2 Transcendentalist Literary Method: Inspiration versus Craftsmanship

We have witnessed the Transcendentalists' admiration for the vocation of the poet-priest. But what exactly does such an individual do? What sort of utterance is demanded of him, and what sort of discipline must he master if he is to achieve it?

At first sight, the Transcendentalists' ideas about literary method seem rather desultory, even abortive. The couplet inscribed on Emerson's gravestone would have made a good epitaph for the group as a whole: "The passive Master lent his hand / To the vast soul that o'er him planned." All Transcendentalist attempts to describe how art is to be created, and the impact which it should make upon its audience, begin and end with the idea of inspiration.¹ "Genius" is lauded, "talent" dis-

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paraged. "There can be no will in composition," Alcott insists. "The spirit within is the only writer" (JA, p. 206). The poet "does not seek his song," says Brownson, "it comes to him. It is given him." 2 Jones Very even professed to value his poems "not because they were his but because they were not." 3 Emerson agreed. "A work of art," he says, "is something which the Reason created in spite of the hands" (JMN, V, 206), lasting "in proportion as it was not polluted by the wilfulness of the writer, but flowed from his mind after the divine order of cause and effect" (W, XII, 466). At such times as these, Emerson sounds like those early protestants who claimed that good works are actually an impediment to salvation.

But even as Emerson seems to be recommending a sort of automatic writing, he is apt to come out with a shrewd remark which suggests the opposite, as in his objections to Very and Ellery Channing: "Is the poetic inspiration amber to embalm & enhance flies & spiders? . . . Cannot the spirit parse & spell?" 4 Although Emerson was a fanciful theorist, he could be a demanding editor and good practical critic. Another example is his mixed opinion of Wordsworth and Tennyson. Wordsworth, most Transcendentalists agreed, had genius; 5 Tennyson had talent; each seemed deficient in the other category. In principle, Emerson was prepared to venerate Wordsworth and disparage Tennyson as "a beautiful half of a poet" (JMN, VII, 83). But he did not rest in this view. Picking up a new volume of Wordsworth in 1835, for instance, Emerson reminds himself (as if about to take medicine) that "I may find dulness & flatness, but I shall not find meanness & error." But on the next day he exclaims: "What platitudes I find in Wordsworth. 'I poet bestow my verse on this & this & this.' Scarce has he dropped the

3 Quoted in JMN, VIII, 52.
5 Brownson's review (see note 2 above) was the only dissent.
smallest piece of an egg, when he fills the barnyard with his cackle" (JMN, V, 99, 100). After such fatuities, Tennyson comes as "a godsend." 6 In the one essay in which they are compared, "Europe and European Books," Emerson moves with an obvious sense of relief from the former to the latter.

Again, Emerson was often carried away by what he took to be a new genius, in whom he placed "a faith approaching to superstition," as Alcott said; 7 but he was quick to have second thoughts. Alcott, Carlyle, Charles King Newcomb, Walt Whitman, and Emma Lazarus were all warmly praised at first, then coolly reappraised in much the same manner as Very and Channing. The famous letter to Whitman, so often taken as a key link in the great causal chain to which one reduces American literature for mythological purposes, is only one instance of the recurring syndrome, in Emerson's criticism, of high praise giving way to critical reservations followed by qualified respect. Nor was Emerson totally spontaneous when it came to his own writing. No method of composition could have been less spontaneous, indeed, than his practice of piecing together mosaics from journal to lecture to essay.

The same common sense, underneath a rhetoric of inspiration, can be found in all the other Transcendentalists with any claim to literary importance except for Channing and Very, and even Channing revised his manuscripts. Contrasting Byron and Goethe, Margaret Fuller concluded that untutored genius was great but cultivated genius was greater. 8 Thoreau, similarly, accepted the theory of inspiration, but with the proviso that "we blunder into no discovery but it will appear that we have prayed and disciplined ourselves for it" (JT, IX, 53). This statement represents pretty well the actual, as opposed to the apparent, consensus among the major Transcendentalists on the subject of inspiration. They were all enamored of the idea of inspiration, and hastened to ascribe as much as possible to it, even the

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6 Letters, III, 74.  
7 Concord Days (Boston: Roberts, 1872), p. 38.  
8 Literature and Art (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), I, 50.
literary grubwork. (Witness Emerson's declaration that the process of revising over a period of time does not negate his theory, because each part of the composition comes to the writer in a flash of insight (JMN, VII, 216–217). But as refined and sensitive people, they demanded satisfaction from the finished product. Discipline, then, was a hidden but genuine part of the Transcendentalist aesthetic. Even Jones Very served an apprenticeship in sonneteering before he wrote his "inspired" pieces, though he may not have regarded it as such.

In some ways the Transcendentalist view of the creative process resembles the attitude taken toward the workings of grace in the covenant theology of the Puritans. In each case, the individual is theoretically powerless and the spirit does the work. All believe and delight in the absolute sovereignty of God or the Muse as the case may be. But the doctrine of sovereignty is hedged about with qualifications as to the importance of individual preparation. These qualifications were muted enough to expose both Puritans and Transcendentalists to the charge of antinomianism, but distinct enough to allow both to repudiate it.

The analogy must not be pushed too hard, or it will make Emerson, with his fondness for the Plotinian theory of the poet's divine madness, seem altogether too respectable; but the resemblances that do exist are more than coincidental, as the Transcendentalists' use of biblical language to talk about the creative process should have suggested. However much it relies for its expression on such literary jargon as genius/talent, imagination/fancy, and classic/romantic, their theory of creativity begins, like the concept of the poet-priest itself, with their intui-

tions about religious experience. Inspiration did not mean for
them a great idea for a poem or story, so much as the experience
of that Truth or Reality of which the finished work was to be
the expression. We must bear in mind this equation of crea-
tivity with spiritual or intellectual fulfilment if we are to under-
stand not only the theoretical importance they attached to in-
spiration but also their practical attention to craftsmanship.
Though these attitudes might seem incompatible, both are con-
sistent with the Transcendentalists' peculiar beliefs as renegade
Unitarians. Their chief weapon against Unitarian "rational-
ism," as we have seen, was to insist that all men have direct ac-
cess to the deity. And yet none of them, except Jones Very and
perhaps Theodore Parker, seem to have been steady partakers
in the divine experience they celebrate. No Transcendentalists
wrote diaries like those of many pious evangelicals, with their
almost daily attributions of particular events to providence. To
be sure, this is explicable partly on technical grounds. The
Transcendentalists, like the Unitarians, tended to discount such
claims as superstitious, at best quaint, at worst delusive. They
viewed spiritual fulfilment in terms of human, natural excel-
lence rather than in terms of supernatural intervention. "Which
is greater & more affecting?" Emerson asks, "to see some won-
derful bird descending out of the sky, or, to see the rays of a
heavenly majesty of the mind & heart emitted from the counte-
nance & port of a man?" (JMN, VII, 236). The true mystical
experience, that is, is a transfiguration from within and not a
message or thunderbolt from without. But even this sort of
experience is rarely recorded by the Transcendentalists. If one
excepts their obviously fictitious recreations of ecstasy, like
"Bacchus" and "Merlin," as merely vicarious and wish-fulfill-
ing, there are not more than a score of mystical experiences
reported by the whole lot of them to rival in emotional intensity
the habitual fervor of some of the great American revivalists.
Alcott and Fuller each had several; Orestes Brownson had vi-
sions in his childhood; Charles King Newcomb and Ellery Channing record none. Emerson gives us something like the real article in “Each and All” and the two anecdotes in the first chapter of Nature—crossing the common and becoming a transparent eyeball; but all three of these are literary elaborations of observations which are reported in a comparatively matter-of-fact way in his journal. The closest thing to a detailed account of an ecstatic experience to be found in all his writing is the description of his illumination in Mt. Auburn Cemetery in 1834 (JMN, IV, 272–273). Thoreau’s writings are almost as unmystical. Judging from his frequent complaints in later life of a loss of spontaneous perception, it may well be, as Ethel Seybold says, that he was “a youthful mystic” who later “lost the ability to enter the ecstatic state.” In any case, he left little record of such experiences, with the exception of a few journal passages (e.g., JT, VIII, 43–45) and three more literary descriptions, all written during the 1840s: two in A Week (on “Monday” night and “Tuesday” morning) and one in “Ktaadn.” For the most part Thoreau’s writing conveys the sense of a highly self-conscious and rational intelligence.

This hasty census suggests that despite what the Transcendentalists said about inspiration, they were nearly as Unitarian in


12 One cannot dogmatize about Thoreau, however. Some readers might also wish, for example, to include Thoreau’s excitement near the end of “Spring” and his moment of cosmic reassurance in “Baker Farm,” although I myself find the first too naturalistic and the second too self-consciously mythical as well as a bit tongue-in-cheek.
their emotional restraint as they were in their distrust of particular providences. Emerson, for example, disliked the "restlessness and fever" of Fuller's religious enthusiasm (Ossoli, I, 309). "He who trusts to sudden flashes of good feeling and excitement, follows no safe guide," says the persona in one of Cranch's parables. Altogether, Transcendentalism was not so much an antirational reaction to Unitarianism as it was, in Clarence Gohdes' admirable phrase, "Unitarianism in the process of 'getting religion.'" Theirs was a highly intellectual, almost a hypothetical mysticism, more talked about than felt. It was not so much that they lacked the emotional capacity for such experience, but that they were too sophisticated to be uninhibited about it, and also too conscientious or unselfish to want to wall themselves up forever with God, without trying to communicate with others. "One must not seek to dwell always in contemplation of the Spirit," Emerson cautioned, lest he become indolent and helpless (JMN, VIII, 188). "The spiritual life," another Transcendentalist minister agreed, "demands, rather contains in itself, the germ which produces . . . utterance of word, utterance of deed." It may be significant that the most passionate men among the Transcendentalists, Brownson and Parker, were also the most committed to logic, as if they felt compelled to rationalize their emotion, and that both found fulfilment in religio-social causes: Catholicism in Brownson's case, theological and social reform in Parker's. Parker's temperament was especially paradoxical. Time and again he insists that belief is a matter of intuition not subject to proof, and from such sermons as "The Delights of Piety" it would seem that he experienced this feeling as much as any man. But at the same time he feels driven to bolster his intuitionalism by copious demonstration and encyclopedic reference.

He seems to have had a farm-boy's simple trust in the power of knowledge, as well as a farm-boy's simple faith. Parker pushes the intuitions still further into the background by insisting upon the moral life as the test of piety. "Parkerism," as a result, is as much rationalism and social gospel as it is Transcendentalism, though the latter is its starting point.

Nowhere are the Transcendentalists' lurking reservations about the validity of inspiration more evident than in their reaction to Jones Very. None of the Transcendentalists were much impressed with Very's messianic claims, not even Alcott, who was most sympathetic. They realized that he spoke reason in madness, but it was still madness. James Freeman Clarke, for instance, draws the following conclusion from Very's insistence to Dr. Channing that he did everything "in obedience to the spirit," even so small an act as walking across the room and leaning on the mantel: "And, indeed, if it has become a habit of the soul to be led in all things, great and small, why not in this too? Only, I suppose, that most of us would not think it worth while to consult the Spirit in such a purely automatic action as this." 16 This is the voice of urbanity curbing the misguided enthusiast, the same voice which speaks in Emerson's comments about Brook Farm, or the Chardon Street Convention, or Edward Palmer, the man who wanted to abolish money. In a way, Yvor Winters was quite right when he said that Very "had the experience which Emerson merely recommends." 17 Emerson admitted as much himself: "'Tis remarkable that our faith in ecstasy consists with total inexperience of it" (W, VI, 213). Indeed, as his writings show, the faith thrived on the inexperience: after the late 1830s, Emerson's praise of inspiration actually gets more effusive the more he complains about his own lack of it. As he felt his powers of perception wane, inspiration seemed progressively more wonderful.

17 Maule's Curse (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1938), p. 127.
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Still, Emerson sold himself short, with characteristic modesty. Nor should we judge the other Transcendentalists by their reactions to Very. Though they fell short of hierophancy, and were skeptical of Harvard tutors who suddenly claimed to be prophets, there is no question that they experienced inspiration of a sort, perhaps many times. At least they thought so. Emerson, Hedge, Parker, Thomas Stone, and Thoreau all undertook to give a general description of what it felt like.¹⁸ The best-known accounts are Emerson's descriptions of afflatus in "The Poet" and "The Over-Soul." But one gets a better idea of the experiential basis for these idealized pictures if we turn to a passage with a more personal ring.

We say I will walk abroad, and the truth will take form and clearness to me. We go forth, but cannot find it. It seems as if we needed only the stillness and composed attitude of the library to seize the thought. But we come in, and are as far from it as at first. Then, in a moment, and unannounced, the truth appears. A certain wandering light appears, and is the distinction, the principle, we wanted. But the oracle comes because we had previously laid siege to the shrine. It seems as if the law of the intellect resembled that law of nature by which we now inspire, now expire the breath . . . , the law of undulation. [W, II, 331–332]

The "inspiration" reported here is modest, but genuine. Everyone has encountered it in some form. It is not the road to Damascus or the Pentacostal fire, but a very natural thing, as natural as breathing, but also mysterious and involuntary, although Emerson is careful to note that we can prepare for it to some extent. It was this sort of phenomenon which formed the primary existential basis for the Transcendentalist theory of literary inspiration. When they talk, that is, of the poet as hav-

¹⁸ In addition to previous citations, see Parker, A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion, ed. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1907), pp. 203–205; Hedge, "The Transfiguration: A Sermon," Western Messenger, 5 (1838), 82–88; Stone, Sermons, pp. 87–108.
ing direct access to godhead, their confidence derives mainly from having known such flashes of insight. When they talk of the possibility of a “perpetual revelation,” they probably have in mind such insight extended and intensified to the nth power—not so much delirious transport as perfect powers of perception and sensitivity to one’s surroundings. It was the failure to gain this anticipated level of awareness, rather than a deep allegiance to the idea of the divine madness in itself, which led Emerson during his middle years to overdramatize the process of inspiration as an almost supernatural event.19

Applying the same line of thought to religious experience as well as the intellectual illumination just quoted, one might contend that there was no real difference between the kind of inspiration felt by Transcendentalists and by other Unitarians, and by many modern believers, for that matter. This is suggested, for example, by Parker’s description of comfort after prayer as a true inspiration. Some conservatives might have quibbled with his definition even as they shared precisely the same experience. Actually, as we have seen, the Unitarians did not categorically deny that there was such a thing as inspiration, and that it might be at work in such a case as Parker cited; they simply claimed less, claimed that it did not imply an identity of the soul with God, that its workings were indistinguishable from other mental acts. Conversely, while the Transcendentalists considered inspiration as a special experience, the most exciting fact of life, they did not think that it should take violent or perverse forms of expression. “It is no turbulent emotion,” cautions F. H. Hedge, “no fever of the blood—no unnatural heat. It has nothing of the whirlwind or the tempest, but that repose which belongs alike to nature and to mind in their most healthy moods—the calmness of the sunshine—the

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tranquillity of intense contemplation." 20 Similarly, for most other Transcendentalists, as Howard Mumford Jones has said, "religion was an experience above, not beneath, the rational faculty." 21 Father Edward Taylor, with his uninhibited sallies of earthy rhetoric, qualified as inspired; Jones Very, when he started to prophesy in garbled Old Testamentese, became suspect.

The fact remains, however, that once the Transcendentalists began to dwell upon the glories of inspiration, they found it hard to apply the brakes. The sense of exuberance one feels in his best moments; the effort of striving to recapture it; the delight of believing that man is truly divine; the awareness that inspiration comes by surprise—all these considerations led them to condone and even to cultivate an extravagance of statement, if not behavior, which goes well beyond what they said in their more sober moments. So it was quite natural that Emerson, in his criticism, should regard genius as implicitly including craftsmanship and yet at the same time choose to view the whole creative process as a divine mystery. Although he knew very well the importance of discipline to writing and to inspiration itself, he believed so strongly that the decisive factor in composition was unpredictable and he attached such a cosmic significance to it that he couldn't bring himself to praise discipline very highly. Though F. O. Matthiessen oversimplifies in saying that the Transcendentalist notion of art as inspiration is necessarily "in sharp opposition" to the idea of art as craftsmanship, such did prove to be the case in some instances, not so much for Emerson and Thoreau as for some of the less gifted Transcendentalists. 22 The reluctance of Very and Channing to comply with Emerson's editorial requests has been alluded to. Alcott and Fuller might also have taken more pains with their writing

20 Hedge, "The Transfiguration," p. 84.
22 American Renaissance, p. 25.
had they not been discouraged so quickly by the task of getting their insights down on paper. John S. Dwight came to grief as a preacher when, for a time, he took literally the principle of spontaneity and did not prepare. W. H. Channing could deliver beautiful extemporaneous orations but he wrote turgid prose; his biographer rightly says that he dissipated his talents. So did Cranch, who upbraided himself in old age for having "wooed too many mistresses." 23

Despite this list of casualties, however, distrust of discipline per se was probably less of a problem for the Transcendentalists in the long run than confusion as to the nature of discipline. They recognized no distinction between art and life. They imbibed too eagerly the critical commonplace of their day, that to be a great artist one must be a good man. If an "immoral" person (like Goethe) seemed to have written a great book, then either the man really did have a great soul underneath or the book itself was somehow flawed. 24 This assumption is philosophically defensible; the real difficulty came when the Transcendentalists tried to reverse the idea and claim that the good man will be a good writer. That is exactly the position Emerson takes in "The Poet," in prescribing an ascetic regime for his bard: "Never can any advantage be taken of nature by a trick. . . . The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body" (W, III, 28). Thoreau's version of this idea is easier to misread but also adamant: "Nothing goes by luck in composition. It allows of no tricks. The best you can write will be the best you are. Every sentence is the result of a long probation. The author's character is read from title-page


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to end” (JT, I, 225–226). Here too the speaker dedicates himself
to a discipline, and at first it seems to be the craft of writing. But it is not. Sincerity and moral seriousness are really what he is after. “The problem of the artist for Thoreau,” Sherman Paul sums up, “was a question of depth,” not of expertise, and the same is true in even greater measure of the other Transcendentalists.

Given the times in which the Transcendentalists lived, their viewpoint is not at all surprising. The idea of art as an expression of character was a standard romantic assumption; it was also a classical assumption, and a Christian assumption too. It was drummed into Harvard students by every Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, beginning with John Quincy Adams. What is provocatively unique about the Transcendentalists is the seriousness with which they took it. It was no mere cultural shibboleth with them. Here, as at several other points, what differentiates them from the great English romantics as well as such compatriots as Hawthorne and Poe is not so much their critical principles as the strictness with which they applied them. Thus Coleridge’s response to the gap between Wordsworth’s theory of language and its practice was to criticize the theory, whereas Brownson’s was to criticize the practice, to take Wordsworth to task for writing in a too artificial manner. Likewise, the Transcendentalists took the messianic implications of the poet-priest more seriously than all English romantics except Blake and Shelley.

In their more worldly moments, the shrewdest Transcendentalists conceded that morality and art didn’t always go hand in hand, as when Margaret Fuller went out of her way to insist that Byron’s dissipation did nothing to impair his power as a writer. Most of them, indeed, were sensitive to the power of

27 Literature and Art, I, 76.
language as an independent instrument; they simply considered it trivial if not employed in the service of truth. Such high-mindedness prevented them from grappling with the technical problems of craftsmanship as effectively as they might have otherwise. They preferred to jump from fact to essence, from the nuts and bolts of technique to affirmations like "The true poem is not that which the public read"; "Life is the Poem; Man is the Poet," and so forth. Because of this attitude, they quickly became dissatisfied with art as a whole, for it was obvious that even the greatest works do not fully realize the inspiration that gave rise to them. Not even the writers of the Bible, Andrews Norton had shown, had been able to do that. Like Shelley, the Transcendentalists regarded art as at best a fading coal, a feeble replica of the original experience. They tended to be hardest on the best books, as being the most pretentious. Tennyson was declared lovely but facile, Wordsworth noble but dull, Coleridge and Carlyle provocative but bigoted, Goethe splendid but dilettantish, Shakespeare great but morally unsound. By keeping their eye so scrupulously on the absolute, the Transcendentalists thus short-circuited themselves both as critics and artists. When confronted with a work of art which came close to meeting their standards, which did seem worthy of discussion, they were unable to account for it, let alone rival it. And this, in turn, reinforced their sense of creativity as miraculous.

An interesting case of this sort is Cyrus Bartol's response to a Madonna of Raphael which he saw in Dresden. This picture captivated him, especially the eyes of the child, in which there is, in what manner I know not, by what art or inspiration painted I surely cannot tell, a supremacy of control which principalities above or below might well fear to disobey, as though that were the final authority of the universe.

... Long did I inspect, and often did I go back to re-examine,

28 See especially ibid., II, 2–4, where Fuller argues that serious literature should be judged by higher standards than popular literature.
this mystery, which so foiled my criticism, and constrained my wonder, and convinced me, as nothing visible beside had ever done, that if no picture is to be worshipped, something is to be worshipped; that is to be worshipped which such a picture indicates or portrays. But the problem was too much for my solving.\(^{29}\)

Clearly Bartol \textit{wants} to remain mystified. He wants badly to draw a pious conclusion from this encounter, as he does from all the other "pictures of Europe" presented in his book. But it is clear too that he has approached the picture not just as a minister but as a critic; he has made a great effort to understand it, and failed. His praise of the artist's inspiration is a confession of personal inadequacy as well as an act of reverence.

This very Jamesian image of the preacher-aesthete overcome by the European masterpiece makes a good epitome of the Transcendentalist writer's predicament. His New England background had trained him to be a connoisseur of piety rather than of art, yet led him to the conclusion that great art was a high expression of piety. But how was he to be an artist, or even a critic, when his forte was the moral life? He might be aware that the Madonna was composed of brushstrokes and paint, but he could appreciate it only as the expression of spirit. This dilemma was almost as severe for Thoreau as it was for Bartol. Though Thoreau was a lot closer to being a professional writer and rated D.D.'s lower than chickadees, he could no more than Bartol be satisfied with a conception of art as craft.

Fortunately the problem implied its own solution, namely an expressivist-didactic form of art in which one's thought or experience or perception was uttered and regulated as deftly as possible but was still the dominant element. At best, if one was lucky or worked hard enough, the result would have the roundness of a masterpiece as well as the authenticity of truth. If not, it would at least be heartfelt, which was more than one could say for most art; it would be emancipated from the kind

\(^{29}\) \textit{Pictures of Europe, Framed in Ideas} (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1855), pp. 203–204.
of triviality which the Transcendentalists disparaged in “men of talent” like Longfellow. Indeed a little roughness might be a good thing: “The kingly bard/ Must smite the chords rudely and hard,” says Emerson’s Merlin (W, IX, 120). One representative literary model for the sort of utterance the Transcendentalists wanted was the ancient bard or prophet, a man of high seriousness, “rude and massive proportions” rather than “smooth and delicate finish,” 30 who would express himself with vehemence and enthusiasm in gnomic, picturesque speech.

He may not stoop to pander to the herd,
Their fickle tastes and morbid appetites,
He hath upon his lips a holy word,
And he must heed not if it cheers or blights,
So it be Truth.31

Thus spake Cranch—a representative view of the poet’s role. He himself was not too successful in his imitation of it, to say the least, nor was most Transcendentalist poetry. Thoreau tries in his doggerel:

Conscience is instinct bred in the house,
Feeling and Thinking propagate the sin
By an unnatural breeding in and in.
I say, Turn it out doors,
Into the moors. [Wr, I, 75]

But this sounds less like the bard than like the local crank. Very had a better sense of the prophetic tone:

Thou art more deadly than the Jew of old,
Thou hast his weapons hidden in thy speech;

30 Wr, I, 378–379. See also Nelson F. Adkins, “Emerson and the Bardic Tradition,” PMLA, 63 (1948), 662–677. The direct influence of bardic poetry on the Transcendentalists was slight; the bard was important rather as an image of the type of role they envisioned—a combination of artist and lawgiver. Among literary examples of the prophetic mode, the Bible was far more important to the Transcendentalists than any other.

31 “The Poet,” Western Messenger, 6 (1838), 90.
And though thy hand from me thou dost withhold,
They pierce where sword and spear could never reach.\textsuperscript{32}

But his imagery is usually so derivative that his utterance seems like a pastiche or masquerade rather than the real thing. Perhaps Emerson came closest in his Channing Ode:

\begin{verbatim}
Virtue palters; Right is hence;
Freedom praised, but hid;
Funeral eloquence
Rattles the coffin-lid. \ [W, IX, 77]
\end{verbatim}

On the whole, though, prose was a more congenial medium for the Transcendentalists, especially if the occasion happened to be a lecture or sermon:

Nothing changes more from age to age than the doctrines taught as Christian, and insisted on as essential to Christianity and personal salvation. What is falsehood in one province passes for truth in another. The heresy of one age is the orthodox belief and "only infallible rule" of the next. Now Arius, and now Athanasius, is lord of the ascendant. Both were excommunicated in their turn, each for affirming what the other denied. Men are burned for professing what men are burned for denying. \textit{[Tr, p. 266]}

This passage, from Parker's "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," comes closer than the poetry just quoted to what "Merlin" calls for: artful thunder. It has a truly prophetic sweep and intensity, combined with aphoristic bite. Emerson's Divinity School Address is in the same vein, though Parker is harder-hitting and much more explicit and orderly than Emerson (which explains why Parker aroused more opposition). The pervasiveness of this sort of rhetoric throughout Transcendentalist writing can be seen by glancing through any anthology. It appears in staccato in Brownson's \textit{News Views}:

I do not misread the age. I have not looked upon the world only out from the window of my closet; I have mingled in its busy

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Poems and Essays}, p. 88.
scenes; I have rejoiced and wept with it; I have hoped and feared, and believed and doubted with it, and I am but what it has made me. I cannot misread it. It craves union. [Tr, p. 123]

Where Brownson is merely strident, Thoreau likes to make his point more obliquely, by elaborating his exempla:

The best men that I know are not serene, a world in themselves. For the most part, they dwell in forms, and flatter and study effect only more finely than the rest. We select granite for the underpinning of our houses and barns; we build fences of stone; but we do not ourselves rest on an underpinning of granitic truth, the lowest primitive rock. Our sills are rotten. What stuff is the man made of who is not coexistent in our thought with the purest and subtillest truth? [Wr, IV, 470]

This is the Emersonian technique of showing man's shabbiness by comparison to nature, with the Thoreauvian twist of contrasting the poverty of our inner lives with the quality of our possessions.

The manifesto-note is not the only one the Transcendentalists favored, although it is the easiest to hear. Much of the time, they employed what we would regard as a normative or conventional style of writing. Nor, when they strove for special effects, did they always try to play Jeremiah or Taliessen, any more than Renaissance poets tried to write only epics. Another style, for instance, of which several of them were equally if not more fond, was the ruminative, especially in a pastoral setting. Thoreau's reflection on autumn flowers, in A Week, is an example:

There is a peculiar interest belonging to the still later flowers, which abide with us the approach of winter. There is something witch-like in the appearance of the witch-hazel, which blossoms late in October and in November, with its irregular and angular spray and petals like furies' hair, or small ribbon streamers. Its blossoming, too, at this irregular period, when other shrubs have
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lost their leaves, as well as blossoms, looks like witches' craft. Certainly it blooms in no garden of man's. There is a whole fairy-land on the hillside where it grows. [Wr, I, 318–319]

This passage gives us the prophet off-duty, so to speak, relaxing. Instead of lofty didacticism for public purposes, we see him playing with the significance of things. His vehemence has diffused into the dreamy atmosphere of fairyland. But it is still moral art: much as he loves nature for herself, Thoreau is not content to stay on the descriptive level alone, even in his later work where there is much less of reverie.

Some other Transcendentalist works which use this style, in whole or in part, are Emerson's "Musketaquid," "Saadi," "Woodnotes," "Stonehenge" (in English Traits), and the second essay on "Nature"; Judd's Margaret; Fuller's Summer on the Lakes; some of Very's nature poems; and much of Ellery Channing's verse. Next to Thoreau, Channing was fondest of pastoral meditation. His poetry in this vein (the best of which is better than it has been given credit for being, as I attempt to show in Chapter 9) ranges widely in content between description and didacticism, and between a leisurely and a compressed style. "Moonlight" is an example of his compression:

He came and waved a little silver wand,
He dropped the veil that hid a statue fair,
He drew a circle with that pearly hand,
His grace confined that beauty in the air;—
Those limbs so gentle, now at rest from flight,
Those quiet eyes now musing on the night.33

The stock imagery here is largely redeemed by the poem's compactness and elusive quality: who "he" is is not at first apparent; the last two lines suggest both Luna and someone ob-

serving her. As with the passage from Thoreau, the evocation of atmosphere is primary here, but it is an atmosphere in which one is induced to look for meanings.

Prophecy and meditation, manifesto and reverie, the bardic and the pastoral, Merlin and Saadi—much of Transcendentalist writing oscillates between these opposites. The charm of Walden, for instance, consists to a large extent in Thoreau's way of alternating between them. Such formulations are simplistic, of course; we shall need to look much more closely at the range of stylistic conventions underlying Transcendentalist literary expression. For now, the point to recognize is that the Transcendentalist idea of craftsmanship, however vaguely articulated, is not a contradiction in terms. Though their theory of inspiration kept them from coping with the practical problems of their craft as clear-sightedly as they might otherwise have done, most of the Transcendentalists interpreted the theory as explaining but not precluding literary labor. Although the kinds of expression which chiefly interested them emphasized message and tone at the expense of aesthetic symmetry and logical precision, the Transcendentalists were by no means insensitive in their understanding and use of the intricacies of those points of style best suited to their ends.