



“Quiet Desperation”: Pessimism in Emerson and Thoreau



12-13 March 2027

University of Łódź

Faculty of Philology

Sorbonne Université

Research Unit VALE

Online conference

Call for Papers

“God help the poor fellow who squares his life according to this,” wrote Melville in the margin of his copy of Emerson’s essay “Prudence.” Since then, Emerson has often been accused of excessive optimism and an incomprehension of evil. Today, in a world marked by the recent pandemic, the devastation of wars, climate catastrophe, and global political instability, are Emerson and Thoreau obsolete in their unshaken faith in the powers of the individual, or do they continue to be relevant? As organizers of this conference, we follow in the footsteps of Stanley Cavell, who believed that Emerson’s philosophy consisted not in optimism, but in a struggle against despair. In Cavell’s reading, what Emerson called “silent melancholy” and what Thoreau referred to as “quiet

desperation” was the main context of American Romanticism (Cavell 130). Our purpose, among others, is therefore to question the well-worn dichotomy of the optimistic ‘Transcendentalists’ and the ‘Dark Romantics’.

Recent scholarly voices suggest that both authors can be fruitfully studied with reference to contemporary issues. Among the more philosophically inclined critics, Cavell’s heritage has been continued by scholars interested in Emerson as a proto-pragmatist (e.g. Robinson 1993; Levin 1999). Another important issue has been literary form and its interconnection with rhetorical purpose (e.g. Voelz 2010). However, the majority of scholarly books devoted to Emerson and Thoreau over the last two decades have dealt with political issues (e.g. Levine and Malachuk 2014; Case et al., 2021). Pessimist themes have been addressed by Arsić (2016), as well as by a number of biographically-oriented studies, most notably Hanlon (2017) and Richardson (2023). Our conference inscribes itself into both trends, assessing the two writers’ ongoing relevance and focusing on the ‘dark’ themes in their writing.

The **Department of North American Literature and Culture** at the University of Łódź, Poland, and the **Research Unit VALE** at Sorbonne Université, France, cordially invite scholars working across various disciplines to submit paper and panel proposals which consider the theme of pessimism in the field of Emerson and/or Thoreau studies. Interdisciplinary perspectives are certainly encouraged; we also welcome abstract submissions from postgraduate students.

Following the success of our 2022 digital conference “Whales and Veils: Obsessions in Melville and Hawthorne” and in an effort to minimize the conference’s carbon footprint while facilitating international participation, we have decided to hold the event online. We believe that, despite the digital format, the conference will constitute an opportunity not only to exchange research results, but also to network and connect with scholars from all over the world.

Although we encourage presentations dealing with one or more of the suggested topics below, the following list is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive:

- Social responsibility vs. social withdrawal
- Economic pessimism
- Melancholy
- Illness and disability

- Death and grief
- The problem of evil
- Eco-pessimism
- Skepticism toward language and representation
- Emerson and Thoreau as inspirations for other writers and artists

CONFIRMED KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

Johannes Voelz is Professor of American Studies, Democracy, and Aesthetics at Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany. He is the author of two monographs, *Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists and Emerson's Challenge* (University Press of New England, 2010) and *Poetics of Insecurity: American Fiction and the Uses of Threat* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Among his articles on the Transcendentalists is the essay "Democracy," included in *The New Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2026). He is the Director of the interdisciplinary PhD program "Aesthetics of Democracy," funded by the German Research Foundation, and the Founding Co-Director of "Democratic Vistas: Reflections on the Atlantic World," a research collective at Frankfurt's Institute for Advanced Studies. In the summer term 2026, he will be Harris Distinguished Visiting Professor at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire. Currently he is completing a monograph on the Aesthetics of Populism.

Andrew McMurry is a Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo, where he teaches discourse analysis, rhetoric, and environmental communication. He has published widely on American literature, ecocriticism, and political rhetoric. His books are *Environmental Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau and the System of Nature* and *Entertaining Futility: Despair and Hope in the Time of Climate Change*. His current project, *Our Dumb Necropolis; and Other Monstrations*, reads ecocide and end-times fascism through the lens of horror, a genre well-equipped to explore our planet-devouring death cult. The cautionary tales, the monstrous tropes, the moods of dread, the ineffable terrors, the false resolutions, the haunted, the dead, and the damned—horror contains all the dark paraphernalia our age requires to represent its hostility to the principle of life.

Deadline for abstracts: 31 October 2026

Notification of acceptance: 1 December 2026

Proposal submission address: quietdesperation2027@gmail.com

Proposals (in English) should be 300-400 words long. Please attach a 200-word bio to your conference paper proposal.

There is no conference fee.

ORGANIZING COMMITTEE:

Justyna Fruzińska (University of Łódź)

Krzysztof Majer (University of Łódź)

Anna Shmatenko (Sorbonne Université)

Barbara Bandos (University of Łódź)

Bibliography

Arsić, Branka. *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau*, Harvard UP, 2016.

Case, Kristen, Rochelle L. Johnson, and Henrik Otterberg, eds. *Thoreau in an Age of Crisis: Uses and Abuses of an American Icon*, Brill | Fink, 2021.

Cavell, Stanley. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. U of Chicago P, 1990.

Hanlon, Christopher. *Emerson's Memory Loss: Originality, Communitality, and the Late Style*. Oxford UP, 2017.

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Richardson, Robert D. *Three Roads Back: How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James Responded to the Greatest Losses of Their Lives*. Princeton UP, 2023.

Robinson, David M. *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work*. Cambridge UP, 1993.

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