

TRANSCENDENTALISM
IN NEW ENGLAND
BY
OCTAVIUS BROOKS FROTHINGHAM

TEXT PREPARED BY THE THOREAU INSTITUTE AT WALDEN WOODS

07.29.2007

TRANSCENDENTALISM IN NEW ENGLAND

The title of this Chapter is in a sense misleading. For with some truth it may be said that there never was such a thing as Transcendentalism out of New England. In Germany and France there was a transcendental philosophy, held by cultivated men, taught in schools, and professed by many thoughtful and earnest people; but it never affected society in its organized institutions or practical interests. In old England, this philosophy influenced poetry and art, but left the daily existence of men and women untouched. But in New England, the ideas entertained by the foreign thinkers took root in the native soil and blossomed out in every form of social life. The philosophy assumed full proportions, produced fruit according to its kind, created a new social order for itself, or rather showed what sort of social order it would create under favoring conditions. Its new heavens and new earth were made visible, if but for a moment, and in a wintry season. Hence, when we speak of Transcendentalism, we mean New England Transcendentalism.

New England furnished the only plot of ground on the planet, where the transcendental philosophy had a chance to show what it was and what it proposed. The forms of life there were, in a measure, plastic. There were no immovable prejudices, no fixed and unalterable traditions. Laws and usages were fluent, malleable at all events. The sentiment of individual freedom was active; the truth was practically acknowledged, that it takes all sorts of people to make a world, and the many minds of the many men were respected. No orders of men, no aristocracies of intellect, no privileged classes of thought were established. The old world supplied such literature

as there was, in science, law, philosophy, ethics, theology; but an astonishing intellectual activity seized upon it, dealt with it in genuine democratic fashion, classified it, accepted it, dismissed it, paying no undue regard to its foreign reputation. Experiments in thought and life, of even audacious description, were made, not in defiance of precedent — for precedent was hardly respected enough to be defied — but in innocent unconsciousness of precedent. A feeling was abroad that all things must be new in the new world. There was call for immediate application of ideas to life. In the old world, thoughts remained cloistered a generation before any questioned their bearing on public or private affairs. In the new world, the thinker was called on to justify himself on the spot by building an engine, and setting some thing in motion. The test of a truth was its availability. The popular faith in the capacities of men to make states, laws, religions for themselves, supplied a ground work for the new philosophy. The philosophy of sensation, making great account, as it did, of circumstances, arrangements, customs usages, rules of education and discipline, was alien and disagreeable to people who, having just emancipated themselves from political dependence on the mother country, were full of confidence in their ability to set up society for themselves. The philosophy that laid its foundations in human nature, and placed stress on the organic capacities and endowments of the mind, was as congenial as the opposite system was foreign. Every native New Englander was at heart, whether he suspected it or not, radically and instinctively a disciple of Fichte or Schelling, of Cousin or Jouffroy.

The religion of New England was Protestant and of the most intellectual type. Romanism had no hold on the thinking people of Boston.

None beside the Irish laboring and menial classes were Catholics, and their religion was regarded as the lowest form of ceremonial superstition. The Congregational system favored individuality of thought and action. The orthodox theology, in spite of its arbitrary character and its fixed type of supernaturalism, exercised its professors severely in speculative questions, and furnished occasions for discernment and criticism which made reason all but supreme over faith. This theology too had its purely spiritual side — nay, it was essentially spiritual. Its root ran back into Platonism, and its flower was a mysticism which, on the intellectual side, bordered closely on Transcendentalism. The charge that the Trinitarian system, in its distinguishing features, was of Platonic, and not of Jewish origin, was a confession that it was born of the noblest idealism of the race. So in truth it was, and so well-instructed Trinitarians will confess that it was. The Platonic philosophy being transcendental in its essence and tendency, communicated this character to Christian speculation. The skeletons of ancient polemics were buried deep beneath the soil of orthodoxy, and were not supposed to be a part of the structure of modern beliefs, but there nevertheless they were. The living faith of New England, in its spiritual aspects, betrayed its ancestry. The speculation had become Christian, the powers claimed by pagan philosophers for the mind were ascribed to the influences of the Holy Spirit and the truths revealed in consciousness were truths of the Gospel; but the fact of immediate communication between the soul of the believer and its Christ was so earnestly insisted on, the sympathy was represented as being of so kindred and organic a nature, that in reading the works of the masters of New England theology, it requires an effort to forget that the speculative basis of their faith was not the natural basis of the philosopher,

but the supernatural one of the believer. The spiritual writings of Jonathan Edwards, the “Treatise on the Religious Affections” especially, breathe the sweetest spirit of idealism. Indeed, whenever orthodoxy spread its wings and rose into the region of faith, it lost itself in the sphere where the human soul and the divine were in full concurrence. Transcendentalism simply claimed for all men what Protestant Christianity claimed for its own elect.

That adherents of the sensuous philosophy professed the orthodox doctrines, is a circumstance that throws the above statement into bolder relief. For these people gave to the system the hard, external, dogmatical character which in New England provoked the Unitarian reaction. The beliefs in scripture inspiration, incarnation, atonement, election, predestination, depravity, fall, regeneration, redemption, deprived of their interior meaning, became ragged heaps of dogmatism, unbeautiful, incredible, hateful. Assault came against them from the quarter of common intelligence and the rational understanding. The sensuous philosophy associated with the school of Locke, — which Edwards and the like of him scorned, — fell upon the fallen system and plucked it unmercifully. Never was easier work than that of the early Unitarian critics. The body of orthodoxy having lost its soul, was a very unsightly carcass, — so evidently, to every sense, a carcass, that they who had respected it as a celestial creation, and could not be persuaded that this was all they respected, allowed the scavengers to take it away, only protesting that the thing disposed of was not the revealed gospel, or anything but a poor effigy of it. The Unitarians as a class belonged to the school of Locke, which discarded the doctrine of innate ideas, and its kindred beliefs. Unitarianism from the beginning showed affinity with this school, and avowed it more distinctly

than idealists avowed Trinitarianism. Paul of Samosata, Arius, Pelagius, Socinus, the Swiss, Polish, English advocates of the same general theology and christology were, after their several kinds, disciples of the same philosophical system. Unitarianism, it was remarked, has rarely, if ever, been taught or held by any man of eminence in the church who was a Platonist. The Unitarians of New England, good scholars, careful reasoners, clear and exact thinkers, accomplished men of letters, humane in sentiment, sincere in moral intention, belonged, of course with individual exceptions, to the class which looked without for knowledge, rather than within for inspiration. The Unitarian in religion was a whig in politics, a conservative in literature, art and social ethics. The Unitarian divine was more familiar with Tillotson than with Cudworth, and more in love with William Paley than with Joseph Butler. He was strong in the "Old English" classics, and though a confessed devotee to no school in philosophy, was addicted to the prevailing fashion of intelligent, cultivated good sense. The Unitarian was disquieted by mysticism, enthusiasm and rapture. Henry More was unintelligible to him, and Robert Fludd disgusting. He had no sympathy with Helvetius, D'Holbach, Diderot or Voltaire, those fierce disturbers of intellectual peace; he had as little with William Law and Coleridge, dreamers and visionaries, who substituted vapor for solid earth. The Unitarian leaders were distinguished by practical wisdom, sober judgment, and balanced thoughtfulness, that weighed opinions in the scale of evidence and argument. Even Dr. Channing clung to the philosophical traditions that were his inheritance from England. The splendid things he said about the dignity of human nature, the divinity of the soul, the moral kinship with Christ, the inspiration of the moral sentiment, the power of moral intuition,

habitual and characteristic as they were, scarcely justify the ascription to him of sympathy with philosophical idealism. His tenacious adherence to the record of miracle as attesting the mission of the Christ, and his constant exaltation of the Christ above humanity, suggest that the first principles of the transcendental philosophy had not been distinctly accepted, even if they were distinctly apprehended. The following extract from a letter written in 1819, expresses Dr. Channing's feeling toward Christ, a feeling never essentially altered: "Jesus Christ existed before he came into the world, and in a state of great honor and felicity. He was known, esteemed, beloved, revered in the family of heaven. He was entrusted with the execution of the most sublime purposes of his Father." About the same time he wrote: "Jesus ever lives, and is ever active for mankind. He is Mediator, Intercessor, Lord, and Saviour; He has a permanent and constant connection with mankind. He is through all time, now as well as formerly, the active and efficient friend of the human race." The writer of such words was certainly not a Transcendentalist in philosophy. His biographer, himself a brilliant Transcendentalist, admits as much. "His soul" he says, "was illuminated with the idea of the absolute immutable glory of the Moral Good; and reverence for conscience is the key to his whole doctrine of human destiny and duty. Many difficult metaphysical points he passed wholly by, as being out of the sphere alike of intuition and of experience. He believed, to be sure, in the possibility of man's gaining some insight of Universal Order, and respected the lofty aspiration which prompts men to seek a perfect knowledge of the Divine laws; but he considered pretensions to absolute science as quite premature; saw more boastfulness than wisdom in ancient and modern schemes of philosophy, and was not a little amused at the

complacent confidence with which quite evidently fallible theorists assumed to stand at the centre, and to scan and depict the panorama of existence." In a letter of 1840, referring to the doctrines of Mr. Parker and that school of thinkers, he writes: "I see and feel the harm done by this crude speculation, whilst I also see much nobleness to bind me to its advocates. In its opinions generally I see nothing to give me hope. I am somewhat disappointed that this new movement is to do so little for the spiritual regeneration of society." A year later, he tells James Martineau that the spiritualists (meaning the Transcendentalists) "in identifying themselves a good deal with Cousin's crude system, have lost the life of an original movement. They are anxious to defend the soul's immediate connection with God, and are in danger of substituting private inspiration for Christianity." What he knew of Kant, Schelling and Fichte, through Mad. de Stael and Coleridge, he welcomed as falling in with his own conceptions of the grandeur of the human mind and will; but his acquaintance with them was never complete, and if it had been, he would perhaps have been repelled by the intellectual, as strongly as he was attracted by the moral teaching.

In this matter the sentiment of Channing went beyond his philosophy. The following extracts taken at random from a volume of discourses edited in 1873 by his nephew, under the title "The Perfect Life," show that Channing was a Transcendentalist in feeling, whatever he may have been in thought.

"The religious principle, is, without doubt, the noblest working of human nature. This principle God implanted for Himself. Through this the human mind corresponds to the Supreme Divinity."

“The idea of God is involved in the primitive and most universal idea of Reason; and is one of its central principles.”

“We have, each of us, the spiritual eye to see, the mind to know, the heart to love, the will to obey God.”

“A spiritual light, brighter than that of noon, pervades our daily life. The cause of our not seeing is in ourselves.”

“The great lesson is, that there is in human nature an element truly Divine, and worthy of all reverence; that the Infinite which is mirrored in the outward universe, is yet more brightly imaged in the inward spiritual world.”

“They who assert the greatness of human nature, see as much of guilt as the man of worldly wisdom. But amidst the passions and selfishness of men they see another element — a Divine element — a spiritual principle.”

“This moral principle the supreme law in man is the Law of the Universe, the very Law to which the highest beings are subject, and in obeying which they find their elevation and their joy.”

“The Soul itself, in its powers and affections, in its unquenchable thirst and aspiration for unattained good, gives signs of a Nature made for an interminable progress, such as cannot be now conceived.”

The debt which Transcendentalism owed to Unitarianism was not speculative; neither was it immediate or direct. The Unitarians, clergy as well as laity, so far as the latter comprehended their position, acknowledged themselves to be friends of free thought in religion. This was their

distinction. They disavowed sympathy with dogmatism, partly because such dogmatism as there was existed in the minds of their theological foes, and was felt in such persecution as society permitted; and partly because they honestly respected the human mind, and valued thought for its own sake. They had no creed, and no system of philosophy on which a creed could be, by common consent, built. Rather were they open inquirers, who asked questions and waited for rational answers, having no definite apprehension of the issue to which their investigations tended, but with room enough within the accepted theology to satisfy them, and work enough on the prevailing doctrines to keep them employed. Under these circumstances, they honestly but incautiously professed a principle broader than they were able to stand by, and avowed the absolute freedom of the human mind as their characteristic faith; instead of a creed, the right to judge all creeds; instead of a system, authority to try every system by rules of evidence. The intellectual among them were at liberty to entertain views which an orthodox mind instinctively shrank from; to read books which an orthodox believer would not have touched with the ends of his fingers. The literature on their tables represented a wide mental activity. Their libraries contained authors never found before on ministerial shelves. Skepticism thrived by what it fed on; and, before they had become fully aware of the possible results of their diligent study, their powers had acquired a confidence that encouraged ventures beyond the walls of Zion. This profession of free inquiry, and the practice of it within the extensive area of Protestant theology, opened the door to the new speculation which carried unlooked-for heresies in its bosom; and before the gates could be closed the insidious enemy had penetrated to the citadel.

There was idealism in New England prior to the introduction of Transcendentalism. Idealism is of no clime or age. It has its proportion of disciples in every period and in the apparently most uncongenial countries; a full proportion might have been looked for in New England. But when Emerson appeared, the name of Idealism was legion. He alone was competent to form a school, and as soon as he rose, the scholars trooped about him. By sheer force of genius Emerson anticipated the results of the transcendental philosophy, defined its axioms and ran out their inferences to the end. Without help from abroad, or with such help only as none but he could use, he might have domesticated in Massachusetts an idealism as heroic as Fichte's, as beautiful as Schelling's; but it would have lacked the dialectical basis of the great German systems.

Transcendentalism, properly so called, was imported in foreign packages. Few read German, but most read French. As early as 1804, Degerando lectured on Kant's philosophy, in Paris; and as early as 1813 Mad. de Stael gave an account of it. The number of copies of the original works of either Kant, Fichte, Jacobi or Schelling, that found their way to the United States, was inconsiderable. Half a dozen eager students obtained isolated books of Herder, Schleiermacher, De Wette and other theological and biblical writers, read them, translated chapters from them, or sent notices of them to the Christian Examiner. The works of Coleridge made familiar the leading ideas of Schelling. The foreign reviews reported the results and processes of French and German speculation. In 1827, Thomas Carlyle wrote, in the Edinburgh Review, his great articles on Richter and the State of German Literature; in 1828 appeared his essay on Goethe. Mr. Emerson presented these and other papers as "Carlyle's Miscellanies" to the American public. In

1838 George Ripley began the publication of the "Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature," a series which extended to fourteen volumes; the first and second comprising philosophical miscellanies by Cousin, Jouffroy and Constant, translated with introductions by Mr. Ripley himself; the third devoted to Goethe and Schiller, with elaborate and discriminating prefaces by John S. Dwight; the fourth giving Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe, done into English by Margaret Fuller; the three next containing Menzel's German Literature, by Prof. C. C. Felton; the eighth and ninth introducing Wm. H. Channing's version of Jouffroy's Introduction to Ethics; the tenth and eleventh, DeWette's Theodor, by James Freeman Clarke; the twelfth and thirteenth, DeWette's Ethics, by Samuel Osgood; and the last offering samples of German Lyrics, by Charles T. Brooks. These volumes, which were remarkably attractive, both in form and contents, brought many readers into a close acquaintance with the teaching and the spirit of writers of the new school.

The Philosophical Miscellanies of Cousin were much noticed by the press, George Bancroft in especial sparing no pains to commend them and the views they presented. The spiritual philosophy had no more fervent or eloquent champion than he. No reader of his "History of the United States," has forgotten the noble tribute paid to it under the name of Quakerism, or the striking parallel between the two systems represented in the history by John Locke and Wm. Penn, both of whom framed constitutions for the new world. For keenness of apprehension and fullness of statement the passages deserve to be quoted here. They occur in the XVI. chapter of the History.

“The elements of humanity are always the same, the inner light dawns upon every nation, and is the same in every age; and the French revolution was a result of the same principles as those of George Fox, gaining dominion [*sic*] over the mind of Europe. They are expressed in the burning and often profound eloquence of Rousseau; they reappear in the masculine philosophy of Kant The professor of Konigsberg, like Fox and Barclay and Penn, derived philosophy from the voice in the soul; like them, he made the oracle within the categorical rule of practical morality, the motive to disinterested virtue; like them, he esteemed the Inner Light, which discerns universal and necessary truths, an element of humanity; and therefore his philosophy claims for humanity the right of ever renewed progress and reform. If the Quakers disguised their doctrine under the form of theology, Kant concealed it for a season under the jargon of a nervous, but unusual diction. But Schiller has reproduced the great idea in beautiful verse; Chateaubriand avowed himself its advocate; Coleridge has repeated the doctrine in misty language; it beams through the poetry of Lamartine and Wordsworth; while in the country of beautiful prose, the eloquent Cousin, listening to the same eternal voice which connects humanity with universal reason, has gained a wide fame for “the divine principle,” and in explaining the harmony between that light and the light of Christianity, has often unconsciously borrowed the language, and employed the arguments of Barclay and Penn.”

A few pages later is the brilliant passage describing the essential difference between this philosophy and that of Locke:

“Locke, like William Penn, was tolerant; both loved freedom, both cherished truth in sincerity. But Locke kindled the torch of liberty at the fires of tradition; Penn at the living light in the soul. Locke sought truth through the senses and the outward world; Penn looked inward to the divine revelations in every mind. Locke compared the soul to a sheet of white paper, just as Hobbes had compared it to a slate on which time and chance might scrawl their experience. To Penn the soul was an organ which of itself instinctively breathes divine harmonies, like those musical instruments which are so curiously and perfectly formed, that when once set in motion, they of themselves give forth all the melodies designed by the artist that made them. To Locke, conscience is nothing else than our own opinion of our own actions; to Penn, it is the image of God and his oracle in the soul. . . . In studying the understanding Locke begins with the sources of knowledge; Penn with an inventory of our intellectual treasures. . . . The system of Locke lends itself to contending factions of the most opposite interests and purposes; the doctrine of Fox and Penn, being but the common creed of humanity, forbids division and insures the highest moral unity. To Locke, happiness is pleasure, and things are good and evil only in reference to pleasure and pain; and to “inquire after the highest good is as absurd as to dispute whether the best relish be in apples, plums or nuts.” Penn esteemed happiness to lie in the subjection of the baser instincts to the instinct of Deity in the

breast; good and evil to be eternally and always as unlike as truth and falsehood; and the inquiry after the highest good to involve the purpose of existence. Locke says plainly that, but for rewards and punishments beyond the grave, it is certainly right to eat and drink, and enjoy what we delight in. Penn, like Plato and Fenelon, maintained the doctrine so terrible to despots, that God is to be loved for His own sake, and virtue to be practised for its intrinsic loveliness. Locke derives the idea of infinity from the senses, describes it as purely negative, and attributes it to nothing but space, duration and number; Penn derived the idea from the soul, and ascribed it to truth and virtue and God. Locke declares immortality a matter with which reason has nothing to do; and that revealed truth must be sustained by outward signs and visible acts of power; Penn saw truth by its own light and summoned the soul to bear witness to its own glory.”

The justice of the comparison, in the first part of the above extract, of Quakerism with Transcendentalism, may be disputed. Some may be of opinion that inasmuch as Quakerism traces the source of the Inner Light to the supernatural illumination of the Holy Spirit, while Transcendentalism regards it as a natural endowment of the human mind, the two are fundamentally opposed while superficially in agreement. However this may be, the practical issues of the two coincide, and the truth of the contrast presented between the philosophies, designated by the name of Locke on the one side, and of Penn on the other, will not be disputed. Mr. Bancroft’s statement, though dazzling, is exact. It was made in 1837. The third edition

from which the above citation was made, was published in 1838, the year of Mr. Emerson's address to the Divinity students at Cambridge.

Mr. Emerson had shown his hand plainly several years before. In 1832 he raised the whole issue in the "epoch making" sermon, in which he advanced the view of the communion service that led to his resignation of the Christian ministry. His elder brother, William, returning from his studies in Germany, was turned from the profession of the church which he had purposed entering, to the law, by similar scruples. In 1834, James Walker printed in the "Christian Examiner" an address, which was the same year published as a tract, by the American Unitarian Association, entitled "The Philosophy of Man's Spiritual Nature in regard to the foundations of Faith," wherein he took frankly the transcendental ground, contending:

"That the existence of those spiritual faculties and capacities which are assumed as the foundation of religion in the soul of man, is attested, and put beyond controversy by the revelations of consciousness; that religion in the soul, consisting as it does, of a manifestation and development of these spiritual faculties and capacities, is as much a reality in itself, and enters as essentially into our idea of a perfect man, as the corresponding manifestation and development of the reasoning faculties, a sense of justice, or the affections of sympathy and benevolence; and that "from the acknowledged existence and reality of spiritual impressions or perceptions, we may and do assume the existence and reality of the spiritual world; just as from the acknowledged existence and reality of

sensible impressions or perceptions, we may and do assume the existence and realities of the sensible world.”

In this discourse, for originally it was a discourse, the worst species of infidelity is charged to the “Sensational” philosophy, and at the close, the speaker in impressive language, said:

“Let us hope that a better philosophy than the degrading sensualism out of which most forms of infidelity have grown, will prevail, and that the minds of the rising generation will be thoroughly imbued with it. Let it be a philosophy which recognizes the higher nature of man, and aims, in a chastened and reverential spirit, to unfold the mysteries of his higher life. Let it be a philosophy which comprehends the soul, a soul susceptible of religion, of the sublime principle of faith, of a faith which ‘entereth into that within the veil.’ Let it be a philosophy which continually reminds us of our intimate relations to the spiritual world; which opens to us new sources of consolation in trouble, and new sources of life in death nay, which teaches us that what we call death is but the dying of all that is mortal, that nothing but life may remain.”

In 1840, the same powerful advocate of the transcendental doctrine, in a discourse before the alumni of the Cambridge Divinity School, declared that the return to a higher order of ideas, to a living faith in God, in Christ, .and in the church, had been promoted by such men as Schleiermacher and De Wette; gave his opinion that the religious community had reason to look

with distrust and dread on a philosophy which limited the ideas of the human mind to the information imparted by the senses, and denied the existence of spiritual elements in the nature of man; and again welcomed the philosophy taught in England by Butler, Reid and Coleridge; in Germany, by Kant, Jacobi and Schleiermacher; in France, by Cousin, Jouffroy and Degerando. Such words from James Walker, always a favorite teacher with young men, a mind of judicial authority in the liberal community, and at that time Professor of Moral Philosophy at Harvard College, made a deep impression. When he said: "Men may put down Transcendentalism if they can, but they must first deign to comprehend its principles," the most conservative began to surmise that there must be something in Transcendentalism.

But before this the movement was well under way. In 1836, Emerson's "Nature" broke through the shell of accepted opinions on a very essential subject: true, but five hundred copies were sold in twelve years; critics and philosophers could make nothing of it; but those who read it recognized signs of a new era, even if they could not describe them; and many who did not read it felt in the atmosphere the change it introduced. The idealism of the little book was uncompromising.

"In the presence of ideas we feel that the outward circumstance is a dream and a shade. Whilst we wait in this Olympus of gods-, we think of nature as an appendix to the soul. We ascend into their region, and know that these are the thoughts of the Supreme Being."
* * * "Idealism is an hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry. It acquaints us with

the total disparity between the evidence of our own being, and the evidence of the world's being. The world is a divine dream, from which we may presently awake to the glories and certainties of day."

The same year, George Ripley reviewed in the "Christian Examiner," Martineau's "Rationale of Religious Enquiry." The article was furiously assailed in the Boston Daily Advertiser. Mr. Ripley replied in the paper of the next day, vindicating the ideas of the review and of the book as being strictly in consonance with the principles of liberal Christianity.

In 1838 came the wonderful "address" before the Cambridge Divinity School, which stirred the soul of aspiring young men, and, wakened the wrath of sedate old ones. It was idealism in its full blaze, and it made the germs of Transcendentalism struggle in the sods.

The next year Andrews Norton attacked the new philosophy in a discourse before the same audience, on "The Latest Form of Infidelity." The doctrine of that discourse was "Sensationalism" in its boldest aspect.

"Christ was commissioned by God to speak to us in His name, and to make known to us, on His authority, those truths which it most concerns us to know; and there can be no greater miracle than this. No proof of His divine commission could be afforded but through miraculous displays of God's power. Nothing is left that can be called Christianity, if its miraculous character be denied. Its essence is gone; its evidence is annihilated." * * * "To demand for certainty let it come from whom it may, I answer that I know of no absolute certainty beyond the limit of momentary consciousness; a certainty that

vanishes the instant it exists, and is lost in the region of metaphysical doubt." . . . "There can be no intuition, no direct perception of the truth of Christianity, no metaphysical certainty." . . . "Of the facts on which religion is founded, we can pretend to no assurance except that derived from the testimony of God from the Christian revelation."

A pamphlet defending the discourse contained passages like the following: "The doctrine that the mind possesses a faculty of intuitively discovering the truths of religion, is not only utterly untenable, but the proposition is of such a character that it cannot well bear the test of being distinctly stated. The question respecting the existence of such a faculty is not difficult to be decided. We are not conscious of possessing any such faculty; and there can be no other proof of its existence. Its defenders shrink from presenting it in broad daylight. They are disposed to keep it out of view behind a cloud of words." . . . "Consciousness or intuition" can inform us of nothing but what exists in our own minds, including the relations of our own ideas. It is therefore not an intelligible error, but a mere absurdity to maintain that we are conscious, or have an intuitive knowledge of the being of God, of our own immortality, of the revelation of God through Christ, or of any other fact of religion." . . . "The religion of which they (the Transcendentalists) speak, therefore, exists merely, if it exist at all, in undefined and unintelligible feelings, having reference, perhaps, to certain imaginations, the result of impressions communicated in childhood or produced by the visible signs of religious belief existing around us, or awakened by the beautiful and magnificent spectacles which nature presents."

Mr. Norton spoke with biting severity of the masters of German philosophy, criticism, and literature, and exhausted his sarcasm on the address of Mr. Emerson delivered the previous year. To Mr. Norton, Mr. Ripley made prompt and earnest, though temperate, reply in three long and powerful letters, devoted mainly to a refutation of his adversary's accusations against Spinoza, Schleiermacher, De Wette, and the philosophic theologians of Germany. Not till the end does he take issue with the fundamental positions of Mr. Norton's philosophy; then he brands as revolting" the doctrine that "There can be no intuition, no direct perception of the truth of Christianity;" that "the feeling or direct perception of religious truth" is an "imaginary faculty;" and affirms his conviction that "the principle that the soul has no faculty to perceive spiritual truth, is contradicted by the universal consciousness of man."

"Does the body see," he asks, "and is the spirit blind? No, man has the faculty for feeling and perceiving religious truth. So far from being imaginary, it is the highest reality of which the pure soul is conscious. Can I be more certain that I am capable of looking out and admiring the forms of external beauty, the frail and weary weed in which God dresses the soul that he has called into time, than that I can also look within, and commune with the fairer forms of truth and holiness which plead for my love, as visitants from Heaven?"

The controversy was taken up by other pens. In 1840, Theodore Parker, speaking as a plain man under the name of Levi Blodgett, "moved and handled the Previous Question " after a fashion that betrayed the

practised thinker and scribe. Mr. Parker occupied substantially the same ground that was taken by James Walker in 1834.

“The germs of religion, both the germs of religious principle and religious sentiment, must be born in man, or innate, as our preacher says. I reckon that man is by nature a religious being, i. e. that he was made to be religious, as much as an ox was made to eat grass. The existence of God is a fact given in our nature: it is not something discovered by a process of reasoning, by a long series of deductions from facts; nor yet is it the last generalization from phenomena observed in the universe of mind or matter. But it is a truth fundamental in our nature; given outright by God; a truth which comes to light as soon as self-consciousness begins. Still further, I take a sense of dependence on God to be a natural and essential sentiment of the soul, as much as feeling, seeing and hearing are natural sensations of the body. Here, then, are the religious instincts which lead man to God and religion, just as naturally as the intellectual instincts lead him to truth, and animal instincts to his food. As there is light for the eye, sound for the ear, food for the palate, friends for the affections, beauty for the imagination, truth for the reason, duty for conscience — so there is God for the religious sentiment or sense of dependence on Him. Now all these presuppose one another, as a want essential to the structure of man’s mind or body presupposes something to satisfy it. And as the sensation of hunger presupposes food to satisfy it, so the sense of dependence on God presupposes his existence and character.”

From these premises Mr. Parker proceeds to discuss the questions about miracles, inspiration, revelation, the character and functions of Jesus, the Christ, and kindred matters belonging to the general controversy. The year following, he preached the sermon on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," which brought out the issues between the "Sensationalists" and the "Transcendentalists," and was the occasion of detaching the latter from the original body.

The first series of Emerson's "Essays" containing "Self Reliance," "Compensation," "Spiritual Laws," "The Over Soul," "Circles," "Intellect," was published during that year, and was followed almost immediately by "The Transcendentalist," a lecture read in Masonic Temple, Boston. In this lecture occurs the following allusion to Kant:

"The Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant of Königsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature in Europe and America, to that extent that what ever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called, at the present day, Transcendental." * * *

"The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual

doctrine. He believes in miracles, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration and ecstasy. He wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered J to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man, without the admission of anything unspiritual, that is, anything positive, dogmatic, personal."

From what has been said it may be inferred that Transcendentalism in New England was a movement within the limits of "liberal" Christianity or Unitarian-ism as it was called, and. had none but a religious aspect. Such an inference would be narrow. In 1838, Orestes Augustus Brownson started "The Boston Quarterly Review," instituted for the discussion of questions in politics, art, literature, science, philosophy and religion. The editor who was the principal, and almost the sole writer, frankly declares that "he had no creed, no distinct doctrines to support whatever;" that he "aimed to startle, and made it a point to be as paradoxical and extravagant as he could, without doing violence to his own reason or conscience." This avowal was made in 1857, after Mr. Brownson had become a Roman Catholic. The pages of the Review prove the writer to have been a pronounced Transcendentalist. A foreign journal called him "the Coryphæus of the sect," a designation which, at the time, was meekly accepted.

Mr. Brownson was a remarkable man, remarkable for intellectual force, and equally for intellectual wilfulness. His mind was restless, audacious, swift; his self assertion was immense; his thoughts came in floods; his literary style was admirable for freshness, terseness and vigor. Of rational stability of principle he had nothing, but was completely at the

mercy of every novelty in speculation. That others thought as he did, was enough to make him think otherwise; that he thought as he had six months before was a signal that it was time for him to strike his tent and move on. An experimenter in systems, a taster of speculations, he passed rapidly from one phase to another, so that his friends ascribed his steadfastness to Romanism, to the fatigue of intellectual travelling. Mr. Brownson was born in Stockbridge, Vt., Sept. 16, 1803. His education was scanty; his nurture was neglected; his discipline, if such it can be called, was to the last degree unwise. The child had visions, fancied he had received communications from the Christ, and held spiritual intercourse with the Virgin Mary, Angels and Saints. Of a sensitive nature on the moral and spiritual side, interested from boyhood in religious speculations, he had, before he reached man's estate, asked and answered, in his own passionate way, all the deepest questions of destiny. At the age of 21, he passed from Supernaturalism to Rationalism; at 22 became a Universalist minister; at 28 adopted what he called "The Religion of Humanity;" the year following, joined the Unitarian ministry. At this time he studied French and German, and became fervidly addicted to philosophy. Benjamin Constant's theory of religion fascinated him by its brilliant generalizations, and its novel readings of Mythology, and was immediately adopted because it interested him and fell in with his mood of mind. In 1833, he accepted Cousin's philosophy as he had accepted Constant's, "attending to those things that I could appropriate to my purposes." In 1836 he organized the "Society for Christian Union and Progress" in Boston, and continued to be its minister till 1843. All this time he was dallying with Socialism, principally in the form of St. Simonianism; thought of himself as possibly the precursor of the Messiah; threw out

strange heresies on the subject of property and the modern industrial system; and was suspected, he declared afterwards unjustly suspected, of holding loose opinions on love and marriage. "New Views of Christianity, Society and the Church," appeared in 1836, a little book, written in answer to objections brought against Christianity as being a system of extravagant spiritualism. This idea Mr. Brownson combated, by pointing out the true character of the religion of Jesus as contrasted with the schemes that had borne his name, exposing the corruptions it had undergone, during the succeeding ages, from Protestantism as well as from Romanism, and indicating the method and the signs of a return to the primeval faith which reconciled God and man, spirit and matter, soul and body, heaven and earth, in the establishment of just relations between man and man, the institution of a simply human state of society.

"Charles Elwood, or The Infidel Converted," was published in 1840. Two or three passages from this theological discussion, thinly masked in the guise of a novel, will suffice to class the author with Transcendentalists of the advanced school.

"They who deny to man all inherent capacity to know God, all immediate perception of spiritual truth, place man out of the condition of ever knowing anything of God." "There must be a God within to recognize and vouch for the God who speaks to us from without." "I hold that the ideas or conceptions which man attempts to embody or realize in his forms of religious faith and worship, are intuitions of reason." "I understand by inspiration the spontaneous revelations of the reason; and I call these revelations

divine, because I hold the reason to be divine. Its voice is the voice of God, and what it reveals without any aid from human agency, is really and truly a divine revelation." "This reason is in all men. Hence the universal beliefs of mankind, the universality of the belief in God and religion. Hence, too, the power of all men to judge of supernatural revelations." . . . " All are able to detect the supernatural, because all have the supernatural in themselves."

The "Boston Quarterly," was maintained five years, — from 1838 to 1842 inclusive, —and consequently covered this period. It would therefore be safe to assume, what the volumes themselves attest, that whatever subject was dealt with, — and all conceivable subjects were dealt with, — were handled by the transcendental method. In the "Christian World," a short-lived weekly, published by a brother of Dr. W. E. Channing, Mr. Brownson began the publication of a series of articles on the "Mission of Jesus." Seven were admitted; the eighth was declined as being "Romanist" in its outlook. In 1844, the writer avowed himself a Roman Catholic, and was confirmed in Boston, October 20th. The "Convert," which contains the spiritual biography of this extraordinary man, and from which the above facts in his mental history are partly taken, was published in 1857. The Romanist was at that time essentially a Transcendentalist. "Truth," he writes, "is the mind's object, and it seeks and accepts it intuitively, as the new-born child seeks the mother's breast from which it draws its nourishment. The office of proof or even demonstration is negative rather than affirmative." Mr. Brownson was the most eminent convert to Romanism of this period, when conversions were frequent in Boston; and his influence was considerable in turning

uneasy minds to the old faith. He was a powerful writer and lecturer, an occasional visitor at Brook Farm, but his mental baselessness perhaps repelled nearly as many as his ingenuity beguiled.

The literary achievements of Transcendentalism are best exhibited in the "Dial," a quarterly "Magazine for Literature, Philosophy and Religion," begun July, 1840, and ending April, 1844. The editors were Margaret Fuller and R. W. Emerson; the contributors were the bright men and women who gave voice in literary form to the various utterances of the transcendental genius. Mr. Emerson's bravest lectures and noblest poems were first printed there. Margaret Fuller, besides numerous pieces of miscellaneous criticism, contributed the article on Goethe, alone enough to establish her fame as a discerner of spirits, and the paper on "The Great Lawsuit; Man versus Men — Woman versus Women," which was afterwards expanded into the book "Woman in the XIXth century." Bronson Alcott sent in chapters the "Orphic Sayings," which were an amazement to the uninitiated and an amusement to the profane. Charles Emerson, younger brother of the essayist, whose premature death was bewailed by the admirers of intellect and the lovers of pure character, proved by his "Notes from the Journal of a Scholar," that genius was not confined to a single member of his family. George Ripley, James Freeman Clarke, Theodore Parker, Wm. H. Channing, Henry Thoreau, Eliot Cabot, John S. Dwight the musical critic, C. P. Cranch the artist-poet, Wm. E. Channing, were liberal of contributions, all in characteristic ways; and unnamed men and women did their part to fill the numbers of this most remarkable magazine. The freshest thoughts on all subjects were brought to the editors table; social tendencies were noticed; books were received; the newest picture, the last concert, was passed upon;

judicious estimates were made of reforms and reformers abroad as well as at home; the philosophical discussions were able and discriminating; the theological papers were learned, broad and fresh. The four volumes are exceedingly rich in poetry, and poetry such as seldom finds a place in popular magazines. The first year's issue contained sixty-six pieces; the second, thirty-five; the third, fifty; the fourth, thirty-three; among these were Emerson's earliest inspirations. The "Problem," "Wood-notes," "The Sphinx," "Saadi," "Ode to Beauty," "To Rhea," first appeared in the "Dial." Harps that had long been silent, unable to make themselves heard amid the din of the later generation, made their music here. For Transcendentalism was essentially poetical and put its thoughts naturally into song. The poems in the "Dial," even leaving out the famous ones that have been printed since with their author's names, would make an interesting and attractive volume. How surprised would some of those writers be if they should now in their prosaic days read what then they wrote under the spell of that fine frenzy !

The following mystic poem, which might have come from an ancient Egyptian, dropped from one who has since become distinguished for something very different from mysticism. Has he seen it these many years? Can he believe that he was ever in the mood to write it? It is called

VIA SACRA.

Slowly along the crowded street I go,
Marking with reverent look each passer's face,
Seeking and not in vain, in each to trace

That primal soul whereof he is the show.
For here still move, by many eyes unseen,
The blessed gods that erst Olympus kept.
Through every guise these lofty forms serene
Declare the all-holding life hath never slept,
But known each thrill that in man's heart hath been,
And every tear that his sad eyes have wept.
Alas for us! the heavenly visitants, —
We greet them still as most unwelcome guests
Answering their smile with hateful looks askance,
Their sacred speech with foolish, bitter jests;
But oh! what is it to imperial Jove
That this poor world refuses all his love?

A remarkable feature of the "Dial" were the chapters of "Ethnical Scriptures," seven in all, containing texts from the Veeshnu Sarma, the laws of Menu, Confucius, the Desatir, the Chinese "Four Books," Hermes Trismegistus, the Chaldean Oracles. Thirty-five years ago, these Scriptures, now so accessible, and in portions so familiar, were known to the few, and were esteemed by none but scholars, whose enthusiasm for ancient literature got the better of their religious faith. To read such things then, showed an enlightened and courageous mind; to print them in a magazine under the sacred title of "Scriptures " argued a most extraordinary breadth of view. In offering these chapters to its readers, without apology and on their intrinsic merits, Transcendentalism exhibited its power to overpass the

limits of all special religions, and do perfect justice to all expressions of the religious sentiment.

The creed of Transcendentalism has been sufficiently indicated. It had a creed, and a definite one. In his lecture on "The Transcendentalist," read in 1841, Mr. Emerson seems disposed to consider Transcendentalism merely as a phase of idealism.

"Shall we say then that Transcendentalism is the Saturnalia or excess of Faith; the presentment of a faith proper to man in his integrity, excessive only when his imperfect obedience hinders the satisfaction of his wit. Nature is Transcendental, exists primarily, necessarily, ever works and advances; yet takes no thought for the morrow. Man owns the dignity of the life which throbs around him in chemistry, and tree, and animal, and in the involuntary functions of his own body; yet he is balked when he tries to fling himself into this enchanted circle, where all is done without degradation. Yet genius and virtue predict in man the same absence of private ends, and of condescension to circumstances, united with every trait and talent of beauty and power." * * * "This way of thinking, falling on Roman times, made stoic philosophers; falling on despotic times made patriot Catos and Brutuses; failing on superstitious times, made prophets and apostles; on popish times, made protestants and ascetic monks; preachers of Faith against preachers of Works; on prelatical times, made Puritans and Quakers; and falling on Unitarian and commercial times, makes the peculiar shades of Idealism which we know."

It is audacious to criticize Mr. Emerson on a point like this; but candor compels the remark that the above description does less than justice to the definiteness of the transcendental movement. It was something more than a reaction against formalism and tradition, though it took that form. It was more than a reaction against Puritan Orthodoxy, though in part it was that. It was in a very small degree due to study of the ancient pantheists, of Plato and the Alexandrians, of Plutarch, Seneca and Epictetus, though one or two of the leaders had drunk deeply from these sources. Transcendentalism was a distinct philosophical system. Practically it was an assertion of the inalienable worth of man; theoretically it was an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct, the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind.

Such a faith would necessarily be protean in its aspects. Philosopher, Critic, Moralist, Poet, would give it voice according to cast of genius. It would present in turn all the phases of idealism, and to the outside spectator seem a mass of wild opinions; but running through all was the belief in the Living God in the Soul, faith in immediate inspiration, in boundless possibility, and in unimaginable good.

The editors and reviewers of its day could make nothing of it. The most entertaining part of the present writer's task has been the reading of articles on Transcendentalism in the contemporaneous magazines. The reviewers were unable to resist the temptation to make themselves ridiculous. The quarterlies and monthlies are before me, looking as if they resented the exposure of their dusty and musty condition, and would conceal if they could the baldness of their wit. It would be cruel to exhume those antique judgments, so honest, yet so imbecile and so mistaken. The

doubts and misgivings, the bitternesses and the horrors, the sinkings of heart and the revolvings of soul may be estimated by any who will consult the numbers of the *Christian Examiner*, the *Biblical Repository*, the *Princeton Review*, the *New Englander*, the *Whig Review*, *Knickerbocker*, (*Knickerbocker* is especially facetious), but we advise none to do it who would retain their respect for honor able names. The writers, let us hope, did the best they knew, and it would be unkind to expose the theological prejudice, the polemical acrimony, the narrowness and flippancy they would have been ashamed of had they been aware of it.

A good example of the courteous kind of injustice may be found in the *Christian Examiner* for January, 1837, in a review of "Nature" from the pen of a Cambridge Professor, who writes in a kindly spirit and with an honest intention to be fair to a movement with which he had no intellectual sympathy:

"The aim of the Transcendentalists is high. They profess to look not only beyond facts, but, without the aid of facts, to principles. What is this but Plato's doctrine of innate, eternal and immutable ideas on the consideration of which all science is founded ? Truly, the human mind advances but too often in a circle. The New School has abandoned Bacon, only to go back and wander in the groves of the Academy, and to bewilder themselves with the dreams which first arose in the fervid imagination of the Greeks. Without questioning the desirableness of this end, of considering general truths without any previous examination of particulars, we may well doubt the power of modern philosophers to attain it. Again, they are busy in the enquiry (to adopt

their own phraseology) after the Real and Absolute, as distinguished from the Apparent. Not to repeat the same doubt as to their success, we may at least request them to beware lest they strip the truth of its relation to Humanity, and thus deprive it of its usefulness.”

We quote this passage not merely to show how inevitably the best intentioned critics of Transcendentalism fell into sarcasm, nor to illustrate the species of error into which the “ Sensational “ philosophy betrayed even can did minds; but to call attention to another point, namely, the general misconception of the practical aims and purposes of the new school. It was a common prejudice that Transcendentalists were visionaries and enthusiasts, who in pursuit of principles neglected duties, and while seeking for The Real and The Absolute forgot the actual and the relative. Macaulay puts the case strongly in his article on Lord Bacon:

“To sum up the whole; we should say that the aim of the Platonic philosophy was to exalt man into a God. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to provide man with what he requires while he continues to be man. The aim of the Platonic philosophy was to raise us far above vulgar wants. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to supply our wants. The former aim was noble; but the latter was attainable. Plato drew a good bow; but, like Acestes in Virgil, he aimed at the stars; and though there was no want of strength and skill, the shot was thrown away. Bacon fixed his eye on a mark which was placed on the earth, and within bow shot, and hit it in the white. The philosophy of Plato began in words and ended in words noble

words indeed; words such as were to be expected from the finest of human intellects exercising boundless control over the finest of human languages. The philosophy of Bacon began in observations and ended in arts. The smallest actual good is better than the most magnificent promises of impossibilities. The truth is, that in those very matters for the sake of which they neglected all the vulgar interests of mankind, the ancient philosophers did nothing or worse than nothing they promised what was impracticable; they despised what was practicable; they filled the world with long words and long beards; and they left it as wicked and as ignorant as they found it."

Substitute Idealism for Platonism, and Transcendentalists for ancient philosophers, and this expresses the judgment of "sensible men" of the last generation, on Transcendentalism. It was not perceived that the two schools of philosophy aimed at producing the same results, but by different methods; that the "Sensationalist" worked up from beneath by material processes, while the "Idealist" worked downward from above by intellectual ones; that the former tried to push men up by mechanical appliances, and the latter endeavored to draw them up by spiritual attraction; that while the disciples of Bacon operated on man as if he was a complex animal, a creature of nature and of circumstances, who was borne along with the material progress of the planet, but had no independent power of flight, the disciples of Kant and Fichte assumed that man was a creative, recreative force, a being who had only to be conscious of the capacities within him to shape circumstances according to the pattern shown him on the Mount. The charge of shooting at stars is puerile. The

only use they would make of stars was to “hitch wagons” to them. The Transcendentalists of New England were the most strenuous [*sic*] workers of their day, and at the problems which the day flung down before them. The most strenuous and the most successful workers too. They achieved more practical benefit for society, in proportion to their numbers and the duration of their existence, than any body of Baconians of whom we ever heard. Men and women are healthier in their bodies, happier in their domestic and social relations, more contented in their estate, more ambitious to enlarge their opportunities, more eager to acquire knowledge, more kind and humane in their sympathies, more reasonable in their expectations, than they would have been if Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker and George Ripley and Bronson Alcott, and the rest of their fellow believers and fellow workers had not lived. It is the fashion of our generation to hold that progress is, and must of necessity be, exceedingly gradual; and that no safe advance is ever made except at snail’s pace. But ever and anon the mind of man refutes the notion by starting under the influence of a thought, and leaping over long reaches of space at a bound. Transcendentalism gave one of these demonstrations, sufficient to refute the vulgar prejudice. Its brief history may have illustrated the truth of Wordsworth’s lines,

“That ‘tis a thing impossible to frame
Conceptions equal to the Soul’s desires;
And the most difficult of tasks to keep
Heights which the Soul is competent to gain.”

The heights were gained nevertheless, and kept long enough for a view of the land of promise; and ever since, though the ascent is a dim recollection, and the great forms have come to look like images in dreams, and the mighty voices are but ghostly echoes, men and women have been happy in laboring for the heaven their fathers believed they saw.

-
- A Note on the Text: from *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* by Octavius Brooks Frothingham (New York: G.O. Putnam's Sons, 1876) pp. 105-141
 - Website: www.walden.org/institute
 - Please report errors to the [Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods](#)