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Writers·Readers·Publishers: On Literary Production in *The Business of the Transcendentalists*

Duan Yini

Abstract: *The Business of the Transcendentalists* breaks new ground in literary studies by examining 19th-century American Transcendentalism through economic and market lenses. By analyzing the creative practices and subsistence strategies of Concord writers including Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne, the book recontextualizes literary creation as socioeconomic activity, revealing how market forces continually help to shape Transcendentalist literature. Drawing on its core arguments, this article examines the market logic underlying Transcendentalist literature from three perspectives: the writer's existential paradox as an "intellectual laborer", the reader's role as a "market-vane" creating literary demand, and the publisher's function as a "commercial strategist" constructing literary reputation. It further explores the symbiotic relationship between literature and economy. The book's significance lies in bridging literary and economic inquiry, thus offering a methodological framework for understanding the complex interplay between literature and the market.

Keywords: *The Business of the Transcendentalists*; market logic; literary production; writer's identity

Author Biography: Duan Yini, Postgraduate student, The School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University, English and American Literature, E-mail: 2217773059@qq.com.

标题：作家·读者·出版商：评《超验主义的生意》中的文学生产

摘要：《超验主义的生意》跳出传统文学研究的藩篱，从经济与市场维度切入，重新审视 19 世纪美国超验主义文学的发展脉络。该书通过梳理爱默生、梭罗、霍桑等康科德作家的创作与生存实践，将文学创作还原为具体的社会经济行为，揭示出超验主义文学的发展从未脱离市场的滋养与制约。本文以该书的核心理念为依托，从作家作为“精神劳动者”的生存悖论、读者作为“市场风向标”的需求塑造、出版商作为“商业操盘手”的名声生产三个维度，剖析超验主义文学背后的市场逻辑，进而探讨文学与经济的深层共生关系。该书的价值在于打破了文学研究与经济研究的壁垒，为理解文学与市场的复杂互动提供了方法论范例。

关键词：《超验主义的生意》；市场逻辑；文学生产；作家身份

作者介绍：段旖旎，硕士研究生，南京师范大学外国语学院，英美文学，电子邮箱：2217773059@qq.com.

Around the mid-19th century, the American literary scene witnessed the remarkable rise of Transcendentalism, represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other prominent figures, leaving an enduring legacy for posterity. For a long time, academia has largely focused on the philosophical core and spiritual values of this intellectual movement, regarding the members of the “Concord Club” as unworldly “spiritual saints.” However, Professor Yang Jing’s book *The Business of the Transcendentalists: The Concord Circle and the American Literary Market* (Guangdong People’s Publishing House, 2026) carves out a new path, approaching the subject through the lens of economics and market dynamics to explore the actual conditions and evolution of Transcendentalist literature within American society of that era.

The book unfolds in eight chapters, detailing the market practices of the Concord writers: Emerson renounced his ministry to embark on a career as a public lecturer, translating Transcendentalist ideas into commercially popular speeches and striking a balance between spiritual pursuit and material gain; Thoreau advocated a distinctive economic philosophy in *Walden*, yet his work saw disappointing sales, which plunged him into considerable debt; Nathaniel Hawthorne forged close ties with publishers such as James T. Fields, achieving dual success in literary fame and wealth through strategic packaging and promotional campaigns; Margaret Fuller distanced herself from the elite circle of Concord to join *The New-York Tribune*, shifting her focus to public issues and addressing the concerns of mass readership, thereby transforming from a Transcendentalist into a public intellectual; Louisa May Alcott, driven by family financial hardship, navigated between highbrow literature and popular writing, ultimately embodying and realizing the ideal of “self-reliance” championed by Emerson; Elizabeth Peabody, using her Boston foreign bookstore as a hub, promoted Transcendentalist ideas through publishing *The Dial*, fueling the social

reform in New England; William Ellery Channing entered the literary scene with Emerson's endorsement but faded into obscurity for failing to break free from the constraints of Transcendentalist poetics; George Ripley's Brook Farm, plagued by financial hardship, evolved from a Transcendentalist utopia into a Fourierist "phalanx", only to collapse due to such "unnatural associations."

Following the framework of this book, the article probes into the market logic underlying Transcendentalist literature from three progressive dimensions—writers, readers, and publishers—offering insights into the profound symbiosis between literature and economy, with a view to providing a new perspective for understanding the social nature of literature.

1. From "Intellectual Preacher" to "Intellectual Laborer": The Existential Paradox of the Writers' Identity

Transcendentalist writers have long been celebrated for their lofty spiritual pursuits. Emerson is hailed as the "American Prophet", and Louisa May Alcott, with her notion of "sentimental economy", envisions an ideal society. They were supposed to be "intellectual preachers" unbound by material concerns. Yet the rise of the American literary market in the nineteenth century swept them into the tides of survival, forcing them to be more pragmatic and turning them into "intellectual laborers" obliged to earn a living. Literary production thus shifted from a literati's "avocation" of self-cultivation to a "profession" for survival, concealing a profound existential paradox between ideal and reality.

This predicament of the writers' identity is not an abstract concept. Emerson's life trajectory embodies this paradox concretely. Poverty in his early years obliged him to run errands to cover his tuition fees at Harvard; the loss of one dollar in childhood became a wound he "regretted for life." The sting of destitution steeled him to pursue wealth. After resigning from the pastoral duties at the Second Church in Boston, which was Unitarian, he keenly seized the market opportunity brought by the Lyceum movement and presented esoteric Transcendentalist doctrines through accessible public lectures. His topics ranged from literature and culture to social reform, all of which reflected public concerns. As he said, "Who would not like to write something which all can read, like Robinson Crusoe?" (22)^① His speeches brought him not only substantial income—no less than one hundred dollars per appearance in the 1860s—but also financial independence, which in turn sustained his philosophical inquiries. The same thinker who once decried "trade as the ruler of the world today" ultimately achieved, as F. O. Matthiessen pointed out, "the moderate balance between Transcendentalism and Franklin" (51), becoming a representative figure who fused Puritan idealism with pragmatic enterprise. His experience proved that "without the bank's interest of \$1,200 a year, how could I dare speak of 'self-reliance'?" (20)—intellectual preaching divorced from material

^① Quoted in Yang Jing (2026). *The Business of the Transcendentalists*. Guangdong People's Publishing House. Subsequent citations are annotated by page number only.

support is nothing but an illusion. Only by confronting the need for survival can a writer sustain his spiritual pursuit.

Nonetheless, not all the Transcendentalist writers achieved the same “success” as Emerson did. For Louisa May Alcott, the pressure of survival was even heavier. The family’s financial burdens, as heavy as a grindstone, weighed her down. To repay the debts and support her family, she had to navigate between highbrow literature and pulp fiction. On the one hand, through works like *Little Women* and *Flower Fables*, she conveyed warmth and ideals while shaping images of diligent and virtuous women. On the other hand, in pursuit of quick money, she wrote many thrillers under pseudonyms, becoming a “hack writer” for the market. The metaphor of “busy bee” runs throughout her works, symbolizing both her devotion to work and the alienation she experienced through labor—the worker bee toils but cannot enjoy the fruits of its labor, just as Alcott squandered her creative spirit in commercial writing. She proposed a “sentimental economy” to counter capitalist competition, yet she remained in the market’s grip. This “dual writing” reveals the reluctant compromise between spiritual aspiration and material necessity, and highlights the writer’s agonizing choice between ideal and reality. As Emerson himself acknowledged, “society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion” (26).

If the above addresses individual struggles, then Brook Farm, founded by George Ripley, enacts this paradox on a collective level. Conceived as a Transcendentalist social experiment, the Farm initially sought to build a utopia where a “Natural Union” between intellectual and manual labor could be realized in pursuit of spiritual freedom. Yet economic pressure shadowed it from the start. The refusal by Emerson and his circle to purchase initial shares forced the Farm to operate on a weak economic foundation. To survive, Ripley had to transform the Transcendentalist association into a Fourierist “Phalanx” to secure financial backing from the North American Phalanx and introduce industrial production models. However, ideological conflicts and mismanagement ultimately led to its dissolution. In 1846, the uninsured phalanstery was destroyed by fire, extinguishing the Farm’s last hope. The collapse of this utopian experiment profoundly demonstrates that purely spiritual pursuits divorced from economic foundation can neither survive nor thrive. Ripley later wrote in an elegy: “The day I was buried! In tears of pain / I sit beside your grave, I and the ghosts of passing years / sweep through the gloom of my soul” (281)—not merely a dirge for the Farm but a lament for spiritual ideal defeated by material reality.

Taken together, the transformation of the Transcendentalist writer’s identity reflects a fundamental paradox of literary production within the capitalist market system. The rise of the American literary market in the nineteenth century recast writers from “dependents of aristocratic patronage” into “laborers in the marketplace.” Their works became “commodity-vehicles”, which are carriers of ideas produced for survival. The so-called transcendental spiritual pursuit ultimately

depends on material support. As Karl Marx observed, in Hegel's bürgerliche Gesellschaft, the abstract citizen and the concrete egoistic individual fail to achieve harmony. The struggles of the Transcendentalist writers vividly enact this proposition in the literary field—they longed to be pure intellectual preachers but were forced to be pragmatic material seekers. Yet paradoxically, this “forced labor” driven by economic necessity nourished literary flourishing, allowing Transcendentalist literature to acquire both intellectual depth and earthly warmth through the interplay of spiritual aspiration and the practice of survival.

2. From Passive to Active Evaluation: To Meet the Readers' Demand as “Market-Vane”

In traditional literary studies, readers are often regarded as mere followers and worshippers of the author's artistic craftsmanship. However, in the literary market of the nineteenth-century America, with the expansion of the readership and the diversification of reading tastes, readers emerged from the background and took center stage, becoming the “market vane” that determines the trend of literature. Readers' demand acts as an invisible baton, guiding the writers' creations and even influencing the trajectory of literary movements and the shift of literary power.

With this power shift in influence, the journey of Thoreau's *Walden* in the marketplace stands as a telling illustration of the adjudicating force of readers' demand. In this work, Thoreau advocates for an economic vision of “voluntary poverty” and practices spiritual freedom through a minimalist lifestyle; his profound thoughts and concise writing ought to have made it a gem in literary history. However, in the mid-nineteenth-century America, readers favored sentimental novels and adventure stories, such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*. Statistics indicate that at that time, “sentimental sub-novels, despite being seen as trash, still had a market,” with Warner's work earning \$4,500 in royalties within just six months of publication. (47) In contrast, Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* printed a thousand copies but saw sales stagnate—with as many as seven to eight hundred copies remaining unsold, ultimately all returned to the author. Not only did Thoreau fail to gain any profit from the project, but he also incurred “enormous debts” to the publisher. He refused to “devalue himself” to appease readers, insisting that “anything that is widely popular among audience is merely cliché” (22), yet he could not escape the punitive backlash of the market. Apparently, readers' demand had become the “invisible judge” of the literary market; if authors dare to ignore it, they will be severely punished. Thoreau would rather fill his shelves with his own writings and sacrifice market success than compromise his freedom; his lofty stance is admirable while his plight is indeed lamentable.

In contrast to Thoreau's choice to resist the market, Margaret Fuller exemplifies literary wisdom by adapting to readers' demand. In her early years, Fuller delved deeply into Transcendentalist thought, engaging in discussions of ancient Greek mythology and German philosophy with Bostonian ladies at the Peabody Bookstore's “Conversations”, earning a net income of about \$500 per year. However, the cessation of *The Dial* in 1844 and the closure of the

“Conversations” made her acutely aware that art disconnected from the public could not endure. After she joined *The New York Tribune*, Fuller resolutely transformed her focus from “transcendental self” to public issues, addressing social realities such as prison reform, women’s rights, and urban poverty. Her columns resonated with the concerns of the masses, fulfilling readers’ needs for awareness of contemporary issues, and the newspaper’s 50,000 subscribers provided a broad audience for her ideas, which earned her reputation as “the public conscience of New York” (147). As Michael T. Gilmore states in *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, “The American Romantic era was the era of the marketplace” (46). In this era, every coin held by readers constitutes a vote for the works of authors and largely directs and shapes changes in creative trajectories; they serve unequivocally as “market-vane”. Therefore, it is not surprising that Sacvan Bercovitch concludes, “Romantic authors had to adjust their writing strategies to market concerns” (4).

After the 1820s, the American reading population grew rapidly; “by 1850, over 90% of adult males could read and write” (4), creating the largest public readership in history. Having long recognized this trend, Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that, in democratic nations, “democratic thoughts merge with commercial spirit in literature” (47). This implies that literature was no longer a luxury exclusive to a few elites but had to cater to the interests of the general public. Between 1831 and 1860, the proportion of adventure novels in America rose to 60%, while sentimental novels dropped to 20%, which serves as a direct reflection of the change of readers’ taste. The flourishing of Transcendentalist literature in mid-nineteenth century can be attributed to its core principles of “self-reliance” and “spiritual freedom”, which resonated with the American public’s psychological need to pursue democratic independence and dispel European cultural constraints; however, as readers shifted their focus toward social reform and contemporary issues around the time of the Civil War, Transcendentalist literature also began to decline.

Thus, readers are no longer merely the terminal of literary dissemination but rather the threshold of literary production, with their demands permeating the whole process of creation, dissemination, and reception. However, this fact indicates a deeper-reaching process of literary democratization than the inexorability of market logic. In the previous ages, the value of literature was adjudicated by the church or aristocracy whereas readers remained as passive recipients; in the emerging literary market, the reading choices of enormous ordinary readers coalesced into an unignorable force that smashed the monopoly of literary discourse held by the minority. This “power shift” is a direct extension of the democratic spirit in the cultural realm. As an ancient Chinese saying goes, “The very water that can carry a boat can also capsize it.” The “water” of readers can both support those authors who adapt to the times and capsize those works that remain complacent. For literati to establish their voice, they must first build their connection with readers; to build that connection, they must first comprehend them—comprehend what readers love and appreciate what they need. This is not pandering but rather the survival wisdom exhibited by Emerson and his circle.

3. From Printing and Distribution to Fame-Making: The Promotion of Publishers as “Commercial Strategists”

In the chain of literary production, publishers were once simply regarded as printers and distributors, whose sole responsibility was transforming writers’ manuscripts into printed books for market circulation. Nevertheless, amid the tide of Transcendentalist literature in the nineteenth-century America, publishers had long transcended such mere technical roles and evolved into “commercial strategists” holding sway over the literary market. Through precise market positioning, elaborate writer packaging, and efficient promotional campaigns, they constructed the literary reputations of authors and accurately estimated their cash value in the literary market, thus becoming a key force in popularizing Transcendentalist literature.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s rise to fame was inseparable from the careful stewardship of his publisher James T. Fields. Though endowed with remarkable literary talent in his early years, Hawthorne remained unknown in the literary market, even mocking himself as “the obscurest man of letters in America” (8), and was forced by economic pressures to turn to children’s literature. In 1849, Fields visited the unemployed Hawthorne and soon published his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. To cater to market demands, Fields suggested Hawthorne expand *The Custom-House* as the preface to the novel, infusing the work with topicality and authenticity through an autobiographical narrative style. To boost the appeal of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Fields designed an exquisite cover for the book, captivating readers with visual aesthetic elements. Fields was also exceptionally adept at publicity campaigns: he not only invited literary acquaintances to write praiseworthy book reviews, but also preheated the market by publishing advertisements and excerpts in newspapers. More notably, together with his business partner William Ticknor, Fields provided all-round support for Hawthorne’s literary creation and daily life, ranging from financial planning and travel arrangements to purchasing cigars and wine on his behalf, allowing Hawthorne to devote himself entirely to writing. Thanks to Fields’ packaging and promotion, Hawthorne rose from an obscure customs officer to a preeminent national writer in the United States. Hawthorne once expressed his heartfelt thanks to Fields, which reveals the core role of publishers in constructing writers’ reputations. Thus, “Fields’s company reaped huge profits while Hawthorne gained literary reputation, a model of mutual benefit” (49). This deeply bonded partnership illustrates how publishers endow literature with value through commercial means.

Hawthorne’s sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody was both a writer and a publisher. Running a foreign bookstore in Boston, the cultural center of America, she built an ideological dissemination network for Transcendentalism centered on her bookstore and periodical business. As an astute bookseller, she kept a close eye on market trends and sustained her business through in-store book sales and overseas procurement of foreign books and journals. Meanwhile, as “the chief patron and

principal chronicler” of Transcendentalism (14), she self-financed the publication of *The Dial*, the organ of Transcendentalism, single-handedly sustaining its operation for a year and a half despite knowing that it was an unprofitable venture. She also edited *Aesthetic Papers*, which, though only one issue was published, included masterpieces such as Hawthorne’s *Main Street* and Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*. She actively solicited contributions from writers, delivered newly published books to cultural celebrities, and leveraged commercial channels to popularize Transcendentalist ideas. Peabody’s extraordinary insight lay in her mastery of promoting ideological advancement through business, and her success was “adapting Transcendentalism to the expanding capitalist literary market” (194). Though her bookstore operated for merely over a decade, it functioned as a crucial hub for spreading Transcendentalist thought, translating niche philosophical speculations into widespread cultural influence. In essence, the value of publishers extends far beyond pursuing commercial gains. By means of commercial operation, they construct bridges for ideological communication, enabling literary trends to win public recognition and achieve enduring vitality.

In contrast to the above cases, Ellery Channing’s literary career corroborates from another perspective how publishers (and mentor-style publishers) exert a decisive influence on reputation construction, which could bring both positive advancement and negative constraints to writers. Endowed with poetic talent from an early age, Channing gained the appreciation of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson not only guided his writing personally but also paved the way for his career with his own prestige: he published advertisements and book reviews in *The Dial* to boost Channing’s fame, strongly recommended him to publisher Mathew Carey, hailed Channing as a “poetic genius” while dismissing himself as merely “an amateur poet”, and even proposed attaching his own poems as an appendix to Channing’s poetry collection to amplify the latter’s popularity (36). Fueled by Emerson’s full endorsement, Channing’s two poetry collections drew immediate critical acclaim upon publication, establishing him as a leading figure among Transcendentalist poets. However, unlike Henry David Thoreau, who dared to break free from his mentor’s ideological constraints, Channing rigidly followed the Transcendentalist poetics advocated by Emerson and never blazed a unique creative path of his own. Consequently, as Transcendentalist literature declined and Emerson shifted his attention elsewhere, Channing lost his core commercial strategist, and his creation lapsed into stagnation. Apart from a biography of Thoreau, he produced no other major works ever after. Channing’s fluctuating career mirrors the supreme power of publishers as “value givers”: they shape not only writers’ instant fame, but their long-term literary influence. Once such external endorsement fades away, a writer’s reputation will inevitably dwindle.

All these instances demonstrate that publishers deeply understand the market logic. They excel at tapping writers’ creative potential and attracting readers through publicity and promotion. They

are both pursuers of commercial interests and discoverers and disseminators of literary value. It was under their strategic operation that Transcendentalist writers stepped out of the niche Concord circle to reach the national readership, with their ideas gaining wide circulation and ultimately securing a prominent place in American literary history. As stated in the book, in the mid-nineteenth-century literary market, the decisive factor was neither “the meticulous writers” nor “the blindly enthusiastic readers”, but the “domineering publishers” (33). Whether a work can stand the test of time hinges not only on its intrinsic artistic quality but also on whether there are strategists to endorse its value and pave the way for its reputation. Nevertheless, this phenomenon does not signify the degeneration of literature; instead, it reflects the social nature of literary production. Walter Benjamin argued that in the era of advanced capitalism, writing has evolved into commodity production (43), yet this does not mean the extinction of literary spirit. On the contrary, it is tempered by commercial operation that private manuscripts are transformed into public cultural assets, and individual philosophical contemplations evolve into ideologies influencing an era. In this sense, the “business” of publishers is also a “business” that sustains the prosperity and perpetuity of literature itself.

Conclusion

From the transformation of writers’ identities and the rise of reader power to the value construction by publishers, *The Business of the Transcendentalists* sketches the landscape of American literary production in the 19th century through the practices of the Concord writers. The struggles of Transcendentalist writers between idealism and livelihood, the shaping of creative directions by reader demands, and the assignment of literary value by publishers collectively confirm a universal truth: literature has never existed in isolation from the market, and economic logic has long been deeply embedded in the texture of literary development. In other words, literature and the market stand not in opposition, but in a mutually dependent relationship. The material support of the market makes spiritual pursuits realizable; economic pressures compel innovations in literary form; and the spiritual substance of literature infuses humanistic warmth into the market, elevating commercial activity beyond mere profit-seeking. The vitality of Transcendentalist literature lies precisely in the balance it strikes between spiritual aspiration and market logic—neither reduced to material gain nor deprived of broad dissemination and enduring vitality.

As the author observes at the end of the book: “The literary creations of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and others were inextricably bound up with the mid-19th-century American literary market. Without such commercial culture and market forces, their works at the very least would

have lacked a certain dimension, their breadth and depth would likely have been severely diminished, and the outlook of American literary history might have been greatly altered” (303). In this sense, literary studies must return to the historical context and confront the profound shaping of literary creation by economic forces. Only then can we truly understand the mechanisms by which literary works are produced and the nature of their value. In short, the market logic behind literary production is no desecration of literature, but rather its fulfillment. This is the profound insight of *The Business of the Transcendentalists* and the central argument of this article.

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ORCID

Duan Yini ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7971-8312>

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