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# Literature and Spirituality in the English-Speaking World

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## Introduction

In 1836 the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in his journal an aphorism that captures the complex relation between literature and spirituality in the American context. He wrote:

Make your own Bible. Select and collect all those words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of trumpet out of Shakespeare, Seneca, Moses, John and Paul. (quoted in Richardson 241)

His oxymoronic formulation expresses the fundamental contradiction underlying the advice of a cultivated and widely-read scholar who preached a personal and intimate relation to the deity and yet could not help seeing the Bible, a text shared by the Christian community, as a model for the power of language to express the spiritual. Emerson's remark reminds us above all that spirituality is often a question of words, that it is in words that the spiritual is captured, however inadequate the spoken or written word may be to grasp all that the term "spirituality" implies. The image of the "blast of trumpet" suggests the force of the spiritual in American life, reminding one of the poetess from Amherst who, although she could not bring herself to believe in the conventional sense, attempted to reproduce the "blast" evoked by Emerson in much of her poetry. The presence of the Bible as text in American literature, through a dense web of intertextuality, can be explained by the role of the Bible in Protestant religious practice. But the involvement of American culture with the spiritual has much deeper and more tangled roots, as the Canadian scholar Sacvan Bercovitch has explained in his studies of American cultural history. Bercovitch explores the impact of the Puritan sense of mission and entitlement on the creation of a specifically American culture and the belief in an American destiny. While the culture of a country whose President takes the oath of office by placing his hand on the Bible is clearly strongly influenced by Christian spirituality, the spiritual in American life is by no means restricted to Christianity and

includes many other religions. The need to establish more personal bridges between the American experience and the spiritual which lies at the heart of much of Emerson's writing can be seen as emblematic of a desire to define experience in spiritual terms, an idea which may even be one of the defining characteristics of American culture. This American propensity for seeking the spiritual in the ordinary is just one of the ideas informing the essays in this collection.

The essays published here were presented during the International Conference "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Spirituality in the Literatures of the English-Speaking World" organised at the Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik of the University of Vienna by Franz Woehrer (University of Vienna) and John Bak (University of Lorraine) in July 2009 in cooperation with the University Paul Verlaine of Metz. They represent contributions concerning spirituality in literatures from English-speaking countries other than Great Britain. The papers devoted to British literature have been published in a separate volume: Franz Karl Wöhrrer, John S. Bak (eds.), *British Literature and Spirituality: Theoretical Approaches and Transdisciplinary Readings* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2013). While most of the articles involve American literature, papers concerning writers from Canada (Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen) and the Caribbean (Erna Brodber) are also included, thus broadening the definition of America beyond the borders of the United States. They are organized in three sections. The first section, "Spirituality and Society," includes articles dealing with the definition of spirituality as a social phenomenon and examining the ways in which spirituality becomes a tool for understanding society. The second section looks at "Spirituality and Poetry," and the third part, "Spirituality in the Americas," studies manifestations of the spiritual both in American literature and in the literature of the Caribbean, where Christian spirituality includes elements of African origin. All the articles raise fundamental questions about the nature of what we call "spirituality" and the way in which it affects our vision of literature as a representation of human experience.

The first section opens with an article by Demelza Martin (University of New South Wales) which goes to the very heart of the questions raised by Emerson's quotation. In "Incarnation and the Spirit of the Social," Martin looks at the ways in which the use of terms like "incarnation" by