Introduction: A Little Beyond

Despite their miscellaneous origin, the essays that follow are held together, I trust, by a set of recurring ideas and images. Several of these coalesce in the notion of transcendence, a concept I find crucial not only to the Transcendentalist movement proper with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau as its key figures, but also to their antecedents in New England Puritanism (here represented by Roger Williams and John Cotton), to their followers in twentieth-century modernism (notably William Carlos Williams), and last but not least to our own time. Five years before he delivered his lecture on "The Transcendentalist" (1841), Emerson notes in his *Journal*: "Transcendentalism means, says our accomplished Mrs. B., with a wave of her hand, *A little beyond*" (*JMN* 5:218). The unmistakable note of irony notwithstanding, Emerson probably found Mrs. B.'s remark worth recording because it captures in a nutshell what Transcendentalism was all about. As he explains in his 1841 lecture, Transcendentalism represents a modern version of an ancient and familiar mode of thought: "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842" (*CW* 1:201). Strongly opposed to Materialism and highly critical of the status quo in politics, society, and culture, the movement rejects the skeptic's claim, famously formulated by David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that "we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appeared in that narrow compass" (i.ii.vi; cf. Spaemann). Emerson and the Concord group thought just the opposite; the status quo has an in-built "tendency" for change, and even if we wanted to, we could not help stepping beyond ourselves, because transcendence or "ecstasy" is a law of nature.

A word like *transcendence*, and even more obviously, such phrases as "a little beyond" and "a step beyond ourselves" contain spatial metaphors, specifically the metaphor of walking. Traditionally relegated to the realms of rhetoric and poetics, figurative speech has recently come to be recognized as an integral feature of thought. Thanks to the pioneering work of philosophers and cognitive linguists – notably Hans Blumenberg in Germany and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in the United States – we now appreciate the degree to which even the most abstract concepts rely on metaphors derived from sensory experience. As Ralf Konersmann explains in the introduction to his handbook of philosophical metaphors (*Wörterbuch der philosophischen Metaphern*), while concepts and metaphors serve different functions, they possess equal value in constituting our ideas. Along the same lines, Lakoff and Johnson have proposed an intellectual approach that forgoes the traditional privileging of abstract concepts and instead tries to do justice to the "corporeal" dimension of language and the physical grounding of thought, with metaphor promoted from an ornamental position to the fore of linguistic and philosophical analysis.

Given these developments, Emerson's reflections on the importance of the imagination and figural language may appear to be even more pertinent today than they seemed in his time. In *Nature* (1836) he claims that "words are signs of natural facts," and that "every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance" (*CW* 1:18). If in an early *Journal* entry he sounds somewhat diffident in expressing the hope that his "strong imagination" would offset a deficiency in his "reasoning faculty" (*JMN* 2:238), the later Emerson unabashedly claims equal if not superior authority for the former. As he explains in the late essay "Poetry and Imagination" (1876), "the term genius, when used with emphasis, implies imagination; use of symbols, figurative speech. A deep insight will always, like Nature, ultimate its thought in a thing" (*CW* 8:9).

Images and figures anchor ideas in things. By the same token, they make things come alive. For the "radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts" (*CW* 1:19) must not be misunderstood, as the metaphor of anchoring might suggest, in the

sense of fixing and holding tight. In order to avoid such a misunderstanding, Emerson repeatedly draws attention to the dynamic feature of metaphor – a feature absolutely essential in doing justice to a reality perceived as process, as "ever-flowing metamorphosis": "The act of imagination [...] infuses a certain volatility and intoxication into all nature. It has a flute which sets the atoms of our frame in a dance. [...] The mountains begin to dislimn, and float in the air" (*CW* 8:9). Thoreau makes the same point in *Walden* when he pleads for a discourse of "extravagance" that leaves the beaten track of common sense rhetoric and releases the "volatile truth of our words": a rhetoric of *translation* that makes things "fly," setting them afloat in tune with the principles of becoming and growing that we share with nature (324f.).

According to Emerson, "all thinking is analogizing, and 'tis the use of life to learn metonomy [sic]." Metaphor or metonymy (terms Emerson uses interchangeably with *similitude*, *trope*, *figure*, *emblem*, and *symbol*) do not fix meanings but try to offer a glimpse of the "endless passing of one element into new forms, the incessant metamorphosis" (*CW* 8:8). Konersmann emphasizes the dynamics inherent in metaphor by selecting, whenever feasible, verbs or gerunds rather than nouns as lemmata for his dictionary; metaphors express thought in motion, hence *Bauen* appears preferable to *Gebäude* (Eng. *building* has the advantage of comprising both verb and noun), *Gebären* to *Geburt* (*giving birth* vs. *birth*), *Richten* to *Gericht* (*judging* vs. *judgment* or *court of law*). Expressions of transcendence in particular seem to call for linguistic strategies characterized by fluidity and openness instead of solidity and grounding. Karl Jaspers entitled his last lecture series "The Ciphers of Transcendence" (*Die Chiffern der Transzendenz*), and he took one of the chief attractions – and challenges – of such ciphers to be their ability to make ideas float and to hold them in a state of suspension. ("Hovering" – "Schwebe" – as one of his editors notes [125], was Jaspers's favorite expression; cf. Olson, 37.)

It comes as no surprise, then, that, next to building, the most pervasive metaphor associated with thinking is that of the way or walking. From Heraclitus and Parmenides to Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida (not to mention the later Heidegger's near-obsessive use of titles and concepts including *Weg* or *Wege*), philosophers have

resorted to images of walking (Westerkamp). A systematic or cognitive metaphor, the way has been used to label schools of thought and their methodologies. The very word *method* contains Greek *hodos* (*way*), and over the centuries philosophers have referred to their respective systems as a *via*. At its founding in the late fourteenth century, my own university joined the advocates of the *via moderna* (nominalism) as opposed to the *via antiqua* (realism; cf. Walz and Düchting). Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, the two branches of the liberal arts were known as the *trivium* (the "triple way" of grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the *quadrivium* (the four mathematical arts or "ways"). From Plato and Aristotle to Plotinus and Proclus, from Augustine to Aquinas, Descartes to Hegel, key aspects of logic, epistemology, and metaphysics could not be adequately formulated without extensive and systematic recourse to metaphors of the way.

The pervasiveness of the metaphor points to an anthropological given: to the idea of man as, in medieval terms, *homo viator*, an idea that finds expression not only in philosophical discourse but also in literary works from Homer's *Odyssey* through the quest romances of the Middle Ages and Romanticism to the travel and walk literature of the present age. At the same time, the metaphor of the way serves different functions in different historical periods and intellectual contexts. When René Descartes likens readers of his *Discours de la méthode* to "voyageurs" and formulates his *Regulae* in terms of "ways" leading from ignorance to knowledge, the metaphor tends to shrink to a recipe or blueprint – a method no longer in the sense of a dynamic interaction between the mind and things, but rather a set of devices or a tool-kit designed to fix a problem. Proponents of "objective" science in the wake of Francis Bacon and Descartes continue to invoke the image of the way, but the image has lost its vigor.

From this perspective, Transcendentalism can be seen as a large-scale effort to revitalize the metaphor of the way in an attempt to counter the insidious tendency toward reification and fossilization inherent in the sciences, economics, politics, and the Church of the time. This effort took several forms. Here I will focus only on those that are immediately relevant to the business of transcendence and walking: first, the Transcendentalists' keen interest in nature as expressed in the physical activity of walking; second, their attempt to

recover the original sense of *method* by restoring its hermeneutical dimension, i.e., by projecting the walker as a reader studying the Book of Nature; and third, their commitment to the American Way as an enterprise to be undertaken in what Thoreau called "the spirit of undying adventure" ("Walking," *Ex* 186).

Thoreau's passion for the outdoors is too familiar to require comment here; as he informs us in "Walking," "I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least – and it is commonly more than that – sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields absolutely free from all worldly engagements" (*Ex* 187). Emerson's first major publication – later referred to as "the manifesto of Transcendentalism" – was his 1836 pamphlet entitled *Nature*, to be followed by an essay of the same title in *Essays: Second Series* (1844), with a lecture on "The Method of Nature" (1841) delivered in between. Although not a naturalist of Thoreau's intensity and persistence, he was deeply interested in nature as *physis*. "All his life," Robert Richardson reminds us, "his interest in nature was rooted in his delight in and close observation of nature." As a boy "who rambled in the woods and fields outside Boston" and as a father who "took his children on nature walks and taught them all the flowers and birds and trees," he felt strongly attached to the natural world and spent a good many hours abroad (Richardson 1999, 97). Jotted down in 1857, the following *Journal* entry comes not from the young man but from the established writer and lecturer: "I do not count the hours I spend in the woods, though I forget my affairs there & my books. And, when there, I wander hither & thither; any bird, any plant, any spring, detains me. I do not hurry homewards for I think all affairs may be postponed to this walking. And it is for this idleness that all my businesses exist" (*JMN* 14:145).

In a letter to his bride written in 1835, Emerson sees his "rambling propensities" as essential to the pursuit of his "nature & vocation," the "high calling" of "a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & and in matter, & specially of the correspondences between these & those" (*L* 1:435). The key word is "correspondence," the idea that matter and mind shed light on each other because they are pervaded by an all-embracing, unifying principle. This is a premise shared by Thoreau. Much has been made of

the difference between a presumably idealistic Emerson and an empiricist Thoreau, or between an early Emersonian and a later protoscientific Thoreau, who renounced the idealistic vision of his mentor (see, e.g., Cameron; R. Johnson, ch. 5). But although Emerson did not engage in the kind of data-gathering that went into Thoreau's "Kalendar" project, the *Journal* shows that his penchant for close observation never waned. Conversely, despite his immersion in data and details, Thoreau always assumed a spiritual unity informing the variety and wealth of physical phenomena. For both Emerson and Thoreau, early and later, the activity of walking involves a quest for unifying patterns. Nature needs to be interpreted; hence the walker's job coincides with that of a reader studying the language of nature. Reacting against the ideal of objectivity advocated by the sciences in the name of Descartian or Baconian methodology, Emerson and Thoreau reinstate the authority of the subject, arguing that we can know only what we are *interested* in. Physically and mentally the walker engages not in an objectively verifiable experiment so much as in an open-ended hermeneutical adventure informed by expectation, intuition, and tact (in addition to the self-evident procedures of observation and factual notation). Such an approach harks back to the ancient topos of the Book of Nature as well as the pre-socratic notion of *method* in the sense of following or accompanying something "on its way." At the same time it anticipates recent attempts in biosemiotics, cognitive linguistics, and philosophical hermeneutics to bridge the gap between the "two cultures" of the sciences and the humanities.

Both Emerson and Thoreau saw their work as a contribution to the American Way, the historic enterprise of building a new commonwealth started by the New England Puritans. Emerson repeatedly invokes the heritage of Calvinism and his Puritan ancestors. "What brought the pilgrims here?" he asks in "The Method of Nature." "And what," he continues, "is to replace for us the piety of that race?" (*CW* 1:135). He knew what he was talking about not only from his reading but also, and perhaps more importantly, from intense conversations with his Calvinist aunt Mary Moody Emerson; several passages in *Nature* are the product of a collaborative venture, as it were, between aunt and nephew (Cole, 240–44). In significant ways, Perry Miller's narrative of the road "from Edwards to Emerson" holds (Shuffelton).

In this volume I've extended that road backwards to include the first generation of immigrants; when John Cotton and Roger Williams fight over the significance of the Biblical types, and when Williams takes up the Indians' idea of "wandering" as an allegorical notion to set against Cotton's typology of the New England Way, we encounter a sensibility that will come into its own in the writings of the Transcendentalists.

The fact that the "American Way" has long been a stereotype, with imagery of the journey providing ready rhetorical currency for Presidential speeches (see Barack Obama's Inaugural Address, for instance), should not blind us to the complexity and continuing creative potential of the metaphor. In "Experience" (1844), Emerson underscores its spiritual dimension when he invokes "this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the west" (*CW* 3:41), while Thoreau aligns his daily walks with the "westward tendency" of Columbus as well as his contemporaries ("Walking," *Ex* 198). But one of the most striking illustrations of the dynamics inherent in the American Way appears in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* – an unlikely source, since no one would seem to bear greater responsibility for the reification of the Way, its decline into materialism and a set of fixed rules, than the author of "The Way to Wealth." The Transcendentalists had good reasons to take a dim view of Franklin (cf. Barbour; Cook), but if they had read all of the *Autobiography* they might have been impressed by an episode toward the end where Franklin tells the story of his encounter with the Dunkers, one of the most radical Protestant groups to find their way into the colonies. When one of the founders of the sect complains that they are being "grievously calumniated by the Zealots of other Persuasions, and charg'd with abominable Principles and Practices to which they were utter Strangers," Franklin – ever the printer – suggests that they draw up and publish their Articles of Belief so as to lay these charges to rest. To which the Dunker replies:

> "When we were first drawn together as a Society [...] it had pleased God to inlighten our Minds so far, as to see that some Doctrines which we once esteemed Truths were Errors, & others which we had esteemed Errors were real Truths. From time

> to time he has been pleased to afford us farther Light, and our Principles have been improving, & our Errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we are arriv'd at the End of this Progression, and at the Perfection of Spiritual or Theological Knowledge; and we fear that if we should once print our Confession of Faith, we should feel ourselves as if bound & confin'd by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive farther Improvement; and our Successors still more so, as conceiving what we their Elders & Founders had done, to be something sacred, never to be departed from." [1416f.]

Franklin applauds "this Modesty in a Sect" as "perhaps a singular Instance in the History of Mankind, every other Sect supposing itself in Possession of all Truth," and he goes on to project the image of a traveler in foggy weather who thinks the people in front and behind as well as to the right and left "wrapt up in the Fog" while his immediate vicinity appears clear, "tho' in truth he is as much in the Fog as any of them." One can imagine Roger Williams reminding John Cotton that we are all "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13), or Emerson and Thoreau insisting that there are no recipes for "the pursuit of happiness." As Thoreau warns his readers in *Walden*, everyone should "be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way" (71).

Beyond Transcendentalism, from Whitman to Modernism, one of the dominant images of the American Way has been the open road, the idea of American society and culture as an open-ended rite of renewal and rebirth that leaves room for what the Dunker quoted above calls "farther Light." To this day most public intellectuals in the United States share a sense of solidarity based on a trust in America's potential for change (see the interviews in Endler and Maul). Europeans tend to take a more skeptical view, which makes Martin Walser's Whitmanesque poem – included in a volume that has *journey* in its title (*Die Amerikareise*) – all the more exciting. But one of the most forceful twentieth-century expressions of the hope implied in the metaphor of the Way can be found in the work of William Carlos Williams. Like Thoreau and Emerson a severe critic of the status quo, Williams never wavered in his belief in America's potential. It would not have occurred to him to trade Paterson, New Jersey, for Paris.

Paracelsus justified his peregrinations as a superior avenue to enlightenment because they enabled him to read the leaves of nature's book with his feet. A way of life, walking as reading was not just an epistemological strategy; it had profound existential implications. In the "Spring" essay toward the end of *Walden*, after describing the leaf patterns forming in the melting sand, Thoreau exclaims, "what Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us, that we may turn over a new leaf at last?" (308). From Aristotle to Hans-Georg Gadamer, philosophers have pointed out that the journey of exploration involves more than the acquisition of knowledge; *experience* or *Erfahrung* – both words contain Indo-European **per* (*fare*, *travel*) – changes the traveler. Thoreau's punning beautifully captures this idea, suggesting as it does that deciphering nature's language, turning the leaves of its book, will eventually help *us* to "turn over a new leaf" – to change our ways and start a new life. (The phrase has been proverbial in this sense since the sixteenth century; *OED*: *leaf* n.1.7.b).

Such a change – involving no less than what the New Testament refers to as *metanoia* and rebirth – requires that the self, rather than follow a prescribed set of rules, confront nature with great physical and spiritual intensity. In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau's ascent of Mt. Ktaadn reaches its climax in moments of "*Contact*" (71). In a similar spirit, William Carlos Williams asserts that the chief task of the American writer is to get *in touch* with the continent and to develop poetic strategies growing out of his immediate experience of the land. Such an enterprise has little to do with American materials (as nineteenth-century authors such as James Fenimore Cooper believed); in Williams's view it is rather a matter of *method*, which he understood to be an opening up of the mind to immediate sensory experience – a method, as he explains in *In the American Grain*, that would finally allow the New World, and with it the American, to be born (227–29).

Once again, then, walking and reading merge in a vision that captures the interplay of mind and nature in a notion of interdependence that does justice to both and realizes the need of both for transcendence. The walker's *ekstasis* as he takes his steps into nature corresponds to nature's need for metamorphosis; both have an urge to step outside and beyond themselves. Under such auspices, the

American Way is no longer a national affair, but indeed – as the Pilgrims, the Founding Fathers, and the Transcendentalists thought – an experiment undertaken for the benefit of humankind. It is nothing less than an attempt to lead a meaningful life, not – *pace* postmodernists – by *constructing* meaning, but by cultivating a method that would activate life's immanent "tendency" (one of Emerson's favorite expressions) toward renewal and growth. Despite the outrages of slavery, Indian removal, and the Mexican War, and despite the traumatic personal losses so amply documented in their writings, Emerson and Thoreau were convinced that life made sense. The Emersonian thinker allowing himself to be intoxicated by nature's "volatile essence" ("Nature," *CW* 3:113) and the Thoreauvian saunterer relishing the flavor of wild apples or huckleberries offer versions of faith, of the self-transcendence that takes care of our "quiet desperation" (*Wa* 8). Life made sense to them, not because as Americans they were "chronically up-beat" (Eagleton, 11), but because, as the word *sense* suggests, they found that it *tasted* good (cf. Grondin, 29f.).