Johannes Voelz, *Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists & Emerson’s Challenge*

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This wide-ranging yet highly focused book is a challenge to read. Emerson scholars will find it stimulating for what it reveals about the New England poet-philosopher’s tactful negotiation of the needs of a developing American market culture. In order to get there, however, they should be prepared to work through the complex chapters in which Voelz dissects the hidden utopian assumptions of the so-called “New Americanist” critics through their engagement with Emerson, the most “polarizing” writer of the American Renaissance. The book’s larger aim is twofold. On the one hand, Voelz casts new light on Emerson’s aesthetic and political doctrines by showing how he, far from being an otherworldly sage, cunningly exploited the possibilities offered by the lecture circuit in order to confront the modern problem of recognition in an increasingly mediatized society. On the other hand, Voelz draws on Emerson’s writings as a vehicle to confront, or to “challenge,” what he calls the “grounding assumptions” of the revisionist scholarship of the last four decades, which has been set on exposing the racist, sexist, and imperialist underpinnings of the founding generation of “Old” Americanists who came of age in the Cold War era. It is the latter aim which in my opinion has consumed most of the author’s energies. However, I hasten to add that this lucidly written book goes well beyond perfunctory readings of Emerson’s hypercanonical texts by drawing extensively on the author’s diaries, letters, and contemporary newspaper reports of the lectures that formed
the basis of most of his essays, in order to highlight how this canonical yet continually controversial literary giant elides easy categorization and political appropriation.

Somewhat ironically, given its insistence on the totalizing “inner logic” inherent in the New Americanist (post-)paradigm, what I see as the most impressive feat of Transcendental Resistance is its integrationist quality: Voelz brings together a wide variety of studies on Emerson under the elusive header of the “New Americanists” and attests in carefully developed arguments – and in a highly elegant style, which is no more than fitting for a book that emphasizes Emerson’s philosophical “stylization” – how they build on a shared but unarticulated consensus regarding the fundamental openness and diversity of American culture. In doing so, Voelz brings to the fore how the New Americanists, in spite of their polemical rejection of the Cold War consensus, remain at least partly indebted to the utopian, integrationist notions of the American “character” as propounded by the representatives of the Myth and Symbol school of the 1950s and 60s. It is indeed striking how, in spite of its enormous diversity, American Studies has from the start legitimized itself as a forward-looking field. The critical impulse which leads Don Pease and Robyn Wiegman, in their influential introduction to the foundational Futures of American Studies volume, to detect a “future fear” in the old guard’s opposition to their revisionist project, thus at the same time connects their radicalism to the consensus model of the foregoing generation. Both factions in the debate, if things can be simplified in such a way, share the largely unquestioned assumption that America is realized through its unreality, as a principle of becoming that drives forward the debates about a truly representative society.

Transcendental Resistance deftly shows how Emerson, the arch-Transcendentalist, may help us to expose the “transcendental overtones” (7) in the New Americanist critics’ rhetoric of resistance, thus in a way turning their critique of Emerson against themselves. Contrary to a dominant interpretation in the field – evident in the work of Myra Jehlen, Eric Scheyfitz, Amy Kaplan and John Carlos Rowe, to name just a few of the scholars with whom Voelz crosses swords –, which holds that Emerson’s idealism reveals his complicity with the dominant racist and imperialist ideologies of his time, Voelz typifies Emerson’s philosophy as a “fractured idealism” (74), which, feeding on the audience expectations created by the Lyceum movement, constantly oscillates between the poles of expression and reception in order to awaken a “receptive creativity” in both the writer-lecturer and the reader-listener. Beyond the realm of aesthetics, this fractured idealism entails a “politics of abstraction” (241), or a refusal to succumb to the temptation to translate universals into particulars. Voelz’s narrative centers around three key terms central to the New Americanist project – the Myth and Symbol critics would refer to them as expressions of the American “Mind” –, namely representation, identity, and the nation. While there appears to be considerable conceptual overlap between these organizing categories, Voelz admirably teases out the implications of each for the New Americanist interpretations of Emerson and how, in turn, Emerson’s philosophy challenges their underlying assumptions. Neither simplistically complicit with, nor entirely free from the prejudices of his time, Emerson’s (supposedly) inconsistent, reception-oriented aesthetic resists the totalizing logic of the New Americanists’ cultural critique and thus, as Voelz argues, draws attention its normative limitations.

One thing that strikes me as paradoxical about Voelz’s otherwise careful and balanced double approach is that, in spite of his efforts to historicize Emerson’s achievement by linking it to the emergent celebrity cult of mid-nineteenth century America, the author’s
primary interest remains Emerson the idealist philosopher. As a consequence, the historical perspective by which Voelz counters the “abstract and strangely ahistorical” (184) readings of the New Americanist critics sometimes gets muted by the book’s conceptual density. As Voelz acknowledges, Emerson’s “politics of abstraction” was sometimes difficult to disentangle from downright vagueness or political flipflopping, and to a degree Voelz’s own finegrained interpretations of Emerson’s essays (the poetry is much less foregrounded) are susceptible to the charge of abstraction. For instance, in what to me appears the most interesting section of the book, Voelz argues against Larry Reynolds, the author of an interesting book on the impact of the revolutions of 1848 on the American literary Renaissance, that Emerson’s ambivalent reception of the Hungarian nationalist Lajos Kossuth was irreducible to political conservatism, but much rather “bespeaks his struggle with the plight of incarnation, or put differently, the organic materialization of the Spirit to which his idealism tended” (234). A reader unfamiliar with Myra Jehlen’s book *American Incarnation* with which Voelz takes issue in an earlier section, and insufficiently versed in Emerson’s own high-flown diction, will have a hard time understanding what is meant here.

5 Both the book’s philosophical bent and its extended engagement with the New Americanists may explain why it remains somewhat unclear just how Emerson’s style was central to his philosophy. In spite of the emphasis on Emerson’s reception aesthetics, the assertion that Emerson’s “metonymic” style “transforms failure into excessive abandonment” (240-1) sounds rather Derridean or de Manean, and in my view does not offer many clues as to how this entails a departure from the deconstructive approach of the New Americanists. On the contrary, at another point, Voelz perhaps correctly but confusingly lambasts the “metonymic formula” (184) implicit in the revisionists’ rejection of Emerson’s idealism, which leads them to reduce all cultural manifestations to either resistance against or complicity with imperial oppression. Reading through Voelz’s perceptive critiques, one may at times get the impression that the study itself fails to avoid the trap of totalization by exaggerating the unspoken consensus of the rather disparate critics subsumed under the label “New Americanists.” Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that the readings of Emerson which Voelz puts forward in *Transcendental Resistance* constitute a valuable, even necessary, corrective to the highly politicized, dichotomous perspective adopted by most of these critics in the ferment of the American culture wars. In Voelz’s optic, Emerson’s fluid, easily misunderstood model of self-reliance proves much more sophisticated and engaging than what can be inferred from the identity politics of much New Americanist criticism.

6 What constitutes the biggest “blind spot” of the generation of New Americanists who came into their own in the conflict-ridden 1960s and 1970s of the last century is inseparable from their shared suspicion of American hegemony. This politicized consciousness paradoxically makes these New Americanists, in spite of their infatuation with French theory, much more monocultural than probably any foregoing generation, and most certainly that of Emerson. This, as Voelz brilliantly shows, is where Emerson’s challenge lies today. Some readers might have wished that the author had more fully explored the interesting connections between Emerson and his French model Victor Cousin, or that he had framed the “culture of eloquence” more explicitly in relation to the historical impact of the Kossuths, the Garibaldi’s and the Mazzini’s on the intellectual scene of Emerson’s New England. Perhaps, as the transnational turn has meanwhile been supplemented by a translational one, it would have been fruitful to include translation or
language as another encompassing category next to representation, identity and the nation, so as to make sense of the contradictions inherent in the New Americanists’ normative horizon. Or, Emerson’s lecture-derived style might have been put into relation with the new positivism of the Digital Humanities in the age of twitter. These observations, however, above all reflect the reviewer’s own current normative horizon and it would be misguided to project them as flaws onto this fascinating, and indeed highly challenging, study by a promising European Americanist.

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