

## CHAPTER IV

### TRANSCENDENTALISM — EMERSON CORRESPONDENCE

IN regard to the meaning of the word "Transcendentalism," we find a letter about this time to Mr. Cranch's father, who had undoubtedly read the charges against the "New Views" and Professor Andrews Norton's pamphlet reprinting two articles by two divines of the Presbyterian Church, — Drs. Alexander and Dod, — where "an exposition of Cousin's philosophy" and the German transcendental philosophy were "arraigned," says Mr. Lindsay Swift, in his interesting book on "Brook Farm."

The young Transcendentalist writes:—

QUINCY, MASS., July 11, 1840.

MY DEAR FATHER:—

I received your letter of the 6th by Mr. Green, day before yesterday, and reply to it immediately on my return to Quincy.

You express alarm at intimations you have received, that I am "inclined to the Transcendental sentiments of the German theologist's," and refer to a statement of "Transcendentalism" in the "Examiner." The article in the "Examiner" I have not seen, and indeed must confess that I know very little about this system of philosophy. So far, however, as I do know anything about it, I can assure you, that it neither recommends itself to my mind nor heart. The philosophy of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, etc., which is what I suppose to be the

Transcendental philosophy, has always, from the very slight idea I have of it, struck me as a cold, barren system of Idealism, not calculated to strengthen the soul's faith in the external realities of the spiritual world, or enable it as a perfect philosophy should, to give a reason for the hope that is in us; although to some minds it may have this effect. However that may be, and however these Germans distinguished themselves as profound thinkers and acute reasoners, I am very certain that to my mind, a philosophy quite opposite to theirs has far greater recommendations. Though not much inclined to metaphysical studies, I have found great truths in the philosophy of Victor Cousin and his school, who seems to stand between both Locke and Kant, the two extremes. I will only say that while Kant's system seems to me to leave the soul without any certain power of knowing the great truths of God, duty, revelation, etc., Cousin expressly contends for a religious element in the soul; a faculty breathed into us by God Himself, whereby we become surer of the existence of such great truths than of anything else. He grounds faith on what is deepest in the soul. And his philosophy is spiritual; is religious in the highest degree, for it effectually removes the possibility of skepticism by proving man to be created a religious being, a being who has an inner light, which can never be entirely quenched, whereby he acquires a knowledge of God and duty and spiritual things.

But somehow the name "Transcendentalist" has become a nick-name here for all who have broken away from the material philosophy of Locke, and the old theology of many of the early Unitarians, and who yearn for something more satisfying to the soul. It has almost become a synonym for one who, in whatever way, preaches the spirit rather than the letter.

The name has been more particularly applied to Mr. Emerson, or those who believe in or sympathize with him. Mr. Emerson has been said to have imported his doctrine from Germany. But the fact is, that no man stands more independently of other minds than he does. He seems to me very far from Kant or Fichte. His writings breathe the very spirit of religion and faith. Whatever his speculations may be, there is nothing in anything he says, which is inconsistent with Christianity.

I can assure you that my faith is as strong as it ever was, in the truth and the divine origin of Christianity. I believe that no man ever was inspired, spoke, or lived like Jesus Christ. What my intellect receives must accord with the blessed revelation to my heart and conscience. God cannot utter two voices.

It is convenient to have a name which may cover all those who contend for perfect freedom, who look for progress in philosophy and theology, and who sympathize with each other in the hope that the future will not always be as the past. The name "Transcendentalist" seems to be thus fixed upon all who profess to be on the movement side, however they may differ among themselves. But union in sympathy differs from union in belief. Since we cannot avoid names, I prefer the term "New School" to the other long name. This could comprehend all free seekers after truth, however their opinions differ.

All Unitarians should be of this school, but I must confess that there are several of the Orthodox who more properly belong to it than do many Unitarians. There is certainly an old and a new school of Unitarianism.

His belief was more fully and decidedly expressed, a little later, in his journal: "Men will never agree

about the fundamentals of Christianity as long as they are possessed with the idea that Christ came to teach a system of doctrines. The only steadfast ground to be taken is that Christ came as a spiritual reformer, not as an instituter of new doctrines."

In his journal he speaks of having consigned to the flames twenty-four of his sermons, saying that others would soon follow. He thus states his growth from the old ideas to the new: "They are old clothes. I feel myself too large to get into them again. I do not stand where I stood a year ago."

Lindsay Swift in his "Brook Farm" says:—

The appearance of Cranch at Brook Farm was always an event. This uncircumscribed genius, by his very presence, made everybody forget the dilapidated condition of the parlor furniture at the Hive; and by his singing, which he himself accompanied either with guitar or piano, he contrived to infuse an atmosphere of affluence into the place which lent grace and elegance to this little world. Curtis says that he became simultaneously acquainted with Cranch and Schubert; for Cranch had made a manuscript copy of the "Serenade," which he sang with such deep feeling as to move sensibly his audience; and when, on his first visit to the Farm, he sang the ballad "Here's a health to ane I lo'e dear," tears were the tribute from some who heard him. His powers of entertainment were almost unlimited: he had a good baritone voice; he played piano, guitar, flute, or violin as the occasion came; he read from his own poems or travesties; and his ventriloquism, which embraced all the sounds of nature and of mechanical devices, from the denizens of the barnyard to the shriek of the railway locomotive, held the younger members spellbound with amusement, or led to loud expressions of approval.

In personal appearance he was of the picturesque type of beauty, with much dark, curling hair, a broad forehead, delicately cut features, and great sensitiveness of expression. Tall, slight, and graceful, he was an alluring presence at all times, and especially when, as at Brook Farm, his imagination was kindled and his sympathies strongest.

Another glimpse of Mr. Cranch at Brook Farm is given in "Years of Experience," by Georgiana Bruce Kirby: —

On the dreariest of winter days, when the sleet and biting wind detained at the Hive the few women who had ventured down the hill to supper, and caused quite a bustle in the kitchen, putting up meals for those who had remained behind, the omnibus arrived with no less a person than C. P. Cranch, the preacher, poet, musician, and painter. How a simple, affluent individual puts one at ease! We apologize to the impoverished and dull-witted alone. The furniture of the little reception room was beginning to look exceedingly shabby, but I am sure no one noticed the fact, when that evening, our visitor sang to the notes of his guitar: —

"Here's a health to ane I lo'e dear."

"Take thou, where thou dost glide,  
This deep-dyed rose, O river," —

melting to tears the more susceptible of his sympathetic audience. That night no one of us doubted that we, who were permitted to hear, were the most favored of the gods. No after quartettes on the violin, in which Mr. Cranch took part; no weird passages from the Erl King, with mysterious, awe-inspiring piano accompaniment; no charming caricatures from his notebook of "The Experience of the Child Christopher down East,"

or of the Harvard mill grinding out ministers, could efface the tender impression made by the ballads which he sang in the poor little parlor on that first evening.

Mr. Cranch was invited to deliver a poem at the two hundredth anniversary of the incorporation of the town of Quincy at the First Church, May 25, 1840.

“The spell of Beauty is upon the hills,  
The fields, the forest, and the leaping rills,  
For Spring hath breathed upon us, and the hours  
Move to the dial of the budding flowers.  
Joy to ye, leaves and blossoms — ye are springing  
Fast to the melodies around you ringing:  
New life, new thought, midst tame and common things.”

Then he speaks of the contrast, the sternness, the barrenness of the scene, and of the Pilgrim Fathers, of their high aims, and deep religious cult.

In another measure comes a very devout “Hymn of the Pilgrims”: —

“Hear us, almighty Father!  
No light but thy great eye above us shines!  
Darker and darker gather  
The shades of twilight through the moaning pines —  
Hear while we pray!

“Hear us, thou great Jehovah!  
When, wandering through the tangled wilderness,  
Cloud after cloud goes over,  
Forsake us not in our loneliness!  
Shield us to-night!

“Guard us from every danger,  
Thou, who hast ever been our sun and shield,  
When trials deeper and stranger  
Swept o’er us, as the wind sweeps o’er the field!  
O guard us still!

“From the wild foeman’s arrow —  
From the dread pestilence that walks unseen —

From sickness and from sorrow,  
And more than all, from hearts and lips unclean,  
Save us, O God!

“And unto thee, great Spirit,  
All that we are and have would we commit; —  
Not for thy children’s merit,  
But through thy own free grace, so clearly writ,  
Keep us, we pray!”

The poem goes on to speak of the superstition, narrowness, and even ignorance, contrasted with the better forms of a later religion. He cannot resist contrasting that older faith with more liberal ideas.

The poem is rather long, but there are some fine verses in it. It is not “stuff,” as he has written to his friend John Dwight. Mr. Cranch had that *mauvaise honte* which never appreciated himself, especially in those early days. It was sent to his friend Miss Julia Myers who marked in it the best verses. In another place I find, “How like C. P. C.”; and at the end, “Très bien, mon ami Christophe!” in her handwriting.

*To Miss Julia Myers*

QUINCY, May 29, 1840.

. . . I have been for over five weeks in Portland, supplying Dr. Nichols’s pulpit during his absence in the South. Have you seen anything of him? I enjoyed myself hugely in Portland. Saw a good deal of society, visited, went to parties, renewed old acquaintances, and formed new ones, sang everywhere, and was quite a lion in this way, *pro tem*. Portland for society, of ladies especially, is one of the pleasantest places I ever was in. I had a golden time there. . . . I came away to attend the Centennial celebration in Quincy. It was the two

hundredth anniversary of the naming of the original town of Braintree, the old name of Quincy, on which occasion I delivered a poem. We had a great day of it, — orations, processions, music, dinner of six or seven hundred persons under a large pavilion, toasts, sentiments, speeches, etc., etc. Things went off generally very well. Reverend George Whitney's discourse was excellent. Of your humble servant's performances it behooveth not me to speak; but they seemed to please, and I think parts of the poem are quite respectable. It did well enough to deliver. The season is charming here now. I never saw trees and fields so luxuriantly green. Fruits we have none yet, — a few flowers. With you it is hottest summer. Do you not envy us Yankees one or two of our East winds occasionally?

*To John S. Dwight*

QUINCY, MASS., June 19, 1840.

. . . And now let me recall your letter. I thank you for your account of your delightful environment. You seem to be in a paradise. Verily I would I could be with you a few days. I must try to manage it this summer. I hear so much of Northampton, and know nothing of it. But I, too, have been in Arcady this spring and summer. In this leafy month of June, I can sit in the old hall of my father's,<sup>1</sup> surrounded by old whispering ancestral trees — and hear the birds — singing forever. The singing of the birds is all new to me this year. It seems as if I had never listened to them before.

I mean soon to visit Emerson, and he shall impart some knowledge of the different "wandering voices" which fill the air and woods.

<sup>1</sup> The old Cranch and Greenleaf home in Quincy.

*To John S. Dwight*

QUINCY, November 20, 1840.

... I have just returned from Hingham. I walked over yesterday morning, attended church and communion, and preached for Mr. Stearns in the afternoon, and in the evening we had a rather interesting conversation meeting in a schoolroom, where there were, I should think, one hundred persons. I thought it something remarkable, a sign of life at least, that so large an assembly should come voluntarily to a conversation on religious subjects. Mr. Stearns has great influence, love and respect among the people there, and it seems to spring simply from his entire simplicity, truthfulness, and earnestness. He is perfectly transparent, and has such a plain, direct, solemn way of speaking from the heart to the heart, that he seems to win everybody. Both in pulpit and parlor he is completely independent and fearless. He has all the spirit of a reformer; is quite transcendental, though he preaches Christ more prominently than some of us; is deeply alive to the evils of our present religious and social institutions, and ready to be one of the first to attempt change and renovation therein, in the sphere of his influence. I don't know where I have met a more liberal and earnest soul. There is no sham about him, depend upon it, — no dark cobwebbed corners. You might turn him inside out and find him everywhere clean.

“On every side he open was as day  
That you might see no lack of strength within.”

... I have dreamed, really dreamed in sleep, of Northampton several times since I left. My visit there seems to have enlarged and embellished my possessions and estate in dreamland considerably. It was a good speculation that way, — my going up to see you. I as-

sure you I have beautiful dreams of you all sometimes, but so shadowy, — so vague. I have a strange fashion in my dreams of seeing the features and feeling the presence of several persons, who are yet one person; and of mingling many places, which are at the same time one place. I would cultivate the art of dreaming, were I you.

I made a visit of a week at Parker's, immediately on my return from Northampton. Parker was taken ill suddenly at Chelsea, while preaching, and I went out to Spring Street, expecting to find him on his back, the nurse, doctor and wife and aunt all in attendance, — but no, the creature was up and alive, laughing and working and digging at Sanctus Bernardus like a very Theodore Parker as he was. You might as well put a young steam engine to bed, cover it up and give it physic, as this marvellous creature. The learned Theban was by no means dieting in the article of books, though forced to do so in profane, vulgar, material eatables and drinkables.

*To Ralph Waldo Emerson*

BOSTON, March 2, 1840.

If the enclosed pieces are worthy a place in the New Magazine with which I understand you are to be connected, will you stand as their godfather, or dispose of them as you think best?

And may I take this occasion, to express what I have long wished to do, my deep gratitude for the instruction and delight I have derived from all your productions, published and spoken. I utter no hollow compliments or vain imaginings when I say that I have owed to you more quickening influences and more elevating views in shaping my faith, than I can ever possibly express to you. From my very heart I thank you. With what

delight I have read and listened to you, cold words like these, have no force to utter. I trust, therefore, you will pardon this expression of my gratitude and admiration, which could not have been restrained, while addressing you, without pain.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson to Mr. Cranch*

CONCORD, 4th March, 1840.

I thank you for the beautiful verses which I have read and re-read with great content. The first piece <sup>1</sup> is true and the second is brilliant; I do not know which I like the best, for I am wonderfully taken in the "Aurora"<sup>2</sup> with the "Ripples over the stars," which is so true and descriptive, and, I believe, with a certain Miltonic tone in "the air that freezes around the Pleiades." I am sure that my friend, the fair editor of our yet unsunned journal [the "Dial"] will be greatly obliged by these contributions. To me they are welcome as one more authentic sign — added to four or five I have reckoned already — of a decided poetic taste, and tendency to original observation in our Cambridge circle. I call it Cambridge, because it is not confined to Boston, though it does not extend far.

Within a year my contemporaries have risen very much in my respect, for, within that period, I have learned to know the genius of several persons who now fill me with pleasure and hope. My dear sir, I recognize with joy your sympathy with me in the same tastes and thoughts, in the kind, though extravagant, expression of your letter. If my thoughts have interested you, it only shows how much they were already yours. Will you not, when our fields have grown a little more invitingly

<sup>1</sup> "Thought is deeper than all speech."

<sup>2</sup> *The Aurora Borealis.*

green, make a leisure day and come up hither alone, and let us compare notes a little farther, to see how well our experiences tally. I will show you Walden Pond, and our Concord poet too, Henry Thoreau.

*To Ralph Waldo Emerson*

FISHKILL LANDING, NEW YORK,  
September 12, 1841.

The favor you showed to some little pieces of mine some time since, and the pleasant hours of intercourse I have enjoyed with you under your roof and occasionally in Boston, encouraged me to trouble you with a few more verses, which you are at liberty to give to the "Dial" or to the poet's corner of your "Portfolio" as you please. They were written last winter, since which time an affection of the head has indisposed me almost entirely to any inspiration or mental labor.

I have been spending the summer at the South, and have lately taken very vigorously to landscape painting, which I am strongly tempted to follow in future instead of sermon writing. It is an art I have fondly looked at from boyhood. Whether I turn artist or not, I become more and more inclined to sink the minister in the man, and abandon my present calling *in toto* as a profession. Verily our churches will force us to it whether we will or not.

Once more, my dear sir, permit me to express my enthusiastic admiration and love of your writings. You must pardon me, but I am constrained to tell you what I never could do in speech, though I have so often wished to. I feel now as if I should be guilty of a poor and unnatural reserve, were I in writing to you, to be silent in this matter. The rare beauty of your style is but the first charm of your books to me. They are wells of deep truth,

which I feel as if I could never exhaust — full of that “divine philosophy” which is described as

“A perpetual feast of nectared sweets  
where no crude surfeit reigns.”

Your thoughts have had a deep influence on my faith and opinions. There are no writings of the day which have so captivated me, and afforded such matter for profound thought as yours. I read them again and again, and see new truth and beauty at every new reading. Again I ask pardon for such blunt praise, but again plead an irresistible call to speak from a full heart. It is less to praise you, my dear sir, for what is praise to you, than to acknowledge a great debt of mine.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson to Mr. Cranch*

CONCORD, October 1, 1841.

With my hearty thanks for your wise, wistful verses, which I read with great pleasure, not only for their tunefulness and particular merits, but for what I admire still more, their continuity of thought and unity of plan — I hasten to write that an apology may reach you before the knowledge of the offence: I sent them very soon to Miss Fuller, who, seizing them as editors seize such godsend, found them a succor of Apollo for her closing pages. The printer took them and Miss Fuller left town. It now appears that there was not space enough in the number left to print the whole, and, Apollo and all gods having left the printer to his own madness, he printed the first half, the “Inworld,” and left the “Outworld” out.<sup>1</sup> The proof which had been directed to be sent to me, only arrived

<sup>1</sup> My father wrote for the *Dial*, the *Inworld* and the *Outworld*. These were separated by a mistake of the printer, the first part appearing alone. Mr. Emerson writes this delightful letter in consequence, to my father at Fishkill.

this morning. Miss Fuller is here, with Mr. Metcalf's compliments, explaining that he could not wait for correction, as he had been foiled in opportunities of sending, and the '*Dial*' would appear to-day. Our only amends now possible in this great wrath of the muses and their diabolical coadjutors, is to declare to you that the piece shall appear whole in the next number, with apology for the divorce in the last. Let me now take breath to congratulate you on what is grateful to me in your letter; that you dwell in a beautiful country, that the beauty of natural forms will not let you rest, but you must serve and celebrate them with your pencil, and that at all hazards you must quit the pulpit as a profession, I learn without surprise, yet with great interest, and with the best hope. The Idea that rises with more or less lustre on all our minds, that unites us all, will have its way and must be obeyed. We sympathize very strictly with each other, so much so, that with great novelty of position and theory, a considerable company of intelligent persons now seem quite transparent and monotonous to each other. I have no doubt that whilst great sacrifices will need to be made by some to truth and freedom — by some at first, by all sooner or later, — great compensations will overpay their integrity, and fidelity to their own heart. Indeed, each of these beautiful talents which add such splendor and grace to the most polished societies, have their basis at last in private and personal magnanimities, in untold honesty and inviolable delicacy. The multitude, when they hear the song or see the picture, do not suspect its profound origin. But the great will know it, not by anecdote but by sympathy and divination.

May the richest success attend your pencil and your pen. I wish I had any good news to tell you. You will

like to know that Miss Fuller transfers the publication of the "Dial," — now that Mr. Ripley withdraws from all interest in the direction, — from Jordan to Miss Peabody, an arrangement that promises to be greatly more satisfactory to Miss Fuller, and so to all of us, than the former one. Do not, I entreat you, cease to give us goodwill and good verses. We shall need them more than ever in the time to come; and yet I hope the journal, which seems to grow in grace with men, will by and by be able to make its acknowledgments, at least to its younger contributors. I remain your debtor for your kind and quite extravagant estimate of my poor pages. I have a pamphlet in press which I call "The Method of Nature," an oration delivered lately at Waterville, Maine, which I shall take the liberty to send to you as soon as it appears, if I can learn in town that you are to remain at Fishkill. I have heard lately from Harriet Martineau and Carlyle. The former writes about the latter, that he is — fault of his nervous constitution — the most miserable man she knows; but that lately he seems greatly better, and was *happy* at her house at Tynemouth for two whole days. Carlyle writes that he has left London and removed to Newington Lodge, Annan, Scotland, but of his works or projects, saith no word.

*To Ralph Waldo Emerson, with a copy of Mr. Cranch's first poems which he dedicated to him*

NEW YORK, May 22, 1844.

DEAR SIR: —

I should have sent you my little book before now, had I received my copies sooner. I trust you will pardon the delay, and more especially the liberty I have taken to place your name on the dedication page without having apprised you of it beforehand.

Pray receive this hasty note in the light of some fuller testimony it would give me pleasure to send of the admiration and regard of

Yours truly,  
C. P. CRANCH.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson to Mr. Cranch*

CONCORD, June 7, 1844.

I received a few days ago, in Boston, the beautiful little volume of poems which you had sent me, and on opening them and your letter, I found the deeper obligation you had put me under, by the inscription. Had you asked me beforehand, I should have said, "Be it far from thee, Lord!" for I dare not sit for a moment in the chair, and all the skill I have is to study in the youngest class. As you have thrust me into place, I must only hope that your fair and friendly book shall not suffer by the choice, and then thank you for the noble gift.

I am glad to find my old friends in the book, as well as new ones, and, throughout, the same sweetness and elegance of versification which I admired in the pieces which adorned our first "Dials." But I should like to talk over with you very frankly this whole mystery and craft of poesy. I shall soon, I hope, send you my chapter on "the Poet," the longest piece, perhaps, in the volume I am trying to bring to an end, if I do not become disgusted with the shortcomings of any critical essay, on a topic so subtle and defying. Many, many repentances he must suffer who turns his thoughts to the riddle of the world, and hopes to chant it fitly; each new vision supersedes and discredits all the former ones, and with every day the problem wears a grander aspect, and will not let the poet off so lightly as he meant; it reacts, and threatens to absorb him. He must be the best mixed man in the uni-

verse, or the universe will drive him crazy when he comes too near its secret. Of course, I am a vigorous, cruel critic, and demand in the poet a devotion that seems hardly possible in our hasty, facile America. But you must wait a little, and see my chapter that I promise, to know the ground of my exorbitancy: and yet it will doubtless have nothing new for you. Meantime I am too old a lover of actual literature, not to prize all real skill and success in numbers, not only as a pledge of a more excellent life in the poet, but for the new culture and happiness it promises to the great community around us. So I am again your debtor, and your grateful and affectionate servant,

R. W. EMERSON.