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Abstract\_Title:

For an America, After Theodore Parker: Bearing American Literature's Secret Heresy

Abstract:

Pictured "near, but not within, New England transcendentalism," Theodore Parker is Cavell's Emerson's new and therefore unapproachable American. Typically viewed as an unorthodox Unitarian minister, Parker remains largely unread despite his extensive correspondence with 19th century thinkers and his intriguing array of publications. An allegiance to subjective "every-day words in which men think and talk," coupled with obsessive reading habits and dogged religiosity, illustrate his uniquely simultaneous reliance on the "method of the natural philosopher ... [and] the method of the metaphysician." Parker thus places himself, and his readers, into a novel, and wildly ethical, critical dialogue. Yet failing to take full account of Parker's neglected writing, and specifically what he terms the "grand heresy" Transcendentalism, means failing to make a full account of America's "self-reliance."

Theodore Parker begs that we begin again to listen; not to attune ourselves to what our texts' institutional history authorizes, but to ask ourselves how now we might do our readings justice. This paper hopes to explore how Parker sounds a different beginning to what Cavell calls philosophy's "attunement" to literature. Specifically, the paper investigates how Parker might radicalize Emerson's transcendentalism, thus helping to initiate a new conversation between an American philosophy celebrating individualism and an American literature celebrating shared democratic liberties.