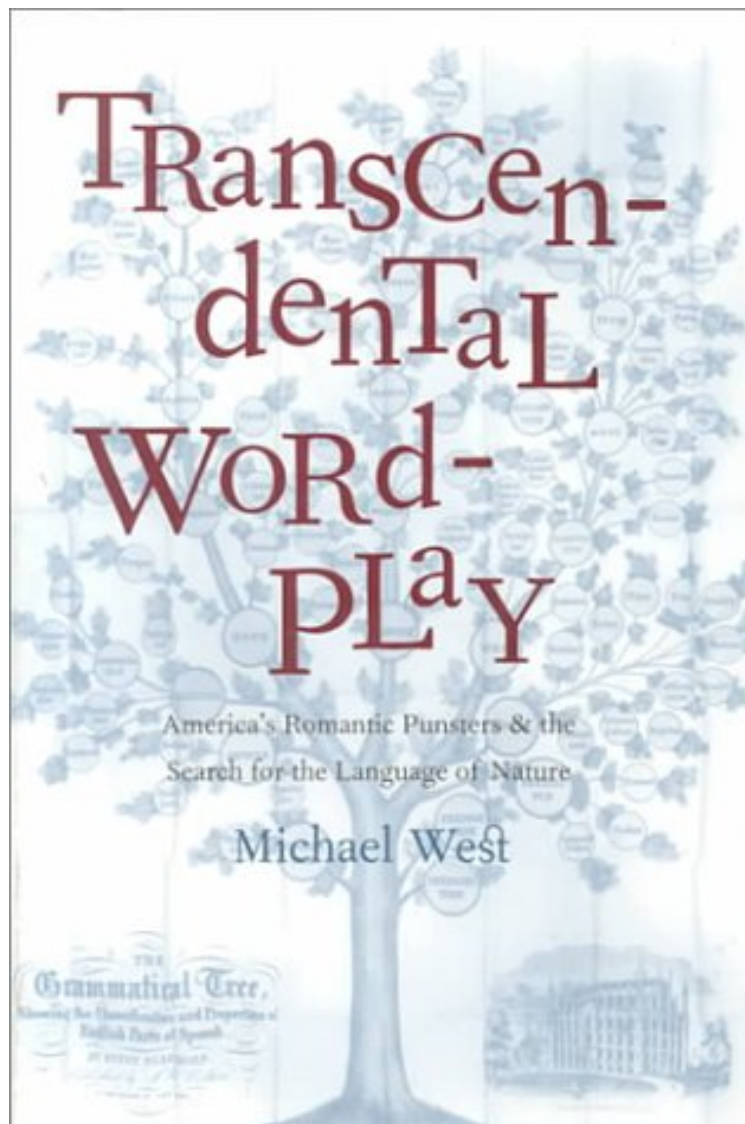


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## Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature

Michael West

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**Michael West : Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature:

19 of 21 people found the following review helpful. Punning in the 19th century - what it's all aboutBy Brian

Claxton This book is wondrous. For openers, it is written so well that it is a marvel of English usage and will shame most of us that think we know the language. Secondly, it strikes a marvelous balance between pedagogy - for fundamentally this is a serious scholastic work - and the delight that the author takes in his subject. Dealing with Thoreau to great degree, it shows how punning was a significant part of romantic literature, and should not be dealt with contempt, but rather as a serious and significant part of our literary heritage. Plus the humor in both the the subject matter and Professor West's treatment thereof are incomparable. Highly recommended to both the scholar and the interested dilettante attracted to our language and its associated history.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, America was captivated by a muddled notion of "etymology." New England Transcendentalism was only one outcropping of a nationwide movement in which schoolmasters across small-town America taught students the roots of words in ways that dramatized religious issues and sparked wordplay. Shaped by this ferment, our major romantic authors shared the sensibility that Friedrich Schlegel linked to punning and christened "romantic irony." Notable punsters or etymologists all, they gleefully set up as sages, creating jocular masterpieces from their zest for oracular wordplay. Their search for a primal language lurking beneath all natural languages provided them with something like a secret language that encodes their meanings. To fathom their essentially comic masterpieces we must decipher it. Interpreting Thoreau as an ironic moralist, satirist, and social critic rather than a nature-loving mystic, Transcendental Wordplay suggests that the major American Romantics shared a surprising conservatism. In this award-winning study, Professor West rescues the pun from critical contempt and allows readers to enjoy it as a serious form of American humor.

From Library Journal Nineteenth-century Americans were fascinated by the meanings and origins of words and also loved a good joke. In this impressive work of scholarship, West (English, Univ. of Pittsburgh) explores the intense interest in etymology and verbal jesting that informed the writings of the era's major authors. Well-known passages from classic books are reinterpreted by West to show how they are rife with puns, off-color innuendoes, and jocularity. With his main emphasis on Thoreau and other transcendentalists, West also examines works by Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. His extensive discussion of early figures in philology and language theory, and their impact upon the American curriculum, is especially noteworthy. Highly recommended for larger collections of literary criticism, linguistics, or American studies. -Ellen Sullivan, Ferguson Lib., Stamford, CT Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. About the Author Michael West is a professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh and the author of more than fifty articles on subjects ranging from Homer to Joyce. He has a particular interest in the Classical tradition, comedy, and satire.