Literary Transcendentalism
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Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance.

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1 The Emergence of the Transcendentalist Aesthetic from American Unitarianism

Since the Puritan ministers were traditionally the cultural as well as the religious leaders of their people, it was natural that their successors should participate actively in the so-called flowering of New England letters during the early nineteenth century. The best of the literary and intellectual periodicals which mark the first stage of this process were thus run and written largely by clergymen: the Monthly Anthology and Boston Review (1803–1811), the North American Review (1815–1939), and the Christian Examiner (1824–1869). What is more noteworthy about these experiments is that their clerical supporters were almost exclusively Unitarian ministers. The Orthodox Congregationalists and other evangelical sects had their journals too—for this was the golden age of the religious magazine. But theirs were much more narrowly theological in scope.

Conversely, in the area of theology itself, the liberal clergy rarely approached the best of the evangelicals in depth, rigor, and thoroughness. Just as Jonathan Edwards was a far more

1 Jerry Wayne Brown’s survey of theological developments during this period, The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800–1870: The New England Scholars (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), contains a lively and informative discussion of controversy between the Unitarians and the Orthodox during this period, but is too uniformly condescending toward the naivetés of both sides. The fact remains that the Unitarians tended to rely on common sense where the Orthodox had a passion for intellectual precision, essentially because they operated within
profound thinker than Charles Chauncy, his leading liberal opponent during the Great Awakening, so Chauncy's descendants were less sophisticated theologians than Samuel Hopkins, Nathaniel Taylor, Lyman Beecher, and Edwards A. Park. Among the Unitarians, only Andrews Norton had any claims to real distinction in this respect. Nor were they greatly concerned about this fact. Even among themselves, Unitarian divines were reputed more for other attainments. One Unitarian minister-historian, for example, after running fondly down the roster of the movement's early leaders, blithely declared that it was "difficult to say, out of hand, just what the Unitarian opinion is on any given matter, or what it is that Unitarians believe in." Indeed, he added, "I am a little impatient that they should ever be judged by their theology, which was so small a fraction of either their religion or their life!" Among eminent early Unitarians, the two Henry Wares were respected primarily for their kindliness, piety, and devotion to duty; Orville Dewey for his eloquence; F. W. P. Greenwood for the beauty of his style; Buckminster and Channing for all of these. "An atmosphere of elegant taste pervades the denomination," as O. B. Frothingham says of this period. "Even where occasion calls for polemics the argument is usually conducted after the manner of one more interested in the style than in the dogmas under discussion, and who would gladly be let off from the duty of debate." The imputation of lackadaisicalness here is unfair; but

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3 O. B. Frothingham, *Boston Unitarianism, 1820–1850: A Study of the
the remark is correct in suggesting that what chiefly distinguished the liberal ministry from its evangelical counterparts was its achievement in such avocations as essay-writing, literary criticism, poetry, and a variety of other secular pursuits from science to philosophy. Channing, for example, won international fame for his essays on Milton and Napoleon; the younger Ware wrote an epic; his brother William invented a new literary genre, the Biblical novel; Jared Sparks and J. G. Palfrey became two of the leading historians of their day.4

The difference in literary attitudes between liberal and Orthodox Congregationalism was great enough even to become a point of dispute in the Unitarian controversy. The Unitarians tended to look down upon Orthodox preachers as dogmatic and narrow-minded ranters, while the Orthodox stigmatized Unitarian preaching and writing as hollow displays of elegance which "please delicate tastes and itching ears, but awaken no sleeping conscience." 5

One must naturally beware of taking the language of controversy at face value. The Orthodox reviewer who condemned a

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volume of liberal sermons as "a poisonous infusion in a delicious bowl" showed considerable sensitivity to their beauties; the Reverend Leonard Withington, who dismissed Channing as a "nightingale of the moral grove," was himself an essayist and poetaster. Nevertheless the controversy did have a deeper basis. Part of the explanation lay in the fact that a higher percentage of Unitarians than of any other American sect except the High Church Episcopalians were people of sophistication and refinement. But beyond this, their theological liberalism led them to draw a closer analogy between religious and aesthetic experience than Orthodoxy would allow. The main impetus behind the Unitarian departure from Orthodoxy—the shift from a Calvinist view of human nature as depraved to an Arminian view of man as improvable—also helped to produce a climate of opinion more favorable to the arts. Believing that the essence of religion is to stimulate the growth of moral character, the Unitarians tended to differentiate less sharply between "sacred" and "secular" pursuits and to view the arts as a means of evangelism rather than as a threat to religion. Beauty and truth came to seem inextricably intertwined. "There is no such thing as naked truth, at least as far as moral subjects are concerned," Channing declared. Such truth must come to us "warm and living with the impressions and affections which it has produced in the soul from which it issues." Even the much more conservative W. B. O. Peabody considered "poetry as not distantly related to religion," as "alike" in its "tendency, which

7 As a William R. Hutchison explains, though the “nominal center” of the Unitarian movement was the rejection of the doctrine of the trinity, the “practical source” was the objection to the Calvinist view of human nature (The Transcendentalist Ministers [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959], p. 4 and chap. i, passim.)
8 The Works of William Ellery Channing, 4th ed. (Boston: Munroe, 1845), III, 142.
is to raise the thoughts and feelings above the level of ordinary life." 9

Orthodox writers, though not entirely opposed to the arts, tended to be cautionary and restrictive. From this point of view, the Panoplist in 1808 endorsed a Presbyterian minister's estimate that five hundred out of every thousand novels were "so contemptibly frivolous, as to render the perusal of them a most criminal waste of time" and that four hundred ninety-nine of the remaining five hundred might "be considered as positively seductive and corrupting in their tendency." 10 The prejudice against prose fiction was such that even religious novels were suspect. The Christian Spectator, one of the most enlightened of early evangelical sect periodicals, did not have a good word to say for the genre until the 1830s. And Lyman Beecher, even in his old age, continued to fulminate against "effeminate, religious-novel-reading Christians." 11

Liberal divines also fretted about "unsanctified literature," and the frivolity of novels in particular; some of Theodore Parker's sarcasms rival Beecher's.12 But Unitarians tended to be much more permissive and positive in their criticism. "When we speak of a distinct moral aim as indispensable to the novelist," F. D. Huntington explained, "we do not mean that he should be constantly thrusting his moral into the reader's face,—one of the weakest pieces of folly an author can commit." 13

10 "On Novel-Reading," Panoplist, n.s., 1 (1808), 205.
13 "Novels and Novel-writing," Christian Examiner, 42 (1847), 117.
Some liberal ministers even conceded that "the mind may be elevated and put in harmony with truth, even where no definite truth is conveyed." Specific moral or religious content is not necessary, as long as the work has an ennobling tendency, for "\textit{whatever} inculcates pure sentiment, whatever touches the heart with the beauty of virtue and the blessedness of piety, is in accordance with religion." 14

Such statements hardly sound revolutionary to our ears, but for their day they were avant-garde. As William Charvat observes in his study of early American periodical criticism, one of the most important developments that took place between 1810 and 1835 was the displacement of "the negative principle of religious restraint" by "the positive principle of moral idealism." The reviewer's question changed from "Does this book make vice attractive?" to "Does it make virtue beautiful?" 15 Although popular taste undoubtedly began to shift in advance of the reviewers, the Unitarian critics were the first group of intellectuals in New England to endorse the shift in significant numbers. They were quick to claim credit for their contribution too. One Unitarian scholar even claimed that nearly every eminent literary figure in nineteenth-century New England "was either a Unitarian or closely associated with Unitarian influences." 16

"Unitarian influences" did not always improve one's critical discernment, though. However much the Unitarian critics praised art—especially poetry—in the abstract, when it came to passing judgment they followed Orville Dewey's stricture that "the moral character, or the effect upon the mind, must be the test." On this ground and this ground alone, Dewey denies the

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name of genius to Cooper, while F. W. P. Greenwood hails Joanna Baillie as the best dramatist since Shakespeare. Similarly, the highest compliment William Parsons Lunt can pay Bryant is, “His poetry is of that sort which is of use.” 17 Altogether, Unitarian criticism was an uneasy mixture of the new and the old. On the one hand, liberal religion was able to provide a rationale, for the first time in New England history, for the intrinsic value of belles-lettres; to defend them, that is, not as decorations or even just as minor instruments of morality, but as inherently valuable by virtue of their beauty and emotional power. No Orthodox divine would have claimed, as Orville Dewey now could, that “the vocation of the really great singer . . . is as holy as the vocation of the great preacher.” 18 But even while the Unitarians excited themselves by such daring remarks, they were holding hard to the very puritan, and Yankee, notion of art as justified by practical utility. For Dewey it is the singer’s capacity for promoting holiness that makes his art worth praising.

It could hardly have been otherwise. So long as the Unitarians held revealed religion, at least in theory, higher than natural religion, they could not consistently depart from the position that human creation was at best a means of Christian influence. There was only one way of rescuing art from this position of subservience, short of denying its obligation to be moral or spiritual, which no self-respecting Unitarian would have done in public. The one alternative was to disclaim the specialness of revelation itself, or, in other words, to affirm that the utterance of art is (potentially) just as spiritual as that of the Bible. This is precisely what the more radical Transcendentalists did. To be sure, whatever they said in disparagement of the authority of revelation, they generally conceded that the Bible in

17 Dewey, review of The Bravo: A Tale, in Christian Examiner, 12 (1832), 84; Greenwood, “Miss Baillie’s Dramas,” ibid., 22 (1837), 1; Lunt, Bryant’s Poems,” ibid., p. 68.
18 Works, p. 126.
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general and Jesus in particular were the most perfect expressions of the divine spirit which mankind has yet seen. But they also insisted, with varying degrees of intransigence, that other men are also capable of inspiration, that the difference between them and Jesus is at most one of degree. This being the case, Emerson said, "what shall forbid us to universalize the operations of God & to believe the operation of the Holy Spirit is the same in kind in the prophet Isaiah as in the poet Milton?" (*JMN*, III, 240). Indeed, if inspiration, or access to godhead, was available to all, then it seemed to follow that literary creation was not simply an amusement, or even a useful instrument, but a sacred act. "To create," Emerson says, "is the proof of a Divine presence. Whoever creates is God, and whatever talents are, if the man create not, the pure efflux of Deity is not his" (*JMN*, V, 341). Applied to art, this becomes a version of romanticist expressivism, just as its theological side might be called a romantic religion. The poet is an inspired demigod who, by creating, assumes God's role and re-enacts the creation. Conversely, Emerson holds, Jesus and the prophets are not figures of special authority but poets, whose sayings are to be taken as inspired utterances to stir us on to similar heights of vision rather than as a body of truths for us to formulate and follow.

The Divinity School Address is Emerson's most forceful statement of this position. Throughout Emerson uses the analogy of poetry to make his points about religion and the ministry. The prophets, including Jesus, are "holy bards," whose sayings "are sacred and permanent in proportion to their purity" (*W*, I, 126) but not binding upon us. Jesus' assertion that he was God and that we shall see God through him is an example of this sort. It was spoken in a "jubilee of sublime emotion." Unfortunately, his words, like all "doctrine of the Reason," have been corrupted into a doctrine of the understanding. "The understanding caught this high chant from the poet's lips" and made the dogma that Jesus was God. "The idioms of his language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth; and
churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes. Christianity became a Mythus, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before” (W, I, 129). Jesus, Emerson affirms, had no disrespect for the earlier prophets; he was simply a true man: he was Self-reliant (W, I, 129–130), and by the same token we should not worship his person but respect ourselves (W, I, 130–132).

“Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost,” Emerson exhorts his audience of fledgling ministers, “cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity” (W, I, 146). “I look for the hour,” he concludes, “when that supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those Eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also.” He even anticipates an improvement upon the scriptures:

The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures contain immortal sentences, that have been bread of life to millions. But they have no epical integrity; are fragmentary; are not shown in their order to the intellect. I look for the new Teacher [“some moral Bard,” the journal version reads (JMN, V, 466)] that shall follow so far those shining laws that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace. [W, I, 115]

Looking at the address as a whole, we see that Emerson at first uses the analogy of poetry pejoratively, to diminish the authority of historical Christianity. The prophets’ utterances are only poetry; they are meant to inspire us, not to have authority over us. On the other hand, Emerson is also sounding the call for a priesthood of prophet-poets in his own day. He wants scripture read as literature, solely to inspire, while at the same time he wants new and better Bibles written by inspired contemporaries.

The turmoil caused by Emerson’s address is well known. The Dean of the Divinity School thought it “odious”; Emerson’s former mentor, Henry Ware, Jr., “refuted” it; the Christian
Examiner repudiated it. The atheist Abner Kneeland, according to Theodore Parker, delightedly read the discourse “to his followers one Sunday, as better infidelity than he could write himself.” Andrews Norton agreed, and prepared to demolish Emerson in the next year’s address. Less dogmatic Unitarians, like Channing and the youthful Edward Everett Hale, criticized Emerson for poor taste in casting aspersions on the clergy and its doctrines within their own sanctuary. And yet, as this last reaction should alert us, the conservative reaction was not uniformly harsh. Channing, for one, claimed not to see any difference between Emerson’s views and his own (though he could have, had he looked closely enough). Even more interesting is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s impression, ten days after the event: “The Reverend Dean Palfrey said that ‘what in it was not folly was impiety!’ Oh! After all, it was only a stout humanitarian discourse; in which Christ and Göthe were mentioned as great Philosophers.” One would hardly expect a person like Longfellow to shed much light on the Transcendentalist controversy, but this passage does. It is written with a layman’s impatience at dogmatic nitpicking. Longfellow obviously considers Emerson’s idea as self-evident, and Palfrey as rather boorish and unfair to dispute it, though technically Palfrey may have a point. This perspective is especially interesting inasmuch as Longfellow was a more or less conventional Unitarian. He respected the clergy; he regularly went to church, though he

19 To George E. Ellis, 15 Oct. 1838; typescript, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Henry Ware’s response was his sermon on The Personality of the Deity. For Palfrey’s reaction, see Frank Otto Gatell, John Gorham Palfrey and the New England Conscience (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 75.


didn’t much like sermons; his muse was properly moralistic. If his reaction to the Address was at all typical of the kind of person whose father was an official of the American Unitarian Association and whose brother was later to become a Harvard Divinity School graduate (and a minor Transcendentalist), then the Unitarian community was much readier for Emersonian notions of art and religion than the acerbity of the miracles controversy would lead us to expect.  

It would be foolish, of course, to insist that Emerson and Andrews Norton really saw eye to eye. The Unitarians were quite right in claiming that the Address subverted their position on the special authority of the Christian revelation and, equally important, the way in which belief is validated. This, Emerson insisted, was entirely intuitive (which makes one’s belief a philosophical certainty), whereas Norton claimed it was inductive, a process of reasoning from evidence (which makes belief at best a strong philosophical probability). But the process of subversion had been going on a long time, from within the ranks, and Norton himself was one of the culprits. As the leading Unitarian exponent of the “higher criticism” of the Bible—that is, the interpretation of scripture as a historical document, the creation of a particular milieu rather than the infallibly inspired word of God—Norton was making use of the German influences he deplored and, in a sense, leading his followers toward the “latest form of infidelity” of which he accused Emerson. As the Transcendentalists were quick to observe, Norton’s magnum opus, *The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, far from strengthening Christianity, in effect weakened it by casting doubts upon the authenticity of many parts of scripture and by seeming to deny to any but the expert the competence to interpret the Bible.  


It was not just religious radicals who made such criticisms. When the Unitarian historian William Hickling Prescott, for example, tried to use Norton as a guide to his own Bible study, he gave up in despair. “It is vain to look for moral certainty in an affair of historic testimony, removed from us by so many ages,” Prescott concludes. Norton’s ascriptions of interpolation lead to “a conviction of credulity and superstition in the narrator” or of “corruption in the original text”; his interpretations of many passages as metaphorical open up “such an allegorical latitude of expression, as will shake the solidity of every doctrine and declaration in the Scriptures.” Prescott’s only refuge was to retreat into religious sentimentalism. Yes, the Bible may be riddled with cruxes and errors, he admitted, but, in the long run, “who, whatever difficulties he may meet with in particular incidents and opinions recorded in the Gospels, can hesitate to receive the great religious and moral truths inculcated by the Savior, as the words of inspiration?” Despite Unitarianism’s claims to being a “rational religion,” this was really the basis of belief for most of its worshipers: a vague but ardent core of poetic feeling.

Unitarians of an aesthetic bent were unlikely to follow Norton’s analyses even as closely as Prescott. To the extent that his approach influenced their faith, it tended to reinforce a loosely poetic view of the Bible. The eighteenth-century researches of Lowth and Herder had called attention to the Bible’s literary qualities; the higher criticism now seemed to show that much of what was not actually poetry was to be interpreted metaphorically also. A good example of the state of mind thus induced can be seen in a report by the future Transcendentalist


25 Daniel Howe and Conrad Wright have effectively disposed of the myth that Unitarianism was “corpse-cold.” Howe gives a good account of the pietistic strain within Unitarianism in his chapter on “The Religion of the Heart,” in The Unitarian Conscience, pp. 151–173.
poet-minister Charles T. Brooks of the teaching of Henry Ware, Sr., who was the professor of divinity to Harvard undergraduates between 1805 and 1843.

Dr. Ware began with stating the importance of the books both because of the momentous nature of their contents and the fact of their authors being inspired. Then he gave the different views of this inspiration that had been held. Some thought it plenary; others only a general superintendence of the Divine Spirit, leaving all minor matters to each author’s taste. But at any rate, we didn’t doubt that they were extraordinarily gifted writers, etc.26

As this example shows, biblical criticism without rigor leads to a dreamy mishmash. Whatever degree of mental discipline Ware’s pupils achieved in later life was not due to him. All the eulogies agree that his chief attributes as a teacher were kindness, tolerance of dissent, and reluctance to come down hard on any side of an issue. “He trusted truth enough to give error every fair chance” was one such epitaph.27

But it was not the likes of Norton or Ware who excited the younger generation of the 1820s and early 1830s so much as the superb oratory of Edward Everett and especially William Ellery Channing.28 Everett was the example par excellence of the

minister in the process of transforming himself into a man of the world; Channing was the minister as sublime saint. He above all other Unitarians prepared the way for the Emersonian synthesis of religion and art. He did this, primarily, by the example of his preaching. His method was to inspire rather than to instruct, to celebrate rather than to argue closely—an approach always congenial to youth. In addition, Channing extended the analogy between art and religion to the farthest limits Unitarianism could bear, by taking seriously, so to speak, the idea of poetic inspiration, with which his colleagues only flirted.

To attribute the creative impulse to the hand of God is an ancient way of accounting for the mystery of creation. In English criticism it is as old as the anecdote of Caedmon by the Venerable Bede. Even in the Age of Reason one finds variants of the idea. But in general the eighteenth century and the Unitarians of Channing's generation, who were mainly children of the Enlightenment in their philosophy, used the notion of art as inspired not for the sake of argument so much as for embellishment, taking the idea metaphorically, or in a classical rather than a Christian sense. They considered the creative impulse as a "humbler inspiration" or "something bordering upon inspiration," rather than the real thing. Channing was bolder. In his essay "Milton" especially, he explicitly endorses Milton's

pp. 113-149. Conrad Wright, however, argues that Edgell and others have somewhat overstated the affinities between Channing and Transcendentalism: v. "The Rediscovery of Channing," The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History (Boston: Beacon, 1970), pp. 22-40. Everett's influence on Transcendentalism itself was indirect and therefore has been less frequently discussed; most scholarship relies on the Emerson essay cited above.  

opinion that “of all God’s gifts of intellect . . . poetical genius [is] the most transcendent,” a genuinely divine infusion.

Channing’s defense of this claim is remarkable for the way its assumptions about religion lead to a conclusion about poetry that is clearly Emersonian. “No doctrine is more common among Christians than that of man’s immortality,” he begins, “but it is not so generally understood, that the germs or principles of his whole future are now wrapped up in his soul,” as the plant is contained in its seed. Consequently, the soul “is perpetually stretching beyond what is present and visible . . . and seeking relief and joy in imaginings of unseen and ideal being. This view of our nature . . . carries us to the very foundation and sources of poetry.” “In an intellectual nature, framed for progress and for higher modes of being, there must be creative energies . . . and poetry is the form in which these energies are chiefly manifested.” Therefore, although poetry may be in a literal sense false, “it observes higher laws than it transgresses” and “far from injuring society, is one of the great instruments of its refinement and exaltation.”

Channing’s article, particularly this section of it, was widely read and quoted. Emerson came to regard the essay as a landmark in American criticism (W, X, 339); Bryant quoted a long passage (on the importance of poetry to society) to conclude his lecture on “The Value and Uses of Poetry”; Alexander Everett, in an 1835 essay on Channing, gave the highest praise to “Milton” and singled out the passage on the nature of poetry—“doubtless familiar to many of our readers”—as the “most powerful” part of the essay.

This last remark shows that the Unitarians were prepared to accept a certain dose of inspiration. But Everett goes on to criticize Channing for ascribing to poetry what properly belongs to

30 Works, I, 7–9.

religion alone. Other Unitarians questioned Channing's pronouncements about religion itself—his claims for what he called man's "Likeness to God," the essential divinity of human nature. On the other hand, Channing would never have gone so far in his literary theory as to say with Emerson that the poet "is the true and only doctor" (W, III, 8), nor would he have endorsed the idea of the divine madness of the poet, or any other theory of inspiration that emphasized its irrational aspects. Channing habitually criticized reverie and dreaming—staples of the romantic poet—as a waste of time. He also shared the Unitarians' reflexive distrust of all forms of religious emotionalism, although he himself had had a conversion experience in his youth the validity of which he seems not to have questioned. Probably he would have agreed with the sentiments of John Brazer's widely respected "Essay on the Doctrine of Divine Influence," which argued that there is such a thing as inspiration but that its workings are indistinguishable "from the ordinary operations of the human mind." The realization of this conservatism underlying Channing's tributes to human nature ultimately alienated the more extreme Transcendentalists, although most of them later mellowed and freely acknowledged their debt to him.

Altogether, the Transcendentalist movement was more an evolution than a revolt from Unitarianism, although there were also basic philosophical differences that should not be glossed over. Transcendentalism was in almost every way a logical end result of the momentum of the Unitarian movement, just as liberalism has led to radicalism in the moral thought of the last two decades. The Unitarians arrayed themselves against the Orthodox as the party of free inquiry; and up until the late 1830s, they elevated this principle, in many a peroration, to

33 Christian Examiner, 18 (1835), 238. For the conservative side of Channing's thought, see Wright, The Liberal Christians, pp. 36-38.
giddy and intoxicating heights—not just Channing, but even some ministers who later accused the Transcendentalists of atheism. In the 1836 Dudleian Lecture at Harvard, for example, John Brazer told the undergraduates:

Let nothing come in competition with the established claims, the rightful supremacy, of your religious capacities and powers. Let nothing mar, debase, or impair them. Let the idea of God sit enthroned, as God, within you. Let the authentic and imperative voice of conscience be ever, and under all circumstances, implicitly obeyed. Honor it. Reverence it. Fall down before it. Give it the entire homage of your entire soul.\textsuperscript{34}

This was not quite Transcendentalism, but under the circumstances it was an invitation to disaster. After hearing this sort of rhetoric from their seniors, Emerson and Parker were understandably surprised by the reaction they provoked. They were not so naive as to be unconscious of playing the role of \textit{enfants terribles}, but they were genuinely taken aback by the depth of Unitarian resentment toward them. Partly this was because they themselves retained a strong tinge of intellectual conservatism, as we shall soon see.

The foregoing discussion has pointed up two aesthetic trends. First, increasingly greater claims are made for the importance of the arts as Orthodoxy gives way to Unitarianism and Unitarianism to the Transcendentalism of Emerson's Divinity School Address. Second, despite this tendency, art continues to be justified on religious grounds, rather than for its own sake alone. Though Emerson elevated the poet to a position superior to that of the minister, he still prized poetry for spiritual reasons, for "the feeling of Immortality it awakens" (\textit{JMN}, VII, 314). "The highest originality," he says, "must be moral": the Bible and other sacred scriptures are the only really original

\textsuperscript{34} "Review of the Argument in Support of Natural Religion," \textit{Sermons} (Boston: Crosby and Nichols, 1849), p. 367.
books, compared to which even Shakespeare is derivative (W, IV, 357). “When we speak of Poet in the great sense, we seem to be driven to such examples as Ezekiel & St. John & Menu with their moral Burdens; and all those we commonly call poets become rhymsters & poetasters by their side” (JMN, VIII, 229).

Emerson’s literary objective, then, was twofold: to unite “seer” and “sayer,” spiritual insight and beautiful expression. This ambivalence is reflected by the image of the poet-priest in the Address and pervades all his literary criticism. Like the ideal preacher, Emerson’s “Poet” must be the “reconciler” (W, III, 37), perfect in both inspiration and utterance (W, III, 37). In Representative Men, Shakespeare and Swedenborg personify the two poles. “For executive faculty, for creation, Shakespeare is unique”; his power of expression is incomparable (W, IV, 212); but he had no conscious purpose beyond beauty and amusement, Emerson thinks (W, IV, 217 f). Swedenborg, on the other hand, was a seer with the vision of a great poet, but his mind was warped by its “theologic determination,” and so his work is often dull and ugly (W, IV, 134). What is needed, Emerson concludes, is a “poet-priest, a reconciler, who shall not trifle, with Shakespeare the player, nor shall grope in graves with Swedenborg the mourner; but who shall see, speak, and act, with equal inspiration” (W, IV, 219). Not surprisingly, he looked in vain for the poet he described (W, III, 37).

Nor was Emerson’s aesthetic position wholeheartedly endorsed by all Transcendentalists, even though most did look up to Emerson as “the best of us all.” 35 A broad range of variance existed within the movement.

To begin with, a number of the Transcendentalist ministers who still saw possibilities in organized religion and maintained a stronger reverence for historical Christianity distrusted the antinomian tendency in Emerson’s thought (as he himself did at times) and regarded his poetic style and theories as beautiful but somewhat frivolous. Frederic Henry Hedge, James Freeman

35 W. H. Channing to Fredrika Bremer, reported in her The Homes of the New World (New York: Harper, 1853), I, 73.
Clarke, William Henry Channing, Parker, and Cyrus Bartol all voiced criticisms of this sort. Their impatience with Emerson's rhapsodies tended to vary in proportion to their social conscience. Bartol, for instance, was himself an aesthete who affected an oracular style; his objection was little more than a slight, decorous quibble over Emerson's heterodoxy. W. H. Channing, however, took Emerson severely to task for ivory towerism, beginning with a review of "The American Scholar." "Not as a scholar, not with a view to literary labor, not as an artist, must he go out among men—but as a brother man," Channing declares. For pastors and reformers intent on communicating the new views to ordinary people, the literary model Emerson presented was a positive encumbrance. The raptures of prophecy, after all, had to be made intelligible to the understanding. Most of the Transcendentalist ministers maintained, like more conservative Unitarians, that "Literature should be the handmaid of Religion," considering it "simply another aspect of man's attempt to better himself." Significantly, when Emerson tried to channel the missionary impulses of two of his friends—Bronson Alcott and Jones Very—in a more literary direction, he met with stiff resistance. One of Alcott's severest strictures on Emerson is that he was too narrowly literary in his interests.

36 "Poetry and Imagination," Christian Examiner, 42 (1847), 259–260; Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Discourse in West Church (Boston: Williams, 1882).

37 "Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa Oration," Boston Quarterly Review, 1 (1838), 116. See also Orestes Brownson, "Mr. Emerson's Address," ibid., pp. 500–516, which is much less sympathetic to the Divinity School Address than the excerpt in Tr, pp. 198–200, would lead one to believe.


39 JA, pp. 90–91 and passim. The Emerson-Alcott relationship is discussed at great length in Odell Shepard, Pedlar's Progress: The Life of
For another group of Transcendentalists, on the other hand, the Emersonian aesthetic did not go far enough. One of these was Margaret Fuller, who felt that Boston culture was insensitive to "the poetical side of existence" for its own sake, not "poetry in its import or ethical significance, but in its essential being, as a recreative spirit that sings to sing." Her cosmopolitanism was part of what eventually drew her away from the orbit of Boston to New York and Europe. John Sullivan Dwight, Christopher Cranch, Ellery Channing, and, to some extent, Henry Thoreau, were also closer to the purely artistic temperament than Emerson. "How could there be a religion without music?" Dwight asks, and he answered the question for himself by quitting the ministry after one year and devoting the best part of his active career to the criticism of music. Cranch, also a ministerial dropout, and Channing, who never got through


40 "Entertainments of the Past Winter," *Dial*, 3 (1842), 46. The most forceful scholarly statement of this contrast between Fuller and Emerson is Frederick A. Braun, *Margaret Fuller and Goethe* (New York: Holt, 1910), pp. 71–147, which overstates its case, however, in its attempt to disassociate Fuller from Transcendentalist moralism and present her as a child of Goethe. A more balanced view of Fuller's aesthetic opinions is Helen Neill McMaster, "Margaret Fuller as a Literary Critic," *University of Buffalo Studies*, 7 (Dec. 1927), 31–100.


42 Cranch wrote little criticism, but was a prolific creative writer and would-be artist. His literary activities are discussed in Leonora Cranch
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his first year as a Harvard undergraduate, were both essentially dilettantes who pursued long and rather troubled careers as painter-poet and poet-conversationalist, respectively. Both concluded rather pathetically after the fact that they were temperamentally unsuited for the prophetic role. Channing, for instance, was quite clearly cut out to be a writer of witty jox and mellow descriptive sketches rather than a bard of the profound; perhaps his most successful work, still unpublished, is a series of thirty New England situation comedies called “Fashionable Dialogues.” Thoreau had more of the prophetic spirit, but was wary of the oppressive moralizing in which the Transcendentalist ministers and (to a lesser extent) Emerson were prone to indulge. Though his own social and ethical writing is also in this vein, Thoreau liked at the same time to maintain an aesthetic distance from his own jeremiads: “What offends me most in my compositions is the moral element in them,” he once declared (JT, I, 316).

But neither Thoreau nor Fuller nor the Dial aesthetes deviated appreciably from the ideal of the poet-priest. Channing repeatedly celebrates it in his poetry (“So sacred is his Calling, that no thing / Of disrepute can follow in his path,” etc.), and


The question of whether Thoreau should be approached mainly as a moralist or an aesthete is broached in the Introduction and reappears below in different contexts, in Chapters 7, 8, and 11. The most ambitious attempt to dissociate Thoreau’s aesthetics from Transcendentalist moralism is Joel Porte, Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), which overstates its case in the same way as Braun does for Margaret Fuller (see note 40, above) but is useful in calling attention to the real differences between Thoreau and Emerson.
for a time, with Emerson's encouragement, even dared to think that he might be destined to become the bard of New England. Fuller, in reviewing Emerson, returns with a vengeance to the Emersonian party line: "A man who has within his mind some spark of genius or a capacity for the exercises of talent should consider himself as endowed with a sacred commission. He is the natural priest, the shepherd of the people." The poetry and criticism of the *Dial* breathe this same spirit almost in unison. Even the Transcendentalist ministers and reformers partook of it, albeit more sparingly. Samuel Osgood conceded that "the Beautiful is the rightful priest of the True"; Theodore Parker, who censured the sort of piety which thrives on art but never translates itself into moral action, nevertheless praised Emerson both as a greater artist than Milton and as the foremost religious writer alive.

The list of instances could be extended indefinitely. Altogether there is little doubt that Emerson's romanticist image of the poet-priest was generally accepted by other Transcendentalists as the model for the role of the artist, though they differed considerably in their dedication to it, their disposition for it, and their opinions of its importance. For some it became a life-style—for better or for worse; for others it was primarily a splendid ideal to dream about in one's idle moments. The literary among them naturally made more of it than the minister-reformer contingent. But even the latter adopted it at least to the extent of attaching great importance to inspiration and imagination in preaching.

This was quite understandable. It followed from Transcen-


46 Quotation from *Tr*, p. 166. For Parker's opinions, see *Autobiography, Poems and Prayers*, p. 360; *Sermons of Religion*, p. 268; *American Scholar*, p. 74.
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dentalism's central principle, the affirmation of man's ability to experience God firsthand. This is a doctrine which has to be communicated more by re-creation than analysis. The experience can of course be talked about in the language of analysis; its probability can be established by induction, and so forth. Hence the great importance of the erudition of Ripley, Hedge, and Parker to the Transcendentalist movement. But because spiritual experience is inherently a nonrational thing, indeed a denial in itself of reason and logic, it will not bear to be talked about for very long in the language of the understanding, as Emerson noted. To make it convincing demands all the resources of which language is capable. Sensing this, Emerson wisely accompanied his call for an original relation to the universe (in Nature) with a call for original use of language.

The basis for the idea of the poet-priest was of course also partly temperamental. It is impossible to say just where principles began and personality left off. Had Emerson not been a dreamy, poetic youth, he would not have become a literary man. Perhaps his formidable Aunt Mary Emerson made the profoundest comment on her nephew when she declared that no Emerson "is capable of deep investigation or of long-continued thought." 47 He himself once said of the attraction of the poet's role that "the provocation is not that the Law is there, but the means are alluring" (JE, VI, 144). Had not a number of Transcendentalists felt the same way, the movement might have expressed itself much less in the area of literature and more in, say, abolitionism. Philosophically most of the Transcendentalists were against slavery at least as much as they were for poetry, but being cultivated intellectuals, for the most part they chose to express this protest in a literary way.

Similarly, the central message of Transcendentalism itself, the idea of divine immanence, was not just a stage in the orderly unfolding of religious thought in New England, but the natural

expression of certain particular temperaments to be found in any age. Parker and Brownson, for example, report that as young children they experienced a deep and intimate sense of God’s presence and felt called to the ministry.\textsuperscript{48} They were headed for Transcendentalism before the Unitarian controversy had well begun. Something of the same can be said of Walt Whitman, whose affinities with the Transcendentalists are probably best explained by the fact that he was like a number of them to begin with: dreamy, rather adolescent, unambitious in a conventional way, optimistic yet confused about his identity. All this was chiefly what made Whitman simmer to the point where Emerson could bring him to a boil.

The Transcendentalist ferment might not have amounted to anything, however, had it not been for the particular position of the ministry and the institutional church at this point in history. The ministry had traditionally been the recognized vocational option in New England for young men of altruistic and literary impulses; but the satisfactions of the clerical life were not now what they once were. No longer was the frugal, sometimes penurious, existence of the average preacher offset by the compensation of being revered as a local patriarch, the shepherd of his people. Though according to one estimate the ratio of church members to total population in America nearly doubled between 1800 and 1835,\textsuperscript{49} the connection between pastor and people was actually weakened. Advances in the educational system and in the mass media eroded the minister’s traditional status as the most learned man in the community, even on religious matters. Sectarian disputes divided his congregations and sapped his energy. He had to fight (or join) as never before a


\textsuperscript{49} Winthrop S. Hudson, \textit{Religion in America} (New York: Scribner, 1965), p. 129. The ratio of church attendance to total population Hudson estimates at 40 and 75 per cent respectively.
range of secular outlets for the religious impulse: temperance, antislavery and other reform societies, the lyceum, the religious press, and the like, all of which undermined the uniqueness of the church. By the same token, these organizations, plus opportunities in the west and the sudden proliferation of church-related colleges across the country, created a more enticing variety of alternative vocations for a minister than ever before. As a result, pastoral removals and changes of occupation become so common by 1835 that one observer wondered "whether any will hereafter close their life in the sacred office, unless they are taken away in the very flower of youth." 50

Needless to say, his fear was premature; but among those who did remain in the ministry one often finds paeans to the dignity of the profession alternating with confessions of clerical self-distrust. Orville Dewey, for example, frequently complains about the disparity between the "superstitious reverence and false respect" accorded a minister and the feebleness of his actual influence. "We grapple with the world's strife and trial, but it is in armor. . . . We are a sort of moral eunuchs," Dewey exclaims in one such mood. 51

For the Congregational clergy the loss of social influence was particularly acute, since theirs had been the established church in New England up until the Revolution (and much later in some states). And among Congregationalists, the Unitarians felt the most aggrieved. Though the early years of the movement were a time of exhilaration, during which the Unitarians imagined that they were spearheading a mass reformation in American religion, by the 1830s it had become clear that Unitarianism


was destined to be only a small wave in the tide of religious awakening which was sweeping across the country. In a period of phenomenal growth in the evangelical sects, the Unitarians made little headway; though their ranks included many of the leading men in New England, their denominational strength was confined mainly to Massachusetts. The Orthodox soon counteracted much of their influence within Congregationalism itself by reforms of their own, and as a result by 1855 they outnumbered the Unitarians by almost twenty to one.52 In retrospect it is clear that from the start the Unitarians were in an untenable position. On the one hand, they would not compete in their proselytizing with evangelical protestantism because their distrust of emotionalism made them unwilling to use revivalistic tactics. On the other hand, their appeal to the large body of deists and ethical humanists was limited because they insisted in preserving the vestiges of revelation.

Some Unitarians blamed their lack of success on the Transcendentalists, for discrediting organized religion and for disrupting the life of the church. But Transcendentalism was, as we have seen, a symptom rather than a cause. Seldom have the recognized leaders of a denomination been so critical of it, almost from the start, as were the Unitarians'. Henry Ware, Jr., was sometimes so critical of Unitarians that "it was often said . . . that he was no Unitarian." 53 Channing always spoke disparagingly of sects, liked to think of himself as not belonging to one, and predicted "that our present religious organizations will silently melt away." 54 John G. Palfrey, Dean of the Harvard Divinity School during the 1830s, publicly averred that for the half-century preceding his generation, the Congregational clergy were "with highly honorable exceptions . . . con-

53 Edward Brooks Hall, "Memoir of Henry Ware," Christian Examiner, 40 (1846), 279. Hall rejects the allegation, however.
54 Letter to Western Messenger, 2 (1836), 167.
sidering their obligations and advantages, an exceedingly im-
becile class of men.” Palfrey professed to think better of his
contemporaries, yet he also described the student body of the
Divinity School “as being made up of mystics, skeptics, and dys-
peptics.” Such criticisms, motivated by a variety of factors—
liberal inclination, personal pique, economic problems—natu-
really conspired to undermine morale. The Transcendentalist
controversy brought the problem to the surface and intensified
it. After 1840, the younger Ware observed, it became the fash-
on among ministers of the liberal stamp to “claim nothing on
account of our office; nothing but for our character and ser-
ices.” Ware deplored this policy as “suicidal,” which was quite
correct, but there was little that could be done about it at that
late date except for conservatives to retrench against the liberal
faction, as they did.

Meanwhile, fewer young men were going into the ministry.
The percentage of Harvard graduates who became clergymen
had dropped fairly steadily since the seventeenth century, from
more than 50 per cent in Harvard’s early years to 15 per cent
between 1800 and 1830 to 10 per cent between 1830 and 1850,
until the class of 1855 produced no ministers at all. Of those
students who did graduate work in divinity at Harvard through
1850, only 70 per cent were ordained (as compared to 80 per
cent at the rival Orthodox seminary at Andover) and 25 per
cent of those ordained later left the ministry. “A man enters
the D. School but knows not what shall befall him there, or
where he shall come out of its tortuous track,” wrote Emerson

55 A Sermon Preached at the Installation of Rev. Samuel Kirkland Lo-
throp (Boston: Hale, 1834), p. 10; T. W. Higginson, Cheerful Yesterdays
57 Catalogus Senatus Academici . . . in Universitate Harvardiana (Cam-
bridge: Metcalf, 1857).
58 General Catalogue of the Divinity School of Harvard University (Cam-
bridge: Harvard, 1915); General Catalogue of the Theological Seminary,
in 1841. "Some reappear in trade, some in the navy, some in Swedenborg chapels, some in landscape painting" (JMN, VIII, 119). The situation was not critical, but it was highly disturbing, especially when the defectors from the ministry had the prestige of an Emerson or a Ripley. The period of indecision which young men normally went through before becoming clergymen was now protracted; even the most devout hesitated to commit themselves. All Theodore Parker's friends, for example, "advised [him] against the ministry—it was 'a narrow place, affording no opportunity to do much'"; 59 and though Parker eventually rejected this advice (not without misgivings for some years) he always retained a prejudice against ministers in general, maintaining his self-respect only by believing that he was an exception to the rule.

In short, by the 1830s the state of liberal religion in New England was such as to disaffect a significant number of young men and women of altruistic and/or aesthetic bent who just a generation or so before would have been able to find enough satisfaction in conventional piety, for whom art and personal rapport with nature were more uplifting than sermons and church worship and for whom writing, lecturing, and social action were more rewarding and effectual when done outside the church than within. This was the state of mind underlying Transcendentalism and the vision of the self-reliant poet-priest. Small wonder, then, if that image was such a nebulous one. There was no institutionalized outlet for the ambitions of the Transcendentalists, no socially recognized name for what they wanted to do. They were going through the most severe crisis of identity ("vocation" was their word for it) that New England had seen; they were the first really modern American generation in that respect, as in several others. Henry Nash Smith and other scholars have rightly noted that it was a favorite Tran-

The Transcendentalist pastime to brood about one's vocation. The answers they hit upon were always metaphorical and grandiose. "I would fain be a fisherman, hunter, farmer, preacher, etc., but fish, hunt, farm, preach other things than usual," says Thoreau (JT, VI, 45); and again, "My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature" (JT, VI, 472). Impractical? No matter, for as Emerson said, "a little integrity is better than any career" (W, VI, 189). When John Sullivan Dwight lost his job as a minister in Northampton, Elizabeth Peabody encouraged him to be of good cheer for "the Ravens shall feed thee," and to remain on the spot "and minister in a truly transcendental way to a true church of friends . . . without money & without price—celebrating the communion of the Lord." Such exuberance had its tragic side, in the long run. "All Emerson's young men," Sherman Paul points out, "had trouble in choosing careers; indeed, in looking back over that generation one finds in the wake of Transcendentalism a series of personal failures."

Almost all the Transcendentalists with literary aspirations fell into this category. Emerson encouraged Alcott, Channing, Very, Thoreau, and Fuller in their writing, but if anything his influence kept them from literary success, at least as the world measures it. This was partly because he encouraged them to be uncompromisingly high-minded, partly because his view of the literary vocation was as vague as it was extravagant. Emerson


61 Elizabeth Peabody to John S. Dwight, 24 June 1841, Boston Public Library.

62 Paul, p. 16.
considered himself a poet, "in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter, and specially of the correspondences between these and those." 63 This was an eloquent summation of the relationship between his poetic and pietistic impulses, but it did not readily translate into a practical program for making a living. Thoreau, following in Emerson's footsteps, complained about having experienced "a fullness of life, which does not find any channels to flow into. I feel myself uncommonly prepared for some literary work, but I can select no work" (JT, II, 467). Emerson's lecture on "The Transcendentalist" paints an unconsciously pathetic picture of the younger generation waiting in disaffected aloofness for the call which, as yet, has failed to come.

When the Transcendentalists did achieve literary success on their own terms, they almost inevitably fell short of popular acclaim. "Essays on 'The True, the Beautiful, and the Good,'" as James F. Clarke remarked to a friend, "are in no demand out of the vicinity of Boston." 64 In most cases, therefore, the Transcendentalists made their way in the world only to the extent that they abandoned the ideal of the poet-priest in favor of such institutionalized roles as minister, journalist, surveyor, and housewife. Lecturing in the lyceum was as close as they came to converting a truly transcendental mode of utterance into a popular success. This indeed seemed to be a forum in which unfrocked ministers could display their talents to best advantage. Lecturing involved many of the same oratorical techniques as preaching; it was a rapidly expanding field; and above all, it was open-ended. Anything was possible in the lecture room. "You may laugh, weep, reason, sing, sneer, or pray, according to your genius," Emerson told Carlyle. 65 But as it turned out,

65 The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle, ed. Joseph Slater (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 171. In the early years of the
only Emerson and Parker among the Transcendentalists had much success in the lyceum. The other Transcendentalists found that the demand there, just as in preaching, was mainly for the entertaining, the easily intelligible, and the morally inoffensive. Without the notoriety of a Parker or the mystique of an Emerson, the Transcendentalist could not expect much more than an occasional honorarium.

In retrospect, it would appear that the Transcendentalist literati were in a doubly anomalous position, in relation to their times. On the one hand, they were in advance of their public in claiming more for the role of the poet than most of New England was prepared to admit. But on the other hand, they were also in a sense seeking to preserve the Puritan conception of the literary life in an era when that conception was fast becoming extinct. In picturing the role of the Poet in essentially religious terms, the Transcendentalists sought, in effect, to subsume their aesthetic impulses within the traditional theocentric framework of New England culture. As a result, in many respects they have more in common with Timothy Dwight and Edward Taylor than with the newly emerging class of literary professionals, such as Irving, Cooper, Poe, and even Hawthorne and Melville.

As we proceed to examine the Transcendentalist aesthetic in more detail, we should keep in mind these anomalies in their position. Not for sympathy's sake, since most of them have won their posthumous laurels, but as a reminder that the sort of literary vocation they had in mind cannot be easily pigeonholed. They themselves were vague about what they wanted, and what

lyceum, ministers appear to have been much better represented than any other occupational group. Of those persons listed as having lectured at the Concord Lyceum during its first fifty years (1829–1878), for example, about 30 per cent were ministers (Proceedings on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Organization of the Concord Lyceum [Concord: Tolman and White, 1879]). For a short history of the lyceum movement, especially in New England, see Carl Bode, The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).
they wanted was not simply aesthetic or spiritual but a combination of the two. To a modern reader it may well seem that their criticism and their art were vitiated by the intermixture, but the reverse is actually more true. The view of the artist's vocation as profoundly religious, for which the Unitarian movement had prepared the way, was a liberating conception for them. If it helps account for their shortcomings, it is also a key to their power.