

ELIZABETH PEABODY AND HER *ÆSTHETIC PAPERS*

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TEXT PREPARED BY THE THOREAU INSTITUTE AT WALDEN WOODS

04.12.2007

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Whatever the attitude of the transcendentalists as intimates of a domestic circle, *sub specie æternitatis*, so to speak, they were ardent believers in the rights of women. In this respect, perhaps, they were merely in harmony with the general trend of enlightened opinion during the nineteenth century. Indeed, so far as literature was concerned, even the unenlightened could not fail to appreciate the conquests made by the “damned mob of scribbling women,” as Hawthorne dubbed them, or the “female poets” whose names appear in the collections of Griswold and others. When Poe delivered himself of such a eulogy as his essay on Mrs. Osgood, he may have shown himself to be, like any good journalist, a reflector of public taste, rather than a wholly misguided lover of female charms. Be that as it may, although many a young lady among the literary aspirants of the forties might have confessed with pride that she was a transcendentalist, the inner circle of the New School was blessed with an intimate association with only two Blue Stockings: Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody.

A romantic death and the services of friendly biographers have combined to make the first of these ladies a person of great importance to an age which finds a delight in “historical personalities who never existed.” One who does not read Margaret Fuller’s literary effusions might easily be led to believe that she was a critic of unusual discernment, simply because of the tradition which has been built up around her memory. Elizabeth Peabody has not been so kindly dealt with by posterity. Hers was the placid domestic life of a New England nun. Yet in her long career she managed to

identify herself with most of the activities—philosophical, social, or religious—that the transcendentalists engaged in. In her later days she was familiarly spoken of as “the Grandmother of Boston.” Emerson, who had taught her Greek, observed that her journals and correspondence would probably be “a complete literary and philosophical history of New England during her long life.”¹

Theodore Parker’s journal contains a passage which contrasts the two women. In 1839, after receiving a call from Margaret Fuller, he wrote:

She has outgrown Carlyle; thinks him inferior to Coleridge. I doubt this much. She says Coleridge will live and Carlyle be forgot. I am glad she has outgrown him,—I wish the world had. Miss Fuller is a critic, not a creator,—not a *vates*, I fear. Certainly she is a prodigious woman, though she puts herself upon her genius a little too much. She is not a good analyst, not a philosopher.

Several days later he was visited by Miss Peabody, and recorded his impressions as follows:

She is a woman of most astonishing powers; has a manysidedness and a largeness of soul quite unusual; rare qualities of head and heart. I never before knew just with what class to place her; now I see she is a Boswell. Her office is to inquire and answer, “What did they say?”

¹ M. D. Conway, *Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, London, 1890, p. 10. Elizabeth Peabody lived from 1804 to 1894.

“What are the facts?” A good analyst of character, a free spirit, kind, generous, noble. She has an artistic gift also.²

As the sister-in-law of Hawthorne and of Horace Mann, Elizabeth Peabody was naturally thrown in contact with the leading figures in the New England renaissance. With the transcendentalists her connections were the closest of any woman.³ In 1825 she lived in the home of the Apostle of Unitarianism, acting as his amanuensis, and recording many of his conversations, which she later included in a volume entitled *Reminiscences of Reverend William Ellery Channing, D.D.*, published in 1880. In 1826, the “first year of her intellectual life,” according to her own statement, she became a transcendentalist. As she wrote to Brownson, she had never seen the word “transcendentalism” before that time except in Coleridge’s *Friend*, through the perusal of which, “relying simply on her own poetical apprehension as a principle of exegesis,” she became one of the New School.⁴ She corresponded with all of the important exponents of the New Spirit, attended their club meetings,⁵ and proved herself worthy of their friendship by a wholehearted devotion to their interests. She was Alcott’s mainstay in his chief educational enterprise, and by writing *The Record of a School* (1835) and *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (1836-1837) she gave to the

² F. B. Sanborn, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, Boston, 1909, II, 548. For Carlyle’s reaction to Margaret Fuller, see *Carlyle-Emerson Correspondence*, ed. C. Norton, Boston, 1883, II, 125.

³ A good sketch of her life may be found in G. W. Cooke’s *Historical and Biographical Introduction to Accompany the Dial*, Rowfant Club Reprint, 1902, I, cap. IX.

⁴ H. F. Brownson, *Orestes A. Brownson’s Early Life*, Detroit, 1898, p. 227. See, for example, Emerson’s *Journals*, IV, 292 (1837).

⁵ See, for example, Emerson’s *Journals*, IV, 292 (1837).

world perhaps the most adequate expression of the rare genius of the mystic-pedagogue.

Alcott in turn honored her with one of his bleak poems:

Daughter of Memory! who her watch doth keep
O'er dark Oblivion's land of shade and dream,
Peers down into the realm of ancient Sleep,
Where Thought uprises with a sudden gleam
And lights the devious path 'twixt *Be* and *Seem*;
Mythologist! that dost thy legend steep
Plenteously with opiate and anodyne,
Inweaving fact with fable, line with line,
Entangling anecdote and episode,
Mindful of all that all men meant or said,—
We follow, pleased, thy labyrinthine road,
By Ariadne's skein and lesson led:
For thou hast wrought so excellently well,
Thou drop'st more casual truth than sages tell. ⁶

As early as 1833 she offered a series of "conversations" to the public,⁷ preceding Margaret Fuller by a half dozen years. In 1839 she opened a bookstore at 13 West Street in Boston, where the transcendentalists, and later the Brook Farmers, occasionally met. During the next year she started a "Foreign Library," with fifty subscribers, a number soon increased as her

⁶ A. B. Alcott, *Sonnets and Canzonets*, Boston, 1882, p. 103.

⁷ Other series of "conversations" were given by her in 1836, 1844 and 1845 (Henry Barnard's *American Journal of Education*, Hartford, XXX, 584 ff.).

shop became the center of interest in foreign literature in Boston.⁸ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, for example, came to her library to further his acquaintance with the writings of Cousin and Constant.⁹ Her experiences with the bookstore soon led her into the publishing business, and she brought out numerous volumes, including several by Charming, Hawthorne, and herself.

The public at large, however, was never interested in her various activities until she became known as an educator. She was the founder of one of the first kindergartens in America, and, in later years, was recognized as the chief disciple of Froebel, whose system she elaborated in several tracts. Even the Concord School of Philosophy found a place for her opinions on “Childhood” during its sessions for 1882.¹⁰ But in spite of all her practical pursuits Elizabeth Peabody managed to produce an occasional article of merit, and to invite her soul into the realms of art and philosophy. Alcott’s sonnet could not have been wholly subjective.

As may be remembered from previous chapters of the present volume, she was the distributor of *The Western Messenger* in New England, and wrote for *The Boston Quarterly Review* and, more notably, perhaps, *The Dial*, which she published for a time. To the later periodicals of transcendentalism she also contributed. But her chief importance in the history of the journalistic adventures of the New School is due to her attempt to establish a magazine for the literary epicures of New England.

⁸ See a broadside, “New Bookstore and Foreign Library,” August 1, 1840, in the library of the Mass. Hist. Soc. French magazines and books seem to have attracted more attention in this notice than their German counterparts.

⁹ T. W. Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays*, Boston and New York, 1900, pp. 86-87.

¹⁰ See the abstract of her lecture in *Concord Lectures on Philosophy*, ed. R. L. Bridgman, Cambridge, n.d. (1886).

Only one number of the *Æsthetic Papers*, as the work was called, appeared in May, 1849.

A prospectus,¹¹ with the customary idealism, announced that the editor desired to assemble, “upon the high aesthetic ground,” removed from the regions of strife, the products of writers of different schools in order that the antagonistic views of philosophy and social culture prevailing in the fields of religion, science, and literature might be harmonized. “The white radiance of love and wisdom” was to be evolved from the union of “many-colored rays.” “Good matter” was to be the prime requisite for the material published. More practical considerations were presented, rather ingenuously, in the following:

The plan of publication for this Work is like that of *The British and Foreign Review*, which has been the model of its form, size, and type; namely, that a number should appear whenever a sufficient quantity of valuable matter shall have accumulated to fill 256 pages. This will in no case happen more than three times a year; perhaps not oftener than once a year.

The terms of patronage proposed are peculiar to itself. No person is asked to subscribe for more than one number in advance; but whoever is so far pleased with the current number as to desire another is requested to send an order to that effect to the Editor, who is also Publisher, No. 13, West-street, Boston. When a sufficient number of orders are given to pay for the publication, including compensation to the authors, a new number will be printed; the

¹¹ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. iii and iv.

Editor being content to receive such profit as may accrue from the sale of other numbers not subscribed for beforehand. The Publisher's subscribers will have the numbers at \$1, payable on delivery. The price at the bookstores will be \$1.25.

A letter from the editor's mother to Hawthorne's wife, written soon after the appearance of the *Æsthetic Papers*, mentions the fact that "one gentleman" had subscribed for three numbers of the next volume, and that Elizabeth Peabody would clear \$400, should the entire edition be sold.¹² But in spite of the praise bestowed upon the work by various local papers,¹³ only fifty subscribers were secured,¹⁴ and most of the issue met the same fate as Thoreau's *Week*, which also undertook to supply the New England of 1849 with literature of artistic merit beyond that of journalistic accounts of the riots at the Opera House in New York or the woefully written epistles of immigrants to California.

In an introductory essay on "The Word Esthetic"¹⁵ the editor explained her idea of the philosophy of art. The "aesthetic element" she believed to be "a component and indivisible part in all human creations which are not mere works of necessity, in other words, which are based on idea, as distinguished from appetite." Since the German mind first approximated the "impersonal principle that underlies the æsthetic view," Germany was hailed by her as the "discoverer of the æsthetic." All art, she

¹² Julian Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife*, Boston, 1885, I, 332.

¹³ For example, the *Boston Daily Evening Traveller* for May 22, 1849; and *The Salem Gazette* for May 18, 1849.

¹⁴ G. W. Cooke, *op. cit.*, I, 193.

¹⁵ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. 1-4.

believed, was, in its origin, national and religious. Feeling was of far greater importance than the vehicle whereby it is conveyed. In the first stage of art “the æsthetic element prevailed unconsciously,” since neither taste nor artistic philosophy has any conscious place in an uncritical age. After numerous assertions of the nature of the examples already given, she expressed her purpose of using the word “æsthetic” as a kind of shibboleth, to designate “that phase in human progress which subordinates the individual to the general, that he may reappear on a higher plane of individuality.”

Needless to say, this introductory disquisition was unlikely to attract popular interest for the periodical, and its decidedly heavy nature indicates clearly that a very unusual type of reader was expected from the outset. Upon comparing the sturdy qualities of the *Æsthetic Papers* with such a collection of drivel as *The Boston Miscellanies*, which held public attention during 1849, one is amazed at the extreme temerity which led Elizabeth Peabody to tempt fate.

The first article in the *Papers* was somewhat similar in nature to the introductory essay—a discussion of “Criticism” by Samuel G. Ward, the friend of Longfellow and Emerson, whose connections with *The Massachusetts Quarterly Review* will be discussed in the following chapter. He denounced the critics who vaunted American productions merely because they were American, and proceeded to descant upon the inventive spirit of the Greeks. He, too, believed that the Germans first manifested a “pure tendency towards criticism,” and insisted upon the presence of a national element in all artistic productions. The essence of criticism, according to Ward, was merely

To see what has taken place in the world under a new point of view; to find a point from which facts arrange themselves in a new and unexpected manner, so that circumstances, before isolated, are seen as part of a new whole.¹⁶

As a consequence, he argued, there is such a thing as creative criticism.

An aid to the transcendentalist confronted by the facts of science was suggested in the article. There are two distinct appearances of truth, its author asserted: "truths of exact science, and truths of faith." Accordingly, a different form of criticism must be distinguished for each.

A faith is the sum of the convictions of a man, or a nation, in regard to spiritual things; its form is based on the teachings of the past; and its criticism rests on inward, individual experience. When it criticizes facts, it is from an internal point of view, and because they disagree with inward experience; no fact becomes monstrous whilst it is the sign of an inward conviction. . . . Exact science . . . rests on a correct observation of phenomena; its safety lies in admitting nothing which is not capable of demonstration or proof. It is based upon doubt.¹⁷

One may question whether Alcott would have agreed without a reservation. However, as future developments proved, such a comfortable dichotomy as

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Ward proposed would have saved many of the later members of the New School from the numerous perplexities in which they were involved when the criticism of science began to dissect the philosophy of intuition.

The second article was elevated to an equally lofty plane. It was entitled "Music," and was written by John Sullivan Dwight. As might have been expected of a man who had shown himself such an ardent member of the Brook Farm community, he could not avoid injecting Fourier's principle of "Unity" into his discussion of the art of Beethoven.¹⁸ If any literary product can be said to apply the faith of transcendentalism, to music, this essay certainly does. Moreover, its undeniable merit as a literary performance makes it one of the more significant contributions of the man who is remembered as the first important musical critic in the United States.

Following the contribution of Dwight there appeared Emerson's lecture on "War,"¹⁹ which had been obtained for the work "at much solicitation," since its author had not looked at it since the time of its first delivery, in March, 1838. The text is the same as that to be found in the eleventh volume of the Centenary Edition of Emerson's works.

The next contribution to the periodical was an extract from an unpublished course of lectures by Parke Godwin, bearing the title, "Organization."²⁰ This sociological treatise provided a kind of pseudo-philosophy upon which the superstructure of Fourierism might have been reared. Beneath most of its generalities one may see the idea of "Universal Unity," so familiar to the readers of *The Harbinger* or *The Spirit of the Age*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31. Ward also had mentioned a doctrine of Fourier in his article (*ibid.*, p. 18).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-58..

However, there is no direct advocacy of the scheme of the French reformer, and the whole lies in the realm of the ideal a fact which no doubt accounts for its presence in the *Papers*.

Immediately after Godwin's article there was printed a lecture on "Genius"²¹ by Sampson Reed, the Swedenborgian whose influence upon Emerson has been pointed out with no little emphasis. Indeed, Mr. G. Sutcliffe has asserted that until Emerson perused Reed's *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*, "nature had been for him suspected and pagan."²² Dr. C. P. Hotson has declared that it was Reed who "gave the first definite impulse .which led to Emerson's literary career."²³ The lecture on "Genius" had been delivered by its author as an oration at the commencement of 1821, when Harvard admitted him to the degree of Master of Arts.²⁴ It was probably at college that Reed made an impression upon Emerson, which remained for a surprisingly long time, since he frequently quoted from the works of Swedenborgian. For example, it has been asserted that six of the entries in Emerson's journals, "by quotation or direct reference," are based upon the oration on "Genius."²⁵ One might suppose that Emerson was responsible for its appearance in the *Æsthetic Papers*, if the general interest manifested by most of the transcendentalists in the doctrines of the New Church were not to be considered. Miss Peabody herself was keenly excited by Swedenborgianism, and one of the passages in Emerson's journal for 1835

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-64.

²² *Emerson's Theories of Literary Expression*, U. of Ill. diss., 1918, p. 129. For Brownson's reaction to Reed's book, see *The Boston Quarterly Review*, I, 385.

²³ "Sampson Reed, A Teacher of Emerson," *The New England Quarterly*, II, 249.

²⁴ *The New Jerusalem Magazine*, New Series, IV (1880), 286.

²⁵ C P. Hotson, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

consists of remarks about the great mystic which had first been written to her.²⁶

An excerpt from the lecture will suffice to show why its utterance in 1821 must have seemed remarkable to the people who were shortly to be called the New School:

Science will be full of life, as nature is full of God. She will wring from her locks the dew which was gathered in the wilderness. By science, I mean natural science. The science of the human mind must change with its subject. Locke's mind will not always be the standard of metaphysics. Had we a description of it in its present state, it would make a very different book from "Locke on the Human Understanding."²⁷

The next article to appear in the *Æsthetic Papers* was a lengthy essay on "The Dorian Measure, with a Modern Application," written by the editor herself.²⁸ This was an elaborate exposition of Doric cultural and social ideas, based largely upon a reading of various works by K. O. Mulier, a contemporary classicist. The application of these Hellenic principles to a modern system of education concluded the work. Miss Peabody, like

²⁶ Emerson's *Journals*, III, 530.

²⁷ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. 63-64. Paulding expressed the usual attitude toward Locke during the early decades of the nineteenth century when he asserted that his chief work was "the only analysis of the human understanding which the human understanding was ever able to comprehend" (*Westward Ho!* 1832, cap. VI).

²⁸ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. 64-110. In an unpublished letter to Parke Godwin, April 20, 1854, Miss Peabody referred to this essay as if it were her chief literary composition (Bryant-Godwin Collection in the New York Public Library).

Alcott,²⁹ insisted that gymnastics, music, drawing, and dancing should constitute a part of every educational curriculum. Her diffuseness of style, however, probably hindered an appreciation of her point of view, so novel as it must have been to the dusty formality of the pedagogues of her day.

Immediately following in the volume were two poems: "Crawford's Orpheus," and "A Spirit's Reply." The former, also written by Miss Peabody, is the closest approach to a discussion of plastic art to be found in the *Æsthetic Papers*.

Next came an explanation of the Swedenborgian doctrine of "Correspondences," by James J. G. Wilkinson, who, it may be remembered, had written foreign news for *The Harbinger*. His discussion is not marked by a particularly lucid explanation of the necessity for a belief in the doctrine which he was elaborating} and parts of it seem to be nothing more than an indication of the sad results of riding the horse of symbolism too far. One may well object to such nonsense as the following despite the dire seriousness with which it was written:

Then the abdomen is the natural kitchen of the soul, raising to sublimity the processes of the gastrosophic art; preparing from all things in its indefinite stores one universal dish, lower than cookery, higher than philosophy, even the natural blood of life, to be served up day by day in repasts for the spiritual man: the viand of viands, solid and fluid all in one. . . .³⁰

²⁹ She disagreed with Alcott on certain matters, however (cf. F. B. Sanborn, *op. cit.*, II, 559).

³⁰ *Æsthetic Papers*, p. 125.

A striking contrast to Wilkinson's effusion is presented by the contribution that followed it, written by the greatest master of symbolism in the history of American literature. In view of the close relationship that existed between Elizabeth Peabody and Hawthorne, it was only natural that one of his works should grace the pages of the *Æsthetic Papers*. In December, 1848, Hawthorne sent a story for the new periodical, apparently "Ethan Brand." But, if we are to trust his son's conjecture, the tale was "too lurid for Miss Peabody's æstheticism,"³¹ and "Main Street" was substituted.³² This exploitation of the history of Essex Street in Salem was without question the most highly praised contribution to appear in the volume.

Second to Hawthorne's sketch in its appeal to the reviewers of the *Æsthetic Papers* was an article on "Abuse of Representative Government,"³³ by S. H. Perkins, a Boston merchant who was a promoter of a variety of reforms, ranging from the amelioration of the condition of the poor to the pensioning of disabled soldiers. He had been sent to Germany to be educated under the guidance of Edward Everett, a fact which alone would have made him welcome to the transcendentalists.³⁴

After *The Dial* had ceased to mark the spiritual hours of New England, Thoreau carefully avoided publication in any periodicals of a kindred sort. It has been pointed out that Parker and Lowell cherished a decidedly poor opinion of his literary ability, and their judgment may also have been responsible for the absence of material from his pen in the journals of the New School. However, not even the perversely disposed naturalist could

³¹ Julia Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, I, 330.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 174-188.

³³ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. 145-174.

³⁴ T. W. Higginson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

refuse Elizabeth Peabody a favor,³⁵ and, as a consequence, her *Papers* included his lecture on “Resistance to Civil Government,”³⁶ which he had delivered in 1847. This is the work, later given the title “Civil Disobedience,” which contains its author’s account of his imprisonment in the Concord jail.

Two poems followed the contribution of the “born dissenter”: “Hymn of a Spirit Shrouded,” by Ellen Sturgis Hooper, one of the minor writers for *The Dial*, and “Meditations of a Widow.”³⁷ Miss Peabody placed next her own remarks on “Language,”³⁸ which were prompted by a treatise of Horace Bushnell, who had shortly before received the full blast of ‘orthodox’ criticism on account of his views concerning the Trinity.

The last essay in the volume dealt with the “Vegetation about Salem, Massachusetts,”³⁹ and was written by an English resident of that village. It is important only in that it was one of the earlier efforts to interest the public in reforestation. At the very end of the *Æsthetic Papers* were two poems: “The Twofold Being,” by Higginson, and “The Favorite,” by his sister Louisa.⁴⁰ These verses, like the others in the work, scarcely emerged above the level of journalistic mediocrity.

Although Elizabeth Peabody had intimated in the prospectus of the *Æsthetic Papers* that she desired to bring together the literary offerings of different schools of thought, her purpose was not carried out, since,

³⁵ See her letter to Thoreau, dated Feb. 26, 1843 (F. B. Sanborn, *op. cit.*, II, 560).

³⁶ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. 189-211.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-214.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 214-224. With the exception of the introductory essay all of Elizabeth Peabody’s work in her periodical is reprinted in her volume, *Last Evening with Allston and Other Papers*, Boston, n.d. (1886).

³⁹ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. 224-245. This essay was reprinted in *The Salem Gazette* for May 19 and May 22, 1849.

⁴⁰ *Æsthetic Papers*, pp. 245-248.

exclusive of herself, five of the writers for her periodical had earlier contributed to *The Dial*: Emerson, Thoreau, Ward, Dwight, and Ellen Hooper. As a consequence, very probably, her project failed, for public interest was never aroused over transcendentalism save as a matter of religious controversy. It is a bitter indictment of American taste during the forties that a journal containing important works by three of the outstanding figures in our literary history should have failed as soon as it made its first appearance.

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