had to have been for him, Waldo’s eventual discovery of Mary’s role in molding and reinforcing the darkest characteristics of his brother’s hidden character had to be one of the most difficult familial realities with which he had to contend during his life” (239).

The phrase “familial realities” nicely conveys what this biography so powerfully demonstrates, just how large a space the Emerson family occupied in Waldo’s world. “I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me,” he famously declared in “Self-Reliance” (1841). Perhaps, but he consistently responded to the call and claims of his family, to which he was deeply committed. Despite the length of this review, I have touched upon only a few of the many aspects of Waldo’s life that The Emerson Brothers illuminates, from the full extent of his grief over the death of his first wife to his longtime involvement in and astute handling of financial matters, the subject of the final chapter, “William and Waldo: Finances and Family.” Moreover, as generous as the selections in this volume are, they indicate rather than exhaust the richness of the surviving letters written by William, Edward, and Charles, all of which Bosco and Myerson have transcribed and plan to make available on the Web site of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society (www.emersonsociety.org). Indeed, just as Waldo fondly hoped to bring his extended family together under one roof or in close proximity in Concord, scholars may well begin to dream of having all of the letters written by Waldo, his brothers, and other members of the family gathered together in one vast and searchable digital archive. Meanwhile, we can be grateful to Bosco and Myerson for opening up such a fascinating portion of the family correspondence and for giving us The Emerson Brothers.

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In the first study to examine the history of social activism by the Concord transcendentalists, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis puts Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and their high-minded peers back in “civic context” (3), a long-overdue critical move that illuminates these literary figures as both reluctant participants in and energizing commentators on the events of their own time. Thoreau, in particular, is “an organizing rather than a main character” in this emerging political drama (3), which opens with ardent appeals by women’s antislavery associations in 1830s Concord and closes with the aftershocks of John Brown’s 1859 raid on...
Harpers Ferry, when Thoreau and his Concord neighbor Frank Sanborn, a member of Brown’s “Secret Six,” resolutely—and perhaps recklessly—stepped into history in order to stand on the principles that they had vaunted for so long.

Petrulionis’s work makes its appearance at exactly the right moment in nineteenth-century American literary studies, when scholars are more attuned than ever to the social and political engagements of authors formerly revered for their powers of intellectual isolation (Emerson and Emily Dickinson can serve as prime examples), as well as to the ways in which local communities implicate themselves in larger patterns of national and global culture. Recent work by Phyllis Cole, Ronald Bosco, and Joel Myerson has enabled readers to understand the strength of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s ties to their family networks, and studies by David M. Robinson, Len Gougeon, and David S. Reynolds have restored these figures, once frozen in place in their respective settings of library and cabin, to the full-blooded, multifaceted roles that they gradually assumed in the radical abolitionist movement. Perceiving her nephew’s early tendency toward self-absorption, the forthright and directive Mary Moody Emerson urged Lidian, Ralph Waldo’s wife, to “Invite him to leave the higher Muses to their Elysian repose and with the higher genius of humanity enter those of living degraded misery and take the gauge of slavery” (15). Emerson and Thoreau did just that by applying their “higher genius” to a specific cause, and the new wave of critical attention to their political speeches and writings, as well as to their dialogues with other antislavery activists, has allowed us to see these canonical figures as real people acting in and writing for a world that urgently needed the guidance of their words.

This book’s greatest strength is its deep and thorough investigation of the Concord citizens whose lives and antislavery work influenced Thoreau’s and Emerson’s thinking on the matter of slavery and shaped their advocacy of its abolition. Thanks to Petrulionis’s extensive archival research and her habit of generous quotation from letters, journals, and newspaper articles, much of which is previously unpublished material, the voices of such bold individuals as Mary Merrick Brooks; Prudence Ward; Daniel Foster; Cynthia, Helen, and Sophia Thoreau (Thoreau’s mother and sisters); and Lidian and Ellen Emerson (Emerson’s wife and daughter) are put back into conversation with Thoreau and Emerson themselves, in whom we have placed perhaps too much trust to speak for Concord and, indeed, for the entire Northern point of view in the decades leading up to the Civil War.

In the pages of this book, Mary Merrick Brooks, leader of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, mercilessly harangues Emerson until he agrees to ascend the lecture platform for a West Indian emancipation celebration in Concord on August 1, 1844, and joins fellow speaker Frederick Douglass in agitating the “conscience of the country” (45) against the perpetuation of slavery in the United States. Thrilled that the lofty Emerson had “descended among us,” and that “[h]e grasps our hands with warm and earnest pressure and says,—‘Brothers, I have come to enter with you into this holy war’ ” (44), Brooks’s antislavery colleague Anne Whiting demonstrates in her enthusiasm for his conversion to the cause that Emerson and Thoreau had fallen behind their female peers in their pursuit of progressive reform, and that they were late to join the “Brother[hood],” or in Concord’s case, the sisterhood, of those who endeavored to change the course of national
history. Instead, Thoreau and Emerson were caught up in their projects of self-culture, eager to pursue moral perfection, but skeptical of achieving such transformation by associative means. In a strange letter that expresses regret for responding to the “popular call” so readily in his August 1 speech, Emerson apologizes to Thomas Carlyle for his own lapse in intellectual discernment and recasts his public statement as “an intrusion . . . into another sphere & so much loss of virtue in my own” (47). In a town whose citizens invested their energies not only in the formation of antislavery societies, but also in the utopian efforts of community building at Brook Farm and Fruitlands, such stubborn individualists as Thoreau and Emerson look increasingly like outliers, bent on pursuing their solitary projects of philosophical “virtue” even as the rest of the world moves on without them.

Petrulionis seeks not to reinforce the separation between the transcendentalists and their fellow Concord citizens, however, but to fill in the historical gaps that have arisen between them and to outline the ways in which they grew together to form a united front of abolitionist thought and action. Even during his two years of relative isolation at Walden Pond, Thoreau hosted the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society for their second August 1 anniversary celebration, an event to which he obliquely refers in Walden (1854) as he observes, “It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, all under one roof” (Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings, ed. William Rossi [New York: Norton, 2008], 115). Rather, Thoreau appears to have been perpetually immersed in a social world in which his own family members and their friends had no qualms about acting on principle; his mother, Cynthia, regularly hosted Concord’s abolitionist speakers in their home, and his sister Helen developed a close friendship with Frederick Douglass, one of their guests (30).

Ordinary Concord citizens set the bar of antislavery activism quite high for Thoreau and Emerson, who began to catch up as they tested the waters with tax resistance and then spoke out more forcefully against slavery and its destructive impact on national life and individual conscience as the 1840s drew to a close. Although the reconstruction of a detailed social history of Concord’s antislavery movement takes precedence in this study over the literary analysis of Thoreau’s and Emerson’s writings, Petrulionis offers a strong and nuanced interpretation of “Civil Disobedience” (1849), arguably “the most read, most influential—and most misinterpreted—work of Henry Thoreau’s literary canon” (70). As Thoreau’s statements have reappeared in subsequent incarnations, especially in the nonviolent resistance of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., their original emphasis on the use of force as a viable method to solve civil problems has been lost. In her significant corrective, Petrulionis persuades us that, “at this phase of honing
his political reform methodology, Thoreau has acknowledged—and does not condemn—the likelihood that his tactic will fail and other approaches succeed” (71).

By the late 1850s, after almost three decades of nonviolent “moral suasion” in the abolitionist struggle, Thoreau’s tactics of civil disobedience had indeed failed. He and other citizens of Concord and Boston repeatedly defied national law as they took the liberation of fugitive slaves into their own hands, but they also experienced humiliating defeat at the hands of Southerners such as Preston Brooks, who caned Massachusetts abolitionist Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate in 1856. They were also horrified by the militaristic lengths to which the U.S. government would go as its soldiers barricaded Boston Harbor and threatened “to fire upon the crowd” in order to return fugitive Anthony Burns to slavery (99). When John Brown arrived in Concord in 1857, Thoreau, Emerson, and their fellow citizens were eager to support his violent strain of radical abolitionism. A figure of great critical interest in our age of terrorism and war, Brown, according to Petrulionis, “dislodges reductive views of Thoreau the militant pacifist or Emerson the indubitable moralist” (122). In Brown, Thoreau found the solution to decades of internal struggle with his competing agendas of individual self-culture and larger social transformation. Granting Brown posthumous Concord citizenship, Thoreau called him a “man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a Transcendentalist above all, a man of ideals and principles” (135).

Emerson agreed with Thoreau’s judgment, as did Louisa May Alcott, whose parents had long been Concord radicals, and who would work to bridge the gap between Concord’s early intellectual projects and its Civil War engagements in her own writings. Alcott’s presence in this book is a surprise, as is Margaret Fuller’s near absence, for she was certainly a leading Concord woman who presented an early challenge to Emerson’s isolationist individualism in her friendship, conversation, and investment in collective social reform. She was quick as well to share the radical lessons that she learned in Concord about slavery and gender equality with the national readership of Horace Greeley’s New-York Tribune. Even though a figure as compelling as Fuller may have escaped the net of this book, Petrulionis has cast her investigations widely and with remarkably productive consequences for the study not only of Thoreau and Emerson themselves, but also of an extraordinary town whose residents worked in concert to achieve intellectual, social, and political transformation on a grand scale. To Set This World Right truly sets the record straight about antebellum Concord, and it will prove an invaluable resource, rich in new primary source material, for those committed to a more complete understanding of the literary and cultural history of this period.

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