, it was an abysmal failure; judged by other standards, it was a first and memorably gallant effort of the mind in America.

Evidently, Margaret Fuller prepared a draft of the introductory manifesto; Emerson seems to have rewritten it so extensively that it must be considered primarily his....The principal point, I imagine, is the graciousness of the tone, all the most striking in terms of 1840, when the controversy had become so

acrimonious. Furthermore, on the second level, it displays Emerson's cool realization that not too much in the way of creativity could yet be expected from this provincial, mercantile New England--or as yet from America.

Perry Miller, ed.
The American Transcendentalists
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 137-38

THE EDITORS TO THE READER (1840)

Ralph Waldo Emerson & Margaret Fuller

We invite the attention of our countrymen to a new design. Probably not quite unexpected or unannounced will our Journal appear, though small pains have been taken to secure its welcome. Those, who have immediately acted in editing the present Number, cannot accuse themselves of any unbecoming forwardness in their undertaking, but rather of a backwardness, when they remember how often in many private circles the work was projected, how eagerly desired, and only postponed because no individual volunteered to combine and concentrate the freewill offerings of many cooperators. With some reluctance the present conductors of this work have yielded themselves to the wishes of their friends, finding something sacred and not to be withstood in the importunity which urged the production of a Journal in a new spirit....

They have obeyed, though with great joy, the strong current of thought and feeling, which, for a few years past, has led many sincere persons in New England to make new demands on literature, and to reprobate that rigor of our conventions of religious and education which is turning to stone, which renounces hope, which looks only backward, which asks only such a future as the past, which suspects improvement, and holds nothing so much in horror as new views and the dreams of youth....

No one can converse much with different classes of society in New England, without remarking the progress of a revolution. Those who share in it have no external organization. They are united only in a common love of truth, and love of its work...

In literature, this influence appears not yet in new books so much as in the higher tone of criticism. The antidote to all narrowness is the comparison of the record with nature, which at once shames the record and stimulates to new attempts. Whilst we look at this, we wonder how any book has been thought worthy to be preserved. There is somewhat in all life untranslatable into language. He who keeps his eye on that will write better than others, and think less of his writing, and of all writing. Every thought has a certain imprisoning as well as uplifting quality, and, in proportion to its energy on the will, refuses to become an object of intellectual contemplation....All criticism should be poetic; unpredictable; superceding, as every new thought does, all foregone thoughts, and making a new light on the whole world. Its brow is not wrinkled with circumspection, but serene, cheerful, adoring....

Our plan embraces much more than criticism...We do not wish to say pretty or curious things, or to reiterate a few propositions in varied forms, but, if we can, to give expression to that spirit which lifts men to a higher platform, restores to them the religious sentiment, brings them worthy aims and pure pleasures, purges the inward eye, makes life less desultory, and, through raising man to the level of nature, takes away its melancholy from the landscape, and reconciles the practical with the speculative powers....

As we wish not to multiply books, but to report life, our resources are therefore not so much the pens of practiced writers, as the discourse of the living, and the portfolios which friendship has opened to us. From the beautiful recesses of private thought; from the experience and hope of spirits which are withdrawing from all old forms, and seeking in all that is new somewhat to meet their inappeasable longings; from the secret confession of genius afraid to trust itself to aught but sympathy; from the conversation of fervid and mystical pietists; from tearstained diaries of sorrow and passion; from the manuscripts of young poets; and from the records of youthful taste commenting on old works of art; we hope to draw thoughts and feelings, which being alive can impart life.

And so with diligent hands and good intent we set down our *Dial* on the earth. We wish it may resemble that instrument in its celebrated happiness, that of measuring no hours but those of sunshine. Let it be one cheerful rational voice amidst the din of mourners and polemics. Or to abide by our chosen image, let it be such a *Dial*, not as the dead face of a clock, hardly even such as the Gnomon in a garden, but rather such a *Dial* as is the Garden itself, in whose leaves and flowers and fruits the suddenly awakened sleeper is instantly apprised not what part of dead time, but what state of life and growth is now arrived and arriving.

Ralph Waldo Emerson & Margaret Fuller, eds.

Michael Hollister (2014)

