

Reviews

Albena Bakratheva: *Visibility Beyond the Visible: The Poetic Discourse of American Transcendentalism*. Trans. Olga Nikolova. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2013. ISBN: 978-90-420-3556-0. E-Book. ISBN: 978-94-012-0831-4. 268 pages \$83.

The blurb on the back cover of Albena Bakratheva's *Visibility Beyond the Visible: The Poetic Discourse of American Transcendentalism* (originally published in Bulgarian, 2007) states that the book is "the first study to entirely deal with the poetics of American Transcendentalism." The intriguing claim is hard to approach, since "poetics" is an unusually slippery term. Indeed, also in Bakratheva's case "poetics" and "poetic discourse" turn out to be both more vaguely defined and narrowly employed than one perhaps might have wished. What *Visibility Beyond the Visible* delivers is a fairly general account of how the New England Transcendentalists understood and articulated the vocational-cum-poetic aspects of their new spiritual stance, along with some more detailed looks at particular texts. The result is in part vivid and inspiring, in part frustrating.

The study is divided into three sections. In "Core Tenets of American Transcendentalism" Bakratheva sets Transcendentalism in relation to Puritanism and Unitarianism and elaborates on its fundamentally "Poetic-Religious" ambiance; in "Transcendentalism and Romanticism" she devotes chapters to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, comparing their views on creativity, spirituality and culture to European and particularly English romanticism (the emphasis is on Thomas Carlyle); and in "Transcendentalism: A Creed of Self and Nature" she focuses almost exclusively on Thoreau, producing largely conventional but enjoyable readings of *Walden* and Thoreau's first work *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. While there are red threads running through the work, they are not developed in a way that would prevent the chapters from being read separately. Indeed, *Visibility Beyond the Visible* ends up feeling like a

closely connected set of separate essays, an impression strengthened by the somewhat overlapping and repetitive nature of the chapters.

Bakratcheva begins her study with a welcome excavation of the term “Transcendentalism” and its different definitions in the antebellum New England. Noting that the “Transcendentalists constituted a heterogeneous group and never established a set of shared ‘objectives’” (7), she nevertheless sees their views converging on a number of points related to the general determination to “combine profound religious faith with artistic ‘sensibility’” (preface, unnumbered). The Transcendentalists were religious people, many of them ordained as Unitarian priests, who drifted away from orthodox Unitarianism in dissatisfaction both of its rationalist epistemology and its adherence to church dogmas. The familiar trope of changing the pulpit for the lectern, epitomized by Emerson’s resignation from church office in 1832, is well in use. The Transcendentalists’ faith in direct intuition of the divine (or of “higher laws”) resulted in a conception of the divinely inspired “Poet-Priest”, which appropriately makes for Bakratcheva’s central figure in the book. It is the Poet-Priestly aspiration for views unattained by common eyesight that gives the study its title.

As the study proceeds, it seems that Bakratcheva partly forgets her own note about Transcendentalist heterogeneity and handles Transcendentalism in notably general terms. At the same time the book’s engagement with writers other than Emerson and Thoreau remains on the whole tangential (excepting the chapter on Fuller, who keeps gaining momentum in Transcendentalism-related studies). This set-up is explained by Bakratcheva largely taking Emerson to be the paradigmatic Transcendentalist, who serves as an example to the others and most eloquently formulates their shared views—even while in some respects it appears to be Thoreau who (in Bakratcheva’s account) best puts those views into practice. Whether it is in all respects accurate to claim Emerson as a card-carrying Transcendentalist is a complicated question. But, more generally, if the reader finds questionable the presumed equation of “Transcendentalist” with “Emersonian” (and in parts “Thoreauvian”), she might well wonder whether the book’s title is accurate or, indeed, whether there can be such a thing as *the* poetic discourse of Transcendentalism.

In any case, Bakratcheva’s account of the Transcendentalist emphasis on inspiration is lucid. While the Transcendentalists often stressed that the ideal artistic act—like communion with God—must be strictly unmediated by conventions of reason or custom, in fact many of them (notably Emerson

and Thoreau) worked hard in composing and rearranging their writings for publication. The opposition of art as inspiration and art as craftsmanship is evident in theory but rarely in practice. Refreshingly Bakratheva compares this Transcendentalist setting to Edgar Allan Poe's poetics, in so many ways diametrically opposed to Emersonian efforts. Poe, who in his essays on composition stresses technical finesse and carefully thought out textual development, in actual practice was, according to Bakratheva, habitually drunk or drugged. For both Poe and the Transcendentalists there is a tension between the theory of creativity and the actual process, only, "[The Transcendentalists] could eulogize inspiration unto eternity, but could not imagine desecrating it with any analysis of poetic technique; whereas for Poe only technique appeared incorruptible" (59).

What is perhaps surprising is the stress Bakratheva puts on the Puritan roots of the Transcendentalist creed. According to Bakratheva, it is the unique "combination of religious devoutness and worldly pragmatism" of the Puritans (14-15), rather than the comparatively liberated Unitarianism, that grounds the Transcendentalist stance. Bakratheva pays little notice to the austere and fatalistic aspects of Puritanism that both Unitarianism and Transcendentalism came to find so foreign. In itself that's not to fault Bakratheva's account. The attention she draws to the Transcendentalists' reverence for their Puritan forefathers, related to their acute New England sense of place, seems appropriate. Still, on this point I would have liked to see her properly engage the scholarly discussion—for example Lawrence Buell's seminal *Literary Transcendentalism* (1973), which in fact in other respects comes across as Bakratheva's most important secondary source. As it stands, her general take on Transcendentalism and Puritanism seems thin, and it's not easy to see how the Puritan tenet of man's original depravity squares with the study's key emphasis on the Transcendentalist "delight of artistic creation" (11).

While Transcendentalism's standing vis-à-vis Puritanism and Unitarianism is a complex matter, *Visibility Beyond the Visible* contains some troubling factual mistakes, such as the claim that "Emerson was the first to introduce British post-Kantian thought in New England" (123) or that the "spiritual impact" of Emerson's lectures left the audience "invariably . . . feeling illuminated" (108) (in fact the lectures were often controversial and put down as muddle-headed by unfriendly press). One cannot but connect these careless moments to Bakratheva's at times eulogistic approach to Emerson's character. She seems to maintain that since the Transcendentalist

conception of the Poet-Priest depends on the creative artistic force of the spiritually inspired individual, one can only properly grasp the Transcendentalist ethos through a strong emphasis on the characters of those real-life would-be Poet-Priests, Emerson and Thoreau. This makes for inspiring prose but has its obvious pitfalls. Also of note from a scholarly perspective is that the majority of the research literature employed by Bakratcheva's study dates from the 1950s to the 70s. One could in fact conjecture that Bakratcheva's preference for older sources partly accounts for the emphasis on Puritanism (Sacvan Bercovitch's influential 1975 study *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* is visible) and for focusing on the persons of Transcendentalism's central dynamic duo—but this would be conjecture.

The language of the translation is generally good, but there's a breath of clumsiness especially in the syntax and the use of commas. Aside from the occasional need for a quick second look ("His Poet could not be but also a Priest" [90], "The irony is more than 'unambiguous'" [58]), the text nevertheless remains readable and lively. Even though *Visibility Beyond the Visible* has notable issues as a work of literary and intellectual history, it does offer moments of inspired textual analysis and an engaging general elaboration on a central theme in Transcendentalism's spiritual and artistic outlook.

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Birgit Däwes. *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH, 2011. 414 pages. ISBN 978-3-8253-5930-0. \$82.65

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, have long since found a place in popular culture, both directly and indirectly. The past ten years or so have seen a steady stream of literature about the attacks and the aftermath, to such an extent that we now talk of the subgenre 9/11 literature. This genre has already been examined by Kristiaan Versluys in his *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009) and by Richard Gray in *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (2011). But as Birgit Däwes notes in her impressive and exhaustive study *Ground Zero Fiction*, "no critical publication has yet provided a systematic analysis and categorization of [the 9/11] texts" (7).

After a 70-page chapter that provides a meticulous overview of existing criticism on 9/11 fiction—and places the monographs by Versluys and Gray