

Non-Teleology: Transcendentalist discourse in Stuart Saunders Smith's *The Starving Month*

Não-Teleologia: Discurso Transcendentalista em The Starving Month de Stuart Saunders Smith

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Abstract: In 1836, inspired by the writings of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and disillusioned with Unitarianism, Ralph Waldo Emerson and others founded the Transcendentalist Club in Concord, MA. The Transcendentalists defended Kant's notion that knowledge was innate and believed that all lives emanated divinity, being bonded through a kind of universal soul. The writings of the Transcendentalists arguably helped shape the New England consciousness. Although composer Stuart Saunders Smith was born more than one hundred years after Transcendentalism's heyday, as a New Englander, his life has been immersed in a culture that inherited values that trace back to this movement. This essay explores one of the movement's principal features: the avoidance of teleology (i.e. goal-oriented thinking). Non-teleology is reflected in his music through his recent tendency of writing evening-length pieces, his frequent references to New England imagery, his disregard of form, his use of repetitions, his use of non-sequiturs, and his incursions of modality. *The Starving Month* for solo vibraphone, analyzed in the final section of this essay, presents all aforementioned characteristics.

Keywords: Stuart Saunders Smith; Transcendentalism; non-teleology; contemporary music; solo vibraphone.

Resumo: Em 1836, inspirados pelos escritos do filósofo alemão Immanuel Kant e desiludidos com o Unitarianismo, Ralph Waldo Emerson e outros fundaram o Clube Transcendentalista em Concord, Massachusetts, EUA. Os Transcendentalistas defendiam a noção de Kant de que o conhecimento era inato e acreditavam que todas as vidas emanavam divindade, estando ligadas através de uma espécie de espírito universal. Seus escritos ajudaram a moldar a consciência da Nova Inglaterra. Embora o compositor Stuart Saunders Smith tenha nascido mais de cem anos após o auge do Transcendentalismo, sendo New Englander, ele sempre viveu imerso em uma cultura que herdou valores do movimento. Este artigo explora uma das principais características do Transcendentalismo: a evitação da teleologia (pensamento orientado para meta). A não-teleologia se reflete em sua música através de sua recente tendência em escrever peças de longa duração, suas frequentes referências a imagens da Nova Inglaterra, seu desrespeito pela forma, uso de repetições, non sequiturs e, mesmo suas incursões da modalidade *The Starving Month* para vibraphone solo, analisada na seção final do ensaio, apresenta todas as características acima mencionadas.

Palavras-chave: Stuart Saunders Smith; Transcendentalismo; não-teleologia; música contemporânea; vibrafone solo.

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1 – Introduction

It was 1836 in Concord, MA. Inspired by the writings of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and disillusioned with the Protestant creed known as Unitarianism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederic Henry Hedge, George Ripley, and George Putnam founded the Transcendentalist Club. The Club initiated the American philosophical and literary movement known as Transcendentalism. While Unitarianism followed British philosopher John Locke's hypothesis that the human mind was a *tabula rasa* (i.e. all human knowledge was acquired through

empirical experience), the Transcendentalists defended Kant's notion that knowledge was innate (SACKS, 2003, p.8). The Unitarians, many of whom held prestigious positions at the Harvard Divinity School, were said to have belonged "to the class which looked without for knowledge, rather than within for inspiration" (FROTHINGHAM, 1876, p.109). However, "looking within" was central for the Transcendentalists. As Lawrence Buell describes, the Transcendentalists understood Kant's innate knowledge as the condition of "the human mind possess[ing] a higher 'Reason,' or divine intuition, distinct from mere 'Understanding,' or inductive of reasoning, that is capable of direct intuitive perception of Truth with capital T" (BUELL, 2006, p.xix-xx). Buell's statement hints at another essential notion that defines the Transcendentalists: their belief that all lives emanate divinity and are bonded through a kind of universal soul. The writings of the Transcendentalists arguably helped shape the New England consciousness.

Although composer Stuart Saunders Smith was born more than one hundred years after Transcendentalism's heyday, as a New Englander, he has been immersed in a culture that inherited values that trace back to this movement. One of the principal features of Transcendentalism reflected within Smith's music is called non-teleology: the avoidance of goal-oriented thinking. In order to address teleology and non-teleology as related to transcendental¹ philosophy in general, I will utilize Leonard B. Meyer's definition provided in *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*. Passages by Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau, especially from *Walden*, Transcendentalism illustrate how non-teleology is manifested in Transcendentalist literature.

Smith seeks to symbolically unify his art and his life by writing pieces that convey his stances—his non-teleological thinking, in particular. Non-teleology is reflected in his music through his recent tendency of writing evening-length pieces, his disregard for form, a frequent and unsystematic use of repetitions, and his use of non-sequiturs. Moreover, Smith's discourse shows that his recent incursions of modality and his frequent references to New England imagery are also indicative of non-teleological behavior.

The Starving Month for solo vibraphone, analyzed in the final section of this essay, presents all the aforementioned characteristics. This section is not intended to feature a theoretical analysis of the piece. Rather, *The Starving Month* will be used to demonstrate how Smith's dialogue with Transcendentalism is reflected not only in his ideology, but also in the final product that emerges from his ideas: his music.

2 – In music: non-teleology vs. formalism

In music, the term "transcendentalism" has been understood as antithetical to "formalism." Meyer has identified "transcendentalism" within music that emphasizes the listening experience rather than scientific procedures (MEYER, 1969, p.162). On the other hand, for Meyer and historian Art Berman, "formalism" implies focus on the technical or "scientific" aspects behind the composition (BERMAN, 1994, p.69). Smith is critical of formalism and its

¹ In the present work, the words "Transcendentalism" and "Transcendentalist" are capitalized when referring specifically to the New England movement. When referring to the philosophical attitude in general, they are not capitalized.

goal-achieving approach in regards to both composition and musical analysis. Focus on goal achievement leads to a kind of music conditioned to the cause-and-effect binary, limiting musical discourse to what is logical. It also tends to emphasize an artificial view of the world, as implied by Smith, making listening unbearable, boring, and “inaccessible.”²

“Much of music composition is based
on the belief in teleology.
The beginning causes what follows.
Everything has its place
in a line.
This assumes that one always has one’s reasons,
that there are irrefutable facts
which recognize their own limitations.
•
•
•
Teleological listening
leads to a mechanical view of the world
where if a music cannot be broken down
into smaller “logical” units
then there is an implicit critique of the construction
of the music.
This kind of thinking leads to the conclusion
that deviations from rhetoric
are mistakes-
fundamentally inaccessible” (SMITH, 2014, p.251-252).

Smith makes it clear in this passage that his upholding of non-teleology is a direct criticism against formalism. The term “teleological listening” implies an attitude prone to objective analysis, that is, “formalist criticism” (BERMAN, 1994, p.68). Smith sees this kind of listening as focused on rhetoric, which Art Berman defines as “semantic devices that yield meaning.” Berman states that formalism assumes construction devices—the *how*—as tenets. Therefore, formalist thinking fails to acknowledge the relevance of music that does not focus on *how* it is constructed: “Formalism assumes the work of art to be an object of study whose properties are objectively discoverable through analysis, like the properties of natural objects investigated by science” (BERMAN, 1994, p.69). Non-teleological thinking is antithetical to formalist listening because it thwarts the *how* in favor of the *detail*. *The Starving Month* is antithetical to formalism because it cannot be broken down into “logical units.” Rather, it is a continuous stream of indivisible musical events originating within the composer’s inner listening.

3 – Non-teleology as a Transcendentalist attitude

The term *teleology* refers to the human attitude of “purpose, strivings, or goal-directed behavior” (MEYER, 1969, p.160). Because this is not an essay on philosophy, this (perhaps reductionist) definition of the term will suffice to discuss the intersections between the Transcendentalists

² Smith’s original formatting was kept: Like his poetry, *Composing Thoughts* features short stanzas that are frequently intercalated by dots that are to be read as one second of silence each.

and Smith. Conversely, a non-teleological stance signifies an avoidance of goal-directed behavior that allows for one's perception and understanding of "the world as it really is" (MEYER, 1969, p.160). Non-teleology is an attitude present in different manifestations of transcendental philosophy (MEYER, 1969, p.161), which inevitably includes the New England Transcendentalists.

Meyer asserts that the transcendental avoidance of goal-orientation is a consequence of a rejection of "metaphysical frameworks, metaphorical language, and psychological theories" (MEYER, 1969, p.161). However, this does not apply to the New England Transcendentalists for two reasons: their writings are full of metaphorical language and, more importantly, their non-teleological behavior was precisely an outcome of a "metaphysical framework," that is, their belief in men's divinity. A belief in men's divinity automatically implies that men should avoid living upon the mere achievement of material goals, which was a particular concern for Thoreau. In *Walden*, Thoreau upholds that excessive work impeded a full enjoyment of life and depreciated man's divine condition: "Talk of a divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night; does any divinity stir within him? His highest duty to fodder and water his horses! (...) How godlike, how immortal, is he?" (THOREAU, 2006, p.6).

In another passage of *Walden*, Thoreau provides an even clearer illustration of how America's excessive emphasis on work was a teleological attitude. He criticizes the average American's attitude of working day and night only to enjoy the convenience supposedly provided by the railroad. According to Thoreau, this endeavor was not worthwhile: While others worked excessively to afford this new "convenience," he could arrive to the same destination faster and experience a deeper enjoyment of the environment on foot (THOREAU, 2006, p.55-56). By going on foot, Thoreau had a better perception and understanding of the "world as it really was," paraphrasing MEYER, 1969, p.161.

4 - Disregard for success as non-teleology: aspiring versus affirming

The following well-known passage from *Walden* is an illustrative example of non-teleological thinking in Thoreau's writing: "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (THOREAU, 2006, p.354). Often used as a motto to inspire free agency, Thoreau's passage has been perhaps only partially understood, as the value of success according to capitalism is nowadays stronger than ever. He, however, despised the concept of success fostered by the burgeoning capitalism of the nineteenth-century America.

In another *Walden* passage, Thoreau tells the story of a "strolling Indian" that failed to sell his baskets to white men in order to portray America's misleading concept of success. According to Thoreau, the Native American failed to sell his baskets because "he had not discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so, or to make something else which it would be worth his while to buy" (THOREAU, 2006, p.18-19). Under capitalistic terms, the "strolling Indian" was unsuccessful, just as Thoreau's book *A week in the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was a commercial failure. He adds that he also had "woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture" that was not valued to be worth purchasing (THOREAU, 2006, p.19), but this experience helped him embrace the lack

of commercial interest toward his writings. “Instead of studying how to make it worth men’s while to buy my baskets,” says Thoreau, “I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them. The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?” (THOREAU, 2006, p.18-19). In other words, Thoreau developed a non-teleological attitude by redefining success as not equivalent to capital and prestige. For Smith, Thoreau’s attitude suggests that his disregard for success led to the longevity of his work: “Look at all his journals. They are still being studied; people are reading them. He lives on, through his work” (SMITH, interview with the author, November 14-15, 2013).

Smith believes that the musician should also search for his place in society without aiming for capitalistic success. He found this path through professorship, which allowed him to live distantly from the standards of success dictated by capitalism.³ To do his best as a composer, he discovered teaching as a way of making a living that gave him space for self-development: “Teaching is an honorable profession, if done properly.” (SMITH, interview with the author, November 14-15, 2013). As a professor, Smith could “avoid the necessity of selling” his baskets, having the “time and encouragement” to develop his creative work “in isolation” (SMITH, interview with the author, November 14-15, 2013). As a possible counter-argument to Smith’s statement, tenured positions may make artists too “comfortable,” hence less creative. However, this is not true of Smith’s work, as his tenure allowed him to compose with no pressure for financial success—a parallel to composer Charles Ives’ day-job as an insurance dealer, which also allowed him to compose freely.

Smith criticizes composers who concern themselves with commercial success, because “too much public ‘success’ attracts the dreaded art consumer” (SMITH, 1984, p.280), as such consumer restricts artists to a formula of success. Composers seeking to please others are inclined to write music that follow the canon, that is, music that constitutes a mere “output of society”—an expression coined by Smith’s late professor Herbert Brün. According to Smith: “There is music or art that is an output of society, and that would be popular music (unquestioned culture) and there is music which is an input to society—and that is original thinking that can add to the wealth of the society, rather than just depleting society. That is what popular art does, it depletes information, whereas art does not deplete information, it adds information” (SMITH, interview with the author, November 14-15, 2013).⁴ While music that is an *output* of society is a mere reflection of the common sense, music that is an *input* to society, contributes to idiosyncratic ways of thinking about music.

Smith adapted Brün’s terms to suit his own vocabulary, replacing them with *affirmational* and *aspirational* art: “There are fundamentally two types of art. One reinforces, validates, and perpetuates what was once composition but now has become the status quo. This art is affirmational—it affirms what already is (...) Pop music and the standard symphonic literature are and have become good examples of affirmational art” (SMITH, 1984, p.280-281). Affirmational art merely reaffirms the common sense, instead of questioning or aspiring to

³ Smith is a retired professor of the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

⁴ A whole discussion on this subject can be found in BRÜN, Herbert (1979). A Portrait of Herbert Brün, By Stuart Smith and Sylvia Smith, *Perspectives of New Music* 17, no. 2 (Spring-Summer), p.62-63.

contribute to mankind, with fresh or alternative concepts. Conversely, art Smith considers aspirational “gives us new realities, new modes of perception, new ways to organize the world (...) Aspirational art reflects dissatisfaction with the here and now” (SMITH, 1984, p.281). Comparing Smith and Thoreau’s thoughts, to compose aspirational music is not to merely seek to “keep pace with his companions,” but to hear “a different drummer” (THOREAU, 2006, p.354).

5 – Inspiring non-teleology

There is a common tendency in academia to antagonize Thoreau and his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson as quasi-opposing Transcendentalist forces in regards to teleology. According to this tendency, while Emerson supposedly features a controlling attitude towards nature (i.e. teleological behavior), Thoreau features a coexisting attitude towards nature (i.e. non-teleological behavior) (SHULTIS, 2013, p.9-59). However, Thoreau and Emerson may be more similar than many believe: Both encompass a paradox that Meyer understands as “latent in some versions of the transcendentalist position,” in which the New England Transcendentalists are inevitably included: If

“on the one hand, by disparaging purposeful behavior, it [transcendentalism] tends to discourage (...) change; on the other hand, the belief that traditional constructs and categories distort human experience tends to encourage change—because novelty is always becoming ‘traditional’ and established: today’s innovation becomes tomorrow’s norm” (MEYER, 1969, p.161).

Based on Meyer’s inference, the Transcendentalist movement rejected “purposeful behavior” (teleology) when referring to society’s notion of progress. However, Transcendentalist writings indeed exhibit a vested interest in changing this reality.⁵ Therefore, it may be problematic to consider the totality of Thoreau’s experiment at the Walden Pond as having no pre-set hypothesis. Thoreau withdrew to Walden implying that life should be simpler: less concerned with material production and free of goal-direction. In other words, Thoreau testified that one did not need to live upon the presumed “benefits” of the nineteenth-century American capitalist society. While his observations of nature were not documented into pre-conceived ideas, his goal was clear.

Smith also believes that “novelty is always becoming traditional,” but also adds a precursor to such novelty: new music as, initially, not understandable. He states that the kind of music he composes “can be so unprecedented that the mind is confronted with non-sense. Eventually, this non-sense will become new-sense and finally common sense, at which point it loses any real purpose or information” (SMITH and GOLDSTEIN, 1998, p.194). He desires that, by experiencing his music, the audience feels inspired to experience more art based on “new-sense” (i.e. a manifestation of the aspiring attitude). This seemingly paradoxical—but easily explicable—desire to inspire audiences for a non-teleological attitude also pervades Walden. The book is abundant with passages in which Thoreau stimulates his readers towards a non-teleological attitude. The following passage exemplifies how teleological behavior can lead to meaningless efforts: “I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited

⁵ This includes Emerson and Thoreau, although Emerson had a less teleological and more poetic (and difficult) style of writing in comparison to Thoreau

farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of" (THOREAU, 2006, p.3). Such farmers worked day and night only to pay for their own farms, becoming their own "slave-drivers," instead of living a meaningful existence (THOREAU, 2006, p.3). In other words, farmers seeking profit are, in essence, prisoners: "As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail" (THOREAU, 2006, p.89). Aiming for financial success, committing to excessive work, and sustaining consumerism prevent the enjoyment of one's present life.

A parallel can be directly drawn to Smith's thoughts about the role of the artist: Consumerism leads to an obsessive concern for profit so as to afford a wealthy lifestyle. The artist that is committed to producing merely for profit is, therefore, a teleological being (a prisoner of the desire for success). On the other hand, noncommitment to success allows the artist to productively question values and assumptions through art based on the present moment and its details. The artist, thus, becomes a non-teleological being and, by performing his art, inspires audiences to also become non-teleological.

Aspiring is, therefore simultaneously a non-teleological attitude and a desire to instill the same attitude in other artists and audiences: "Thoreau was one of the most productive writers in North-American history, and it was precisely because he did not care about production" (SMITH, interview with the author, November 14-15, 2013). Hence, Thoreau is only "committed to sharing his insights so that we all can benefit from them. Again it goes back to that point: you individualize your self through self-actualization in order for you to have something to share". Audiences are invited to think non-teleologically through his music, which becomes an epiphany that invites the audience to *aspire* instead of merely *affirm*. While *aspiring* questions society's concept of progress and inspires audiences towards a non-teleological behavior, *affirming* aims for audience approval through easily accepted musical formulae—teleological behavior.

By inspiring others toward non-teleological thinking, Smith exercises the irony inherent to the Transcendentalists: His art aims for societal improvement, although this improvement is based on questioning society's very idea of progress. This explains the apparent contradiction of having the word *aspiration* related to non-teleological attitude.

An anecdote in *Walden* evidences that Thoreau also considered art as a means to instill non-teleological thinking: After hearing the notes of flute music, a man begun "to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect" (THOREAU, 2006, p.242). Smith believes that the world calls for "music that has the capacity to give us an epiphany," like the notes of the flute that became a voice that inspired the man in the anecdote to self-transformation. (SMITH, interview with the author, November 14-15, 2013). The composer understands that it is the role of the artist to instill the curiosity for novel art in his audience, as art inspires self-development. Smith's music invites each audience member to *aspire* and move away from the zone of the *affirmational*, to use his own terms. In other words, the audience is invited to experience novelty and move away from teleological thinking.

6 – Contemplation: Non-teleology, length, and imagery

Dwelling upon Thoreau's non-teleological passage about going on foot rather than using the train, Smith concludes that a slower pace ironically allows one to go faster, as it permits one to go deeper. He addresses the subject in the following story:

“I was in the library in Vermont, and I thought what would happen if I took the car and travelled 10-mile-an-hour back home? What would I notice? I would have noticed all kinds of things that I would not have noticed if I were going at the speed limit. (...) I remember being on a horse-and-buggy ride that an Amish took me on—all the things that I could notice by just going slower. That is what we learn from *Walden*. A human irony that is profound. In order to go deeper and faster, we have to go slower. That is *Walden*: he goes slower but ultimately is faster” (SMITH, interview with the author, November 14-15, 2013).

The last sentence of this excerpt implies that in a process that involves assimilation, slowness allows for a more comprehensive and deep understanding. Therefore, in a music listening experience, “slower is ultimately faster” because it allows for a more in-depth experience, which ignores the passing of time. The key word here is *contemplation*.

The contemplation of nature and the focus on the moment are some of Smith's personal stances that are conveyed in his music. Meyer gives an incomplete picture of non-teleology when he states: “as art ceases (which it should) to be teleological, it will become more like nature—and, like nature, it will become objective and impersonal” (MEYER, 1960, p.161). This description applies only partially to Transcendentalism and Smith, because impersonality is never an object of their non-teleological attitude. In Smith's music, non-teleology only highlights the idiosyncrasies of his personal compositional style both by drawing the audience's attention to the present moment and by evoking New England imagery.

Particularly, Smith's shunning of teleology and emphasis on contemplation is highlighted in his recently composed long (sometimes evening-length) pieces. One of such pieces, *Plenty* for solo vibraphone, does not feature the goal-oriented qualities of traditional music: It has no traditional form, cadences, or functional harmonies. The musical example shown in Figure 1 features the thirty-fourth (and last) movement of the piece. This movement, in particular, finishes with a free retrograde of the melodic material from the beginning. This feature, alongside the non-functional C Ionian inflection, gives the piece a meditative character typical of Smith's non-teleological attitude. This characteristic is reflected in the entire piece, which is a non-teleological journey that takes about one hour and twenty minutes.

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Figure 1: *Plenty*, by Stuart Saunders Smith, last movement. Copyright Sonic Art Editions. Used by permission of Smith Publications, Sharon, VT 05065 USA

Pieces of relatively long duration such as *Plenty*, *New England*, *The Starving Month*, *By Hand*, and *The Shapes Beneath the Ground* eschew any idea of goal orientation. The listeners of these works are invited to experience music immersively, similarly to how Thoreau contemplated nature. In fact, some of these pieces, including the solo vibraphone pieces *The Starving Month* and *New England*, have titles that directly reference the New England region. This adds another layer of analogy to Thoreau's *in loco* descriptions of the New England landscape in works such as *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *The Maine Woods*, and *Cape Cod*.

The table in Figure 2 lists some of Smith's other pieces that evoke the imagery of his childhood in New England:

Title	Instrumentation	Description
<i>Family Portraits: Embden Pond</i>	flute and two vibraphones	“where I [Smith] spent summer in central Maine” (SMITH, 2008, p.3)
<i>Castine</i>	marimba and speaker	“the coastal town where [poet] Robert Lowell spent his summers” (SMITH, 2008, p.3)
<i>Three for Two</i>	violin and viola	“portraits of three places in rural Maine” (SMITH, 2008, p.3)
<i>Two Lights</i>	solo drum set	“as in Two Lights State Park in Cape Elizabeth” (SMITH, 2008, p.3)
<i>In Bingham</i>	solo speaker	a town in Maine
<i>... And Points North</i>	solo speaking percussionist	“a percussion opera about a soul regained in the infinity which is North”. “Maine Turnpike ... <i>And Points North</i> ” was a road sign seen by Smith in his childhood (SMITH, 1992, program notes)

Figure 2: Table with selected pieces by Smith that evoke the imagery of his childhood in New England.

The titles listed in Figure 2 are reminiscent to Ives’ titles of pieces that reference New England, such as the already mentioned *Concord Sonata*, as well as *A Symphony: New England Holidays*, *Three Places in New England*, and some of his *114 Songs*. Scholar Dunja Dujmić quotes the following passage by philosopher Étienne Souriau as an indication that Ives’ programmatic music presents Transcendentalist conditions:

“The demands of true musical structure are such that the creator (...) is simply forced to renounce music itself and transgress its basic laws. (...) Even emotional description in music leaves those bounds as soon as it approaches too close to the real movements of the soul, the natural course of physical facts, which do not contain the prescribed repetitions, not the quivering, nor architectonic transitions from one tonality to the other, nor correct cadences, nor the ready, stereotyped conclusions which musical form demands” (SOURIAU, 1954, p.148, apud DUJMIĆ, 1971, p.91).

Dujmić’s use of Souriau’s statement also suits Smith’s New England-related pieces. Smith’s pieces do not contain any “prescribed” features or incursions of traditional tonality, do not apply any “architectonic transitions,” and do not attempt to fulfill any formal demands of traditional music. Rather, once Smith decides a title like *New England*, he “gets out of the way

and lets the music emerge from that poetic universe” (SMITH, interview in MULLER, 2014, p.9).⁶ In fact, pieces like *New England*, which lasts for fifty minutes, invite the audience to evade the anxiety of today’s teleological world and contemplate the “poetic universe” of New England for the duration of a whole concert. During the performance, audience members do not hear “architectonic” features, but rather a “poetic universe” that evokes New England’s imagery.

Smith’s solo vibraphone piece *The Starving Month* also promotes a contemplation of New England’s poetic universe by referring to a time in the region “between running out of food that had been canned and preserved during the summer for the winter, and the beginning of harvest time in late spring” (SMITH, 2013, CD liner notes). The title is also a reflection on society’s longing for the impossible—a symptom of its teleological behavior: “The ethos of the music is centered around the losses we all face, all the time. We are always starving for the one who can never return. The starving month is every day. Just listen to the news” (SMITH, 2013, CD liner notes).

The following section addresses the non-teleological musical features of *The Starving Month*.

7 – “Yet I feel eternal:” non-teleology in *The Starving Month*

Composer and theorist Kendall Kennison, a Quaker who has known Smith through his attendance at worship meetings, has spoken about the influence of Quakerism in Smith’s music. Kennison focuses particularly on the relationship between the thought process of the worshipper in a meeting and the unfolding of material in Smith’s music. He sees Smith’s music as contemplative, because its material is “subject to consideration and reworking in the moment, like thoughts in worship” (KENNISON, 2013, keynote speech). In fact, Smith’s recently composed works show various examples of constantly reworked material, particularly through varied repetition. In non-systematic ways, repetition has appeared in his work like a train of thoughts constantly reworked during the compositional act—a clear outcome of non-teleological thinking in Smith’s current music. Repetition leads to other features such as absence of form and lengthening of duration. Nonetheless, there are other important non-teleological outcomes: In particular, the occurrence of nested polyrhythms and incursions of modality are indications of non-teleological attitude, as discussed in Section 6.3. *The Starving Month* features all these characteristics.

The Starving Month avoids the very idea of a musical metanarrative, as reflected in its non-teleological organization of musical material. This approach to composition is not exclusive to Smith and can be traced back to the Transcendentalists. Compositional processes based on non-teleological thinking have often been thought of as a “stream of consciousness.” This term is frequently used to define a state of mind that originates ideas that, although seemingly discontinuous, reflect a continuous flow of thought. William James, an admirer and younger contemporary of Emerson, was one of the first Americans to theorize this non-teleological state of mind. James used the term “stream of consciousness” to hypothesize that consciousness is

⁶ “Getting out of the way” should not be understood as an attempt to write unpersonal music. It is rather an avoidance of the *ego*: the same *ego* that could lead to “purpose, strivings, or goal-directed behavior” (MEYER, 1969, p.160) during the compositional process.

continuous, while simultaneously its different states are constantly changing (i.e. discontinuous), so that consciousness does not necessarily give rise to teleological constructions (JAMES, 2000, p.171-190). Over time, James' use of the term "stream of consciousness," was popularized to describe a mode of writing that mimics this mental process, originating a flow of non-teleological text. Some examples in American literature can be found in Gertrude Stein's *Composition as Explanation* and *What Are Master-pieces and Why are There So Few of Them*, as well as John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*, *Lecture on Something*, and *Mureau*. There are two noticeable characteristics that mark these works. One is the use of text that flows with very little to no punctuation; the other is the constant use of non-sequiturs that any sense of teleology. Continuity and discontinuity paradoxically serve the same end-result: the evasion of goal-oriented thinking. Cage's *Mureau*—a mix of the word "music" and the name Thoreau—is illustrative of this procedure: "(...) at one spot only There is more squeak, mew, clear whistle of philosophy. Music soothes the d in and liGHTENS THE heads of all things in the year of a tree sparrow Youand their conque (...)" (CAGE, 1973, p.40).⁷

Tracing back to the Transcendentalists, the avoidance of linearity can be found in Emerson's writing style (although not to the level of *Mureau*). Ives found in Emerson a quality of preoccupying himself "more with the substance of his creation than with the manner by which he shows it to others," although Ives understands this more as a virtue than a flaw (IVES, 1962, p.119). In his essays and addresses, Emerson is frequently more concerned with the content than with its formal organization, due to his emphasis on the *substance* over the *manner*. Frequently, Emerson's writing lacked the formal organization of traditional scholarly writing: flowing around a subject in poetic prose style, but lacking the logical coherence of traditional writing. Charles Ives describes this condition in Emerson's writing style:

"Emerson is more interested in what he perceives than in his expression of it. He is a creator whose intensity is consumed more with the substance of his creation than with the manner by which he shows it to others. Like Petrarch he seems more a discoverer of Beauty than an imparter of it. But these discoveries, these devotions to aims, these struggles toward the absolute, do not these in themselves, impart something, if not all, of their own unity and coherence—which is not received, as such, at first, nor is foremost in their expression. It must be remembered that "truth" was what Emerson was after—not strength of outline, or even beauty except in so far as they might reveal themselves, naturally, in his explorations towards the infinite (...) Carlyle told Emerson that some of his paragraphs didn't cohere. Emerson wrote by sentences or phrases, rather than by logical sequence. His underlying plan of work seems based on the large unity of a series of particular aspects of a subject, rather than on the continuity of its expression" (IVES, 1962, p.120).

Like Emerson, in *The Starving Month*, Smith also writes "by sentences or phrases, rather than by logical sequence." He focuses on the smaller units (e.g. motives and phrases) and not on metanarrative (i.e. teleological form). The *manner* in which melodic phrases are presented to the audience is less important than the *substance* of each phrase. In doing so, Smith

⁷ For this quote, Cage's capitalization was kept, but not his sudden changes of font styles and font sizes.

corroborates two aspects of Transcendentalist thought: the preeminence of material over form and the denial of the hierarchical construct of composer over listener. By eschewing teleology, the work gives space for the audience's own appropriation of the piece, because the audience's capacity for creating is respected as an essential part of the unity formed by composer, performer, and audience. The expression "devotion to an end," mentioned by Ives, should not be misinterpreted as devotion to a teleological goal. The only end that Emerson and Smith intend to achieve is the evasion of linearity to evoke the listeners' thought autonomy, leaving the piece's meaning open to interpretation. Thus, Emerson and Smith remain timelessly relevant.

On the surface, Smith's current non-teleological avoidance of form contrasts with his former use of simple forms. In his earlier music, the organization of material frequently culminated in simple structures, such as ternary forms—Smith's *Links Series of Vibraphone Essays* are a classic example. The reason why form in this music is so simple is because it "is not the point—the point is detail. In order to make detail the point you need to make other things subservient. If you have very complex details and very complex forms, I think one will cancel the other" (SMITH, interview in WELSH, 1995, p.324). This attitude bears a fundamental similarity to the openly non-teleological attitude reflected in *The Starving Month*. The importance of a piece such as *The Starving Month* lies in the substance presented in the material, rather than in any attempt to provide an overarching formal construction. Both his previous use of simple forms and his current use of "anti-forms" imply a focus on the material, or on the detail, rather than on form. In both cases, the composer draws the listener's attention to the work's *substance* rather than to *manner*. In other words, overtime Smith deepened his emphasis on small units over form: He has virtually banished form in his recent works, especially through his frequent use of repetition.

7.1 - Repetition

The Starving Month features two types of repetition. The first type, which I call "literal consecutive repetition," appears as repetition marks spanning the length of motives (i.e. short musical gestures of one to two measures) or through one or more phrases (i.e. longer passages that can span over ten measures). The second recurrent type of repetition is what I call "non-consecutive varied repetition." It appears in passages where a musical statement (e.g. the melody of the first two lines of the score) recurs in a non-consecutive moment, often in a freely varied way. Both kinds of repetition do not appear with the intention to fulfill any formal demands, but rather to evade the very idea of form.

Literal consecutive repetition expands the duration of smaller portions to stretch the moment, like phrases or sections—an attitude that parallels Thoreau's idea of living the present fully. Particularly, by "stretching the moment," Smith's use of repetition facilitates a thorough understanding of the piece's complex material. This attitude is non-teleological, because the moment is always central. Thus, Smith applies repetition to guide the listener to focus on the details of the material. When I received the first draft of the piece, it was already replete with repetition marks, but as we worked on it, the composer added even more. I can recall the vivid image of going over the piece with Smith in his living room: his eyes carefully looking at his manuscript while I performed to help him feel where the piece asked for new repetitions. This

process was obviously intuitive. Because the placement of these repetitions and the decisions around their inclusion happened intuitively, there was no architectonic scheme behind them. The abundance of literal consecutive repetition that resulted from our work together contributed to the avoidance of teleology, because these repetitions were not intended to delay any sort of tonal goal. Rather, they simply guide the listeners to re-experience what they had just heard.

Non-consecutive varied repetition is best explained as a manifestation of Kennison's notion: that material in Smith's compositional process is "subject to consideration and reworking in the moment, like thoughts in worship" (KENNISON, keynote speech, February 2, 2013). Through non-consecutive varied repetition, material is frequently re-signified. Because material comes back in random moments and in slightly varied ways, the listener is constantly provided with new textures that are simultaneously novel and familiar. This kind of repetition causes the evasion of linear narrative by giving rise to an irregularly cyclic character, or a sense of stillness (i.e. anti-form). Therefore, even though the piece is always moving, its motion is ruminative, which gives the piece its meditative character. It does not mean, however, that the piece contemplates any arch-like formal structure. On the contrary, the random disposition of the material prevents any sense of reaching a pinnacle and going back "home."

The following example, in Figure 3, shows both kinds of repetition as essential to *The Starving Month's* non-teleological construction. Each phrase is highlighted and labeled with capital letters. This excerpt shows how each moment in the piece can be stretched through consecutive repetition and how an anti-form is created through non-consecutive varied repetition. The pitch material of the non-consecutively repeated phrases is virtually the same, but the rhythms are radically modified.

The image displays a musical score for 'The Starving Month' by Stuart Saunders Smith, measures 1-64. The score is presented in a vertical, overlapping layout with systems labeled A through F. Each system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). The music is characterized by complex rhythmic patterns, including 16th and 32nd notes, and various dynamic markings such as *mf*, *p*, *cresc.*, and *dim.*. Fingerings and articulations are indicated throughout the piece. The score is arranged in a vertical, overlapping format, with systems A through F. The piece is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic values, including 16th and 32nd notes. The dynamics range from *mf* to *pp*, with crescendos and decrescendos. The score is arranged in a vertical, overlapping format, with systems A through F. The piece is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic values, including 16th and 32nd notes. The dynamics range from *mf* to *pp*, with crescendos and decrescendos.

Figure 3: *The Starving Month*, by Stuart Saunders Smith, m.1-64. Copyright Sonic Art Editions. Used by permission of Smith Publications, Sharon, VT 05065 USA

Repetition provides *The Starving Month* with a sense of stillness. This phenomenon occurs because each musical event avoids any attempts of goal achievement: a direct repetition of what immediately happened, a slightly varied repetition of something that happened in a random previous moment, or completely new material with no apparent connection with the previous material. These characteristics are confirmed in the excerpt shown above, which, like the piece as a whole, indicates no attempt to achieve a goal and bring material back.

7.2 – Non-sequiturs

In a musical sense, non-sequiturs involve apparent breaks in the flow of the piece, which halt the linearity of a piece and give it a “stream of consciousness” character, thwarting teleology. *The Starving Month*'s non-teleological narrative is abundant in nested polyrhythms and sudden contrasting dynamic changes that create non-sequiturs. The fortissimo dynamic explosion of phrase F's first line, shown in Figure 3, breaks the dynamic flow of the phrase, only recovered in the second to last measure of the phrase. Pervading the entire piece, the nested polyrhythms constantly halt linearity by changing tempo abruptly. Nested polyrhythms are shown as numbered brackets (“tuplets”) over parts or entire measures (e.g. the third measure of C). Dynamic and rhythmic non-sequiturs pulverize and attenuate potential moments of “peak.” Additionally, when referring to his piece *One for Syl*, he states: “*One for Syl* is the prototype for the *Links* series. One can see my concentration on aperiodic speech rhythms, nonteleological developmental ambitions, non sequiturs, and a lack of conventional drama” (SMITH and GOLDSTEIN, 1998, p.190).

7.3 – Modality

Smith's pitch choices in *The Starving Month* show an embrace of modal vocabulary at a level previously unheard in his music.⁸ His use of a modality in the piece is done through a non-systematic approach that denies formalism. Therefore, it should not be seen as an endeavor to limit music material. Rather, it can be understood via the Transcendentalist discourse of self-reliance. In his essay *Self-Reliance* Emerson says: “In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, ‘without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution.’ Brave; for fear is a thing, which a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance” (EMERSON, 1989, p.63-64). Smith's courage of relying on his intuition—and not on pre-compositional systems—may attract destructive academic criticism. I have asked Smith more than once why he has recently written melodies that suggest modes. His reply is always the same: “I just have been hearing that way.” If he has just been hearing that way, it would be a denial of his free, creative mind to write music otherwise. Even if the music accepted in academia as “forward-looking” normally shuns the use of modality, Smith's use of it means that he has deepened his self-reliance to be “free even to the definition of freedom.”

⁸ Even though this feature has constantly grown in his recent music, such as in *To Freshen the Moment!* (2009-2010).

In spite of the more “familiar” melodic vocabulary—if compared to complete atonality—modality does not entail the teleology of tonality: Modes do not encompass the functionality of tonal keys, because there is no dominant-tonic goal orientation. Moreover, Smith’s incursions of modality are not pure modality; rather, they are heavily chromatic modal inflexions. The use of modality in *The Starving Month* is not methodical and should not be understood as the use of a pre-compositional system. Smith’s stretched use of modality is an example of how his aural memories are filtered through his intuition. Figure 4 illustrates Smith’s use of a G Aeolian inflexion with minimal use of chromaticism:



Figure 4: *The Starving Month*, by Stuart Saunders Smith, pg. 10, first 5 measures. Copyright Sonic Art Editions. Used by permission of Smith Publications, Sharon, VT 05065 USA

Smith also relates non-systematic incursions of modality, as shown in the example above, to deny teleology in his life. In fact, he has related other aspects concerning his recent non-teleological music to his current senior condition:

“I am in the winter of my life.
 My music has become slower,
 more introspective, and poignantly, afraid of the future.
 This is happening by itself
 of its own
 without any system to make it so” (SMITH, 2014, p.241).

This “fear of the future” accounts not only for his pieces’ longer lengths and focus on stretching the moment—“my music has become slower”—but also to his unsystematic incursions of modality. It seems natural for him to use more modal inflexions for a life that has “more past than future”:

“The chromatic music teaches
 the more or less modal music
 how to exist in the world. The
 difference is a kind of weight.
 Having less stretches the moment.
 The modal is deeper in its movement.
 Chromatic music floats easily
 in the clouds. Modal music
 sings of the past. I have more
 past than future. Yet I feel
 eternal. This is an illusion that

helps us go on in winter”
(SMITH, letter to the author, April-May, 2013).

There are different layers of meaning in this enigmatic statement, starting with Smith's recurrent desire to “stretch the moment.” In this case, Smith implies that because modality has fewer pitch choices, it aids in deepening the listener's experience in a way akin to his use of repetition. As addressed earlier regarding Thoreau's transportation preferences, the importance of depth over ephemerality is evident in Smith's choice of work-lengths, use of repetition, and consequent lack of form. This is how Smith thwarts teleology, and this is why he “feels eternal.” Letting the past “sing” through the modality gives rise to a sense of stillness that is antithetical to the metanarrative of formalism. Moreover, because past and future are both unknowable, the ambiguity that results from Smith's use of modality and chromaticism shuns teleology, enabling different interpretations:

“The past and future
have much in common.
They are both, radically unknowable.
The past gives the illusion of stability.
The Future a pipe dream” (SMITH, 2014, p.253).

Because *The Starving Month* obfuscates past and future, it entails the paradox of non-teleological attitude; that is, it points to the future by pointing to the past, so as to avoid societal notions of progress. *The Starving Month* stretches the moment and “sings the past” to symbolically avoid it. Smith intends his music to be lived in the present moment, perhaps even to render the present moment “eternal.” Yet Smith assumes to have “more past than future,” which explains his modality as a symptom of his reliance on individual experience. Whether or not this modal “past” is a reference to Smith's involvement with jazz is open to interpretation. Also left to interpretation are the symbolic implications of disposing musical material in ways that deny any remnants of form, pervading music with non-sequiturs and adding passages of modal inflection to chromatic music. Smith's attitude of leaving musical discourse open to the interpretation of each listener may be the reason why his music remains timelessly relevant.

8 - Conclusion

In *The Starving Month*, the deployment of musical material in non-teleological ways constitutes a radical rejection of formalism and an indication of Smith's Transcendentalist stance. In fact, his recent radicalization of non-teleology deepened his Transcendentalist attitude: When Smith denies goal-orientation, he eschews lust, expectation, or desire, paraphrasing MEYER, 1962, p.160. Non-teleology in Smith's work, therefore, symbolizes his denial of anxiety, materialism, and longing for success. As a symptom of this assertion, the composer himself has dealt with the fact that long pieces such as *The Starving Month* and other even longer pieces may find a certain resistance toward being programmed or performed. However, frequent performances of his pieces are not his priority. His priority is, rather, to follow his intuition.

The belief that all life emanates divinity implies the duty of living up to the standards of such a belief, avoiding the world's depletion led by teleological behavior while adding to the world's knowledge (i.e. *aspiring*). Such are the values defended by the Transcendentalists that are

reflected in Smith's work. He writes music that does not seek to restate the common sense (or to "deplete" knowledge), but to leave a legacy by questioning the materialistic values. Particularly in *The Starving Month*, Smith avoids materialistic success by highlighting the details of the piece's musical complexity through an array of non-teleological features: imagery, anti-form, repetition, non-sequiturs, and modality. Such non-teleological features invite audiences and performers to *aspire* as much as Smith *aspires* during his compositional process.

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Note about the author

As an advocate of new music, **José Augusto Duarte Lacerda**, also known as Zeca Lacerda, has worked with composers such as Steve Reich, John L. Adams, George Lewis, Elliott Sharp, Jeff Herriott, Thomas DeLio, James Romig, Gabriela Ortiz, Christian Wolff, Bob Becker, Lewis Nielson, and Stuart Saunders Smith, having premiered works by the latter ten. In Brazil, he has performed with some of the country's premier orchestras, such as the Brazilian Symphony and the Petrobras Symphony. Zeca currently teaches at Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, where he also directs the university's percussion ensemble [re]Percute UFMT. He has released an album of solo vibraphone music, through Soundset Recordings, and has published an article on *Percussive Notes*. Awards received include Percussive Arts Society and Zildjian scholarships. He earned a Doctoral degree in Contemporary Music from Bowling Green State University, a Master's in Music from the University of Miami, and a Bachelor's in Music from Universidade Federal de Santa Maria.

Annex 1: SMITH INTERVIEWED BY ZECA LACERDA (LIVE INTERVIEW)

November 14-15, 2013: *Walden* interview⁹

[author: "Please comment on Thoreau's criticism to the American society and its concern with production, as seen in *Walden's* first chapter "Economy."¹⁰] *Walden* was an important cultural edifice and cultural definer of New England. It's part of the old Yankee New England consciousness. You have to, in this world, compose your life. Look at all the elements, like what you eat. For instance, I am a Vegan because it seems to me that it is a healthier way to eat, as well as the least damaging to the environment. You need to figure how much technology do you want in your life. I don't have cellphone; I don't have a computer. I like to make phone calls so I keep that technology around. I do not watch TV. But I do like picking my own movies and enjoy them very much. I think that people need to make conscious choices. And I think too much technological gear is in the way of self-development, because you are always connecting with other people, and doing this and that, and you have very little time for solitude and to quiet.

Getting back to the idea of composing yourself, people also need to figure out where they are politically, not just say "ok, I am a democrat," or "I am a republican," as if these were the only choices. There are many choices one can have. For instance, some people may want to have a king or queen. Myself, I think that the horizon for human development should be towards communism. I think Thoreau's thinking kind of goes in two directions, which may seem contradictory at first, but not really. I think he was very much leaning to an anarchism, in that he was so socially aware that he was leaning towards a kind of communist situation. If you don't just consume all time, then you can think about sharing, instead of "I need, I need, I need." How about the other people, what to they need? They need food, water, shelter, medical care, so and so forth, and something meaningful to do. So it is not always "me, me, me, me, me." I think if people live their lives where they have some time of solitude, like a year or several months, or whatever, it will lead them into a [life that is] more socially aware. It is seemingly contradictory that when you are alone you can become more socially aware, but [for instance] I see it in Vermont, which is a very sparsely settled state – there are not a lot of people in Vermont. But when we all go to the general store it is like an old home week. People talk to each other: "It is great to see you!" We are always going to some other's house for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. So if you have less people around, people matter more. Whereas in the cities people can be extraordinarily lonely, in the country I don't see that.

⁹ All the quotations from this interview are taken from: Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ The remainder of the interview consisted of the author introducing, commenting, and reading passages from *Walden* and asking Smith to comment on the parallels between these passages and his life and artistic stances. The bracketed words and numbers that appear before each answer refer respectively to keywords and page numbers for reference (see *Walden* edition above). Only the author's comments that are pertinent to understand Smith's responses were included.

[misfortune it is to have inherited farms, 3] What he again is talking about is choice. In other words, being conscious, not just simply as Kant said following your inherited tutelage. You realize that there is an inherited tutelage: "Okay, I have been taught X, is that how I want to live my life, or do I want to go Y and a little X? And the other thing about being productive is that Thoreau was one of the most productive writers in American History--North-American history-- and it was precisely because did not care about production. He had some ideas, he wrote them down, and before you know he had volumes of writings, observations, and drawings – beautiful drawings of nature.

[slave-driver of yourself, 6] This reminds me of a parable, that I think about often, that Jesus taught. He talks about this farmer that has many employees. And the farmer finally gets his barns or storage place full of grains, enough for years. So he takes stock of it "wow, now I am secure." And at night he dies in the sleep. What good did all that do? And then he talks about the lilies of the field. God takes care of birds, takes care of the lilies, well how about humans? I think humans it is a different situation, but I think humans can take care of each other. And should. That is what Jesus was talking about. If you read the gospels carefully, you will read stories of a communist teacher. His name was Jesus Christ.

[divinity, 6] When I compose – I work at the piano – I try to be as quiet internally as possible, so that the musical ideas can emerge naturally, organically, from the body, from the spirit, from the mind. One has to get out of the way. This can be learned from Walden: if you pay attention, you see the intelligence of ants, you see the intelligence of the fish in the water, you see the intelligence of the trees. Well, it is the same with pitches. If you play a Bb, and you listen. It is a vibration just like water is a vibration, just like the sky is a vibration, or our body is a whole bunch of different vibrations. And we listen to that, and we get one pitch, and then you get another pitch, and another. Then you got three pitches, and they determine another pitch. Before you know, you have phrase. Then little phrases, "phraselets." And that to me is the same idea that one can find in Walden time and time again, and that is him noticing. That is what composing is for me: noticing--and then staying out of the way, just noticing by itself.

If he [Thoreau] imposed his will on the ice he wouldn't see it melt. He got his will out of the way, so he could see clearly – so that he could see seeing, so he could hear hearing, rather than "I am now going to do this on the land."

[honestly think there is no choice left, 7] That kind of reminds me of growing up in the 50's, and us taught by commercials. We were one of the first generation that were taught by TV commercials about what real man was supposed to do: smoking cigarettes, eating red meat . . . and that was all that TV commercials have to teach, and people went along with it uncritically. But I was very fortunate, my father taught me to think in this way: He was very against war because he had been in one—World War Two. And he told me he didn't think God was on anybody's side, that the whole thing was immoral--killing each other--and that helped me see that war was not necessarily an inevitable thing. Than, from there I could see that smoking cigarettes was not an inevitable thing. From there I could see that eating meat was not an

inevitable thing, etc. So that you can build on that small little curdle that your father may have said, or your mother may have said at one point. And then you can build the foundation of individualization. It seems strange, but the best way to become a communist is through self-actualization. By defining the self and composing the self you are more able to help others, and more receptive to them helping you

[philosopher, 14] What is the function of thinking? What is its utility? It is to find your way in the forest. Thoreau found his way, you have to find your way, I have to find my way. And we collectively share our ways. And the only way you have something to share is to find your own way. So when I talk about composing, I am not talking just about composing music, I am talking about composing one's life, and finding your way, precisely to be socially conscious, as well as to be a deeply rooted life – rooted in what is real. What is real is: when you eat a mushroom, it is a way of eating a tree. And when you eat the brassicas, which is a certain kind of vegetable, you are eating the ground. So Sylvia in addition to being my wife for 44 years, in addition to being a performer she is also a publisher, and a farmer. I help her on the farm for about one hour a day – she farms for a lot longer than that. I learned some fundamental things, by watching things grow. One year we don't have any cucumbers, and in the next year we have an abundance of cucumbers but no apples. This year we had apples at the wazoo, and no cucumbers.

[strolling Indian 18-19] It reminds me a way to describe music that Herbert Brun, the great music philosopher and composer, had taught me. There is music or art that is an output of society, and that would be popular music— unquestioned culture—and then there is music which is an input to society – and that is original thinking that can add to the wealth of the society, rather than just depleting society. That is what popular art does, it depletes information, whereas art does not deplete information, it adds information.”

[author: how would you connect the passage with your life and your academic career . . . ?] I learned early on as a jazz musician and club player that the better we play, the less the audience seems to like it. So in order to do the best I could as a musician, I had to find a way of making a living – that gave me enough time to develop. As a young man I discovered academia. Then you could teach, which is an honorable profession, if done properly. And, then have time, and encouragement from the university, to do your own work. So after a while I decided to do that instead of trying to make my living as a jazz musician, which seem impossible in a culture that does not value art. This is what America is: is a culture that does not value art, because it is so capitalistic. So I view getting in the classroom as a kind of performance. So I try to perform well, entertainingly, and teach them [the students] new things in their lives. So I do [did] two or three courses a semester, and that would give me plenty of time to develop my work in isolation.

[author's comment on technological advancing] First of all, does technology always have to advance? Why does technology have to . . . its own advance? Shouldn't we, at some point, say “We want this, and not that?”

[Maine and Texas telegraph, 55] Look at this thing called Twitter and Facebook: "I just had dinner today. I had gravy on my meat. Who cares? It is silly."

[afoot, 55-56] That reminds me of this: I am in the library in Vermont. And I thought what would happen if I took the car and travelled 10 mile an hour back home? What would I notice? I would have noticed all kinds of things that I would not have noticed if I was going at the speed limit. The other thing I notice is that no one else is on the road all the time . . . on the car. Of course, it would have been even better if I walked. I would have noticed things better. Remember being on a horsing buggy ride that an Amish took me on. All the things you notice by just going slower. That is what we learn from Walden. A human irony that is profound. In order to go deeper and faster, we have to go slower. That is Walden; he goes slower but ultimately is faster.

[goodness tainted, 79] Quakers believe that there is that of God in everybody. The gospel of John talks about light a lot There is a light in every one. So we should offer up whatever we can to everybody: poor or rich. We have some friends in the end of the road. We had surplus of potatoes, and Sylvia made a lot of apple butter, more than we would be able to eat this winter. So we decided: lets just give them some apple butter and potatoes. We don't have institutional sharing, which is what communism is. So if you don't have that, one thing that we have to do is share, even if is not institutional. So you share when you can. When you have over abundance, you share. There are people that are billionaires and they share some of it, but when is enough enough? Is their time worthier than other's people time on earth? There are homeless people out there. Who is worth more in the eyes of God?

[I have frequently seen a poet, 88] There is a bunch of ways of farming. One is you need to have a bunch of crops. You need cabbage, you need wheat, so and so forth. There is another way to farm, equally important. And that is you walk in the woods and you say: "My goodness, there is an apple tree here. So if you clear away the forest, so that the apple tree can breathe, and have plenty of sunlight. And before you know, you have got a big harvest of apples. So sometimes it is a matter of clearing, in order that the mind can see properly. It is the same with getting apples.

I don't enjoy farming; I don't like manual labor. But it is something that Sylvia likes a great deal. So she has chosen to farm. This is her composition. She figures out, she has maps of what is going to go where in each season, she clears away the land, so that the apple trees breathe.

["As long as possible live free and uncommitted, 89] He is absolutely right. But again the irony is: what is Thoreau committed to? He is committed to sharing his insights, so that we all can benefit from them. Again it goes back to that point: you individualize your self through self-actualization in order for you to have something to share. If you don't build anything in you life, you have nothing to give. That is why you practice.

[Every morning was a cheerful invitation, 94] What I developed over forty years of composing was this routine: get up in the morning, have some tea, and compose from 9 to 11. Put that away. Do other musical things, correspondence, or proofreading, you name it. And then do some

farming, or reading. And there is more free time so you can do whatever; [for instance] I have been writing a book. You have a structure to your day, but is a little bit like a mobile. You have these elements that you want to do in the day, but it is up to you when you do them or if you do them. Thoreau had it right. You retire early. He retired early. He literally retired to Walden. And then in Walden he retired, so that he could be with nature. And nature taught him how to retire, because he was open to watching nature and how it worked.

[how could I have looked him in the face?, 94] The book *Walden* shows a person that is awake and awakening. All the time he is open to learning. You learn it from the outside in order for you to be rich inside.

[live like baboons or like men is little important, 98-99] What I think is important for people to realize about Thoreau is that he was very critical of accepting – again I come back to this point – just accepting what technological change comes along, just accepting it. So Thoreau is looking at telegraph, “is that something useful or not?” Maybe it was useful and Thoreau was wrong, but it does not really matter. That important thing was to look at it critically, not just to accept. Time and time again Thoreau asked fundamentally radical questions.

[railroads, 99] We are running out of resources. The other part of this is that these technological advancements may not necessarily keep up, because if we run out of resources to make them, we will go back in time. And I believe this is entirely possible. Even a solar panel requires an enormous amount of minerals that we may run out of in a relatively short period of time, so we need to prepare for that eventuality.

[. . . but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident, 106] I would say [a few words] as someone who is trying to be conscious. When you are conscious, you can outlive your own time. In other words, you will have something to share to generations that come after your death. And Thoreau certainly did. Look at all his journals. They are still being studied; people are reading them. He lives on, through his work.

[. . . at most astrologically, not astronomically, 111] One of the beautiful things about music and any art form I would imagine is: the first thing that a person sees or experiences is the surface of the work. If the surface of the work is attractive, it will act as a kind of invitation to experience the work more and more. If the work has depth as well as being attractive, the audience will plume in those depths over time. We have to be very inviting to our audiences, not just assuming they never will understand. I don't assume that at all. I assume that everyone can be a composer; everyone can be a creative listener. We just need to invite people to do that, at the earliest ages. Invite them to participated. Not to be acted on, but to act.

[author's comento on the passage's connection and Theodor Adorno's viewpoint on Beethoven] Adorno, seems to me, sells the audience short. I think that the audiences, if they have a chance, will love to be their own persons.

[. . . my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel, 109] There is a guy I know who has done some house painting for us. We visited him in his home, which he made out of logs. He has no electricity. He has the running water coming from his pond that he dug himself. He has a tree house that he got just made, so he can watch animals. So will takes meat out there, get up in this tree house and watch the wolves and the bears, eat. It is his own entertainment. This guy invents his own life. He is awake. He does some house painting, and some carpentry. He has his own gardens. He knows how to forage for food. So if his garden does not do well, he can go into the woods and find food. He is a very rich man. Has a very rich life.

It is not a question of giving up entertainment. It is a question of being able to see what is right in front of you. Right in front of you there is stuff to notice.

[a vibration of the universal lyre, 132] One thing I notice in my home is how quiet it is. When I go out, of course, I hear all kinds of things; it did in the city as well. If you just pay attention there is always something to hear. But I don't find listening to nature or listening to a city a condition of music for me. It is for Sylvia. She prefers silence over music, because for here, there is always music. So she does not need anyone to play music. It is a Quaker view. If you go move into a person who was raised as a Quaker you will notice there is silence in the house all the time. Her father was like that he kept silence as his best friend.

While for me I really enjoy intentional music making. I enjoy hearing people do that.

(and he also enjoys inner music, which is probably why the ambient sounds do not influence in his music making).

[I find it wholesome to be alone, 146] I remember something Cage said that I remember now fully. He said Conlon Nancarrow did not pay attention to anybody else's music except Conlon Nancarrow's music. (he also said that) Henry Cowell's music was truly great when Henry didn't care about other people's music. Solitude allows you to grow your own garden. And make sure that it'd your own seed. That is what is the problem with the composer's in New York. They are too close together, and they cross each other's paths so many times, that is hard for them to be themselves.

[author's comment on the same subject]In my experience, it is harder for artists who are in dense population centers to truly be in solitude. I understand that that is certainly possible. There is certainly great examples of that. But from my experience a lot of people are let astray by being in too close proximity to each other.

[We are wont to forget that the sun looks . . . , 181] What I learned from Sylvia, who is the farmer in the family, is that you can't control the weather. All you can do is build up the fields so that they are with compost and worms and all kinds of things to make the dirt and soil rich. Then the weather interacts with you and the fields in such a way that you have to accept what is going on. For instance, this season it rained a great deal, which delayed all the crops. So we had to harvest late in the season, because it rained so much. On the other hand the rain seemed to help

the apples. We got a huge crop of apples – I got some of the apple cider right here with me. So what I learned, from watching Sylvia, is that you can't go into farming multiple crops and expect everything to do well. So there is a kind of implicit acceptance with the natural world and you are part in it. In Vermont one of the first things that people talk about is the weather. "What is the weather going to be like in the next couple of days?" Because you are living close to the land, it matters.

[As a composer, should you be like the squirrel?, 181] Absolutely [yes]. What I am learning as I get older is to allow the work to change me very deeply. For instance, there is a work called *Winter*, which is a huge collection of materials from which people make their own parts. At first I wondered what to make of such music. But then I developed ways of appreciating it, rather than me saying "Oh my God, I am disappointed. It is something that I have no way to relate to." Well, over time I find ways to relate to it. So Cage's dictum that art alters the self is true for the composer as well as the performer and the audience. But it comes down to a degree of acceptance, both in farming and in composing.

[. . . not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves . . . , 186-187] This is precisely what Jesus said. You must lose yourself to find your self. Living close to nature, you realize how dangerous it is, and how beautiful it is, both at the same time. If it is 18 below zero and you want to go for a walk, you better dress right. And you better know where you are going, because if you get lost, and it is close to night – is dusk – and then it becomes night and you don't know where you are you can die. You can die ten feet from your house if it is a blinding snowstorm. You need to know what you are doing. But in the metaphorical sense he is completely right. When you are lost, you have to be self-reliant and find your way. That is what composing is about. Trying to get lost, so that you can find a new path in the woods to arrive home.

[author's comment: getting lost allows you to change yourself. It is about sitting everyday with the intention of getting lost"] Yes that is exactly my message. My fundamental message is "The composer must get lost."

[I did not pay a tax to . . . , 187] He is so correct. "Civil" disobedience is a bigger statement than "violent" disobedience. If you do violent disobedience against the war, you are starting a war on a smaller scale. It does make sense. But if you have civil disobedience, by your action you are trying to teach the government what it should do. You should talk to the other, to the perceived enemy. Not shoot, but talk.

[thieving and robbery would be unknown, 188] Yes absolutely. If everyone has the same access, and the same amount of material goods, and everyone can survive healthily, what is there to steal? Someone bag of beans? "You have one more bag of beans and I need."

I just saw a concert, where there were tons of drums on the stage. The amount of material that they had was ridiculous. They had over abundance. When you have over abundance you have ripe fruit that can lead to greed. And lead to others feeling bad if they don't have access to all

that stuff. Inequality leads to violence and leads to envy, which is a kind of violence that envious ones perpetrate on their selves. It leads to bitterness, and bitterness corrodes the soul.

[abstain from animal food, 234-235] Reminds me of the Jain religion and their diet. They only eat those things that they can pick. They won't eat the root vegetables because when they you pull up the root vegetable you kill it. So they eat off the tree or the will have some wheat. It is a very small footprint on the environment.

[author: "has abstaining from animal food has changed your 'poetic faculties?'"] Definitely. It has sharpened them. Gives you more energy. And you feel spiritually lighter because you are not participating in killing animals. Of course, you end up killing vegetables, but the fact of the matter is we have to it. We have to consume food, but it is important to figure out whether you want to have animals killed, and you go to the butcher shop and buy the carcass, or if you want to live a less violent life, where you don't eat animals and fish, and birds.

[music of the harp which trembles, 238] Reminds of Music of the Spheres, musica mundane...

[John Farmer, 242] He is talking about the epiphany that music can help create. I think that we need music that has the capacity to give us an epiphany. And epiphanies instantaneously change our lives. Usually for the better. He is talking about the power of music to transform.

[struggle, the ferocity and carnage, of a human battle, 251-252] I hope [for the day] that [violence] is not part of the human condition. I hope that through human evolution, eventually we come to the point that the word "war" does not even exist more in any language, because we don't do it. We don't hit each other. It is something beyond our imagination to hit. Let alone shoot, or blow up. It is something humans don't do. And that will happen when there is a reduction of nationalism, to such a point that it does not matter what country you come from because we are all citizens of the world. Then war would be an obsolete relationship between people and peoples.

[partridge, 300] Maybe instead of the eagle, being the United States bird, we would be better off with the partridge.

[castles in the air, 351-352] We are never alone. And if we make a mistake, we can always dig a whole and make a foundation under that mistake, and the mistake becomes whole. Says something about revising in composition. If something does not work, you go back and make it work. It is part of the daily job of the composer. You get lost, and sometimes you get really lost, and you need to revise.

[perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer, 354] I think that different drum will not be playing marches, but will play like nature. If you listen to nature, it does not repeat sixteenth notes. Nature is organically predisposed to what is called irrational rhythms. That is the organic nature that music should try to emulate.

[author: “and that is not the drummer of the capitalistic industries with their assembly lines”]
The assembly line forces the human being at the assembly line to be nothing more than a robot.

Annex 2: SMITH INTERVIEWED BY ZECA LACERDA (LETTER INTERVIEW) April-May 2013

1 – Different forms of musical repetition are present in *The Starving Month*. A kind of repetition that frequently comes into play is what I would call a literal consecutive repetition, which pervade the piece and which appear as repetition marks that can span through short musical gestures of one to two measures, or through long passages of over ten measures (long musical phrase or period). What is the purpose of this kind of repetition for either of these cases?

Art is history relived. As one gets older
the regrets grow. Paths not taken haunt.
Also, we see things come back like fashions
in art. I repeat in hopes of not repeating
Repeating is a way of staying. I am
a Christian in spite of being an agnostic.
I protest the structures of the universe
And the variety of “human nature” through
the ages by protesting Christ as an
answer. Even as I doubt profoundly.
I repeat as I am repeating now: our
Foot in the stream over and over
touches a new stream: repeat no, the
same that is not yes.

2 – Another recurrent kind of repetition in the *Starving Month* is what I would call a non-consecutive varied repetition. This kind occurs in various passages of the piece, where a musical statement (noticeably, but not limited to the one shown in the first line of the score) reoccurs in a non-consecutive moment of the piece, in a rather varied way in regards to its rhythmic disposition. What is for you the purpose of this kind of repetition?

I “say” something. It cries out
to exist again in a different garment
of duration. It cries out to change
but stay the same all the while
being a new harmonic rhythm. Oh yes
music “speaks” to me and I listen
and change over the years. I have a
history. My 190 compositions is my history.
I do battle with my history automatically.
Change...evolution happens – just happens
And at certain we are hit hard

with the fact: we have come here to go.
Whate we make and leave turns to dust.
We continue making, composing because habits
bring us in touch with the divine.

Notice how I am writing here...from
Sentence to place. What does it tell you?

3 – The repetitions of the second type show high pitch fidelity if compared to their original occurrences (even in regards to the order in that these pitches were presented in their first occurrence). This fact somewhat contrasts with some of your early pieces, in where pitch material would come back in varied ways (such as with the use of a “free retrograde” technique, in the early pieces Links series). Would you be able to comment on the reasons that lead you to this change of approach?

I do not change approach. The
music changes approach on its
own. The “I” sleeps by composing
or more correctly, by being composed,
by making space to let, not to be
anywhere: By being no where special
while the composing takes place.
Sentence, phrase by phrase it happens
until it dies of its own making. A
Composition should be allowed to die.
I heard Beethoven last night. It is
so square. It ends. I hear his will to power:
The will to battle with material is utterly
boring. Give me Coltrane any time, where
the moment is glory and breath is the
key. Do not give me the key. I don't want it

4 – The use of repetition frequently generated simple forms, such as ABA forms, in your early music. In *The Starving Month*, the frequent use of non-consecutive varied repetition of different materials seems to create a rather complex form. Would you comment on this seemingly recent feature of your music?

Form is what happens. Form
is memory deferred. Form is
hidden by not thinking about it.
It is the details we remember: a
phone call at my dorm from a young
woman who wants a lover. No, I say.
What would a yes done? I remember
that small detail often. It is a form.
A refrain if you like. But ideas

about memory is the close relative to
right now a past. Right now. Again
now. Memory occupies space.
use it to saturate the space
of regret.

5 – Your pitch choices for *The Starving Month* show an embracement of a modal vocabulary in an extent that I had never witnessed in your music, even though this feature seemed to have been growing in your music in the recent years. Would you be able to comment on the process that led you from a more chromatic approach to the frequent use of modal inflexions in your recent music?

The chromatic music teaches
the more or less modal music
how to exist in the world. The
difference is a kind of wieght.
Having less stretches the moment.
The modal is deeper in its movement.
Chromatic music floats easily
in the clouds. Modal music
sings of the past. I have more
past than future. Yet I feel
eternal. This is an illusion that
helps us go on in winter.

6 – How would you respond to the provocative statement that the use of repetition, as well the more frequent use of a modal vocabulary seem to constitute an attempt on your part to limit material?

I am composed of 190 compositions
The Starving Month is just one
manifestation. My musical path
is one of the most varied of any
living composer. I limit nothing
because I do not plan. I am planned
by experience. By the experience
of sitting each day to see what
happens. I limit nothing. Look at
all my music. Not just a instance of
my foot in a stream, and you
will see how composition has made
me in different differences

7 – When I attended Kendall Kennison's keynote speech in the Colloquium, I was interested by his comments on the thought process of the worshipper in a traditional Quaker meeting as related to the way that material unfolds in your music. *The Starving Month* came instantly to my mind, especially because its use of non-consecutive varied repetition. Much has been already discussed on the influence of Quakerism in your music, especially in relation to the use of silence and non-periodical rhythms. One considers now how Quakerism may parallel with your use of varied repetition of material. What are your thoughts on this matter?

One must be a Quaker to
See Quakerism clearly. It is
not a silence religion. It is a
religion of action – social justice.
He was born this way: Silence
is the largest part of Sandbox
composed at the age of 14, scored
for woodblocks and cowbell. It
expresses the nature of the Maine
Woods: a few sounds into the nothing.
I felt isolated in crowds
the loneliest place was in school which I
cared little about, because I wished
From the beginning of self emancipation
to learn on my own – groups kill –
the lone person grows.
 I am not good enough
 or silent enough to be a Quaker

8 – Kennison explains your music as contemplative, so that gestures are "subject to consideration and reworking in the moment, like thoughts in worship." How would you relate this consideration to *The Starving Month*, especially in relation to the use of recurrent varied repetition?

Dr. Kennison has the tools to
speak about Quakerism. He has the
experience.
 My music contains no ideas.
It is experience. It is my shame
that I taught ideas in music as
a professor. There is the music. And
music teaches us about music by
being music.

9 – The Philosopher Étienne Souriau says: "The demands of true musical structure are such that the creator, as soon as stimulation goes too far and leaves final stylization, is simply forced to renounce music itself and transgress its basic laws. So little are the facts of nature in harmony

with those laws. Even emotional description in music leaves those bounds as soon as approaches too close to the real movements of the soul, the natural course of psychical facts, which do not contain the prescribed repetitions, not the quivering, nor architectonic transitions from one tonality to the other, nor correct cadences, nor the ready, stereotyped conclusions which musical form demands." Dunja Dujmić cites this statement as conditions for Ives' music as being transcendentalist. Souriau's statement seems to perhaps apply to *The Starving Month* because its repetitions are not prescribed and occasional incursions through modality do not happen through any architectonic transition or with the intention to fulfill any formal demands. According to Kennison, while Quakerism is different than transcendentalism, both practices share "points of overlap and similarity." Please comment on the applicability of Souriau's statement to *The Starving Month*, and your music in general.

The philosopher Étienne Souriau makes words like French intellectuals everywhere. It sounds deep but is finally a circle with no way up.

10 – According to George Amoss “the Quaker meeting is a place where all opinions are respected and can get a hearing, and that Quaker decision-making is a process of arriving at truth through attending to each person’s expressed opinion.” Please comment on how attending Quaker meetings, especially in regards to the decision-making and the search for divine truth, has had an impact on your composition process and your relationship to the performers of your music.

The Quaker connection should be eliminated in your essay. The more I think about it The less it resonates. Religion, at its best, is experience without words and ideas. Music, at its best confound the mind to find instead the ocean we all swim.

Best wishes