

## Between Faith and Unbelief

# Studies in the History of Christian Traditions

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# Between Faith and Unbelief

American Transcendentalists and  
the Challenge of Atheism

*By*  
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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter I. “The Spirit of Infidelity”: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harvard’s Early Göttingen Students.....	5
Chapter II. The “Credentials” of Faith: The Miracles Controversy in New England .....	31
Chapter III. The Arch-Fiend of Christian Faith: David Friedrich Strauss and New England Divinity .....	53
Chapter IV. The Claims of History: Strauss’s “Mytho-Mania” and After .....	77
Chapter V. Man as God-Maker: Feuerbachian Atheism in New England .....	95
Chapter VI. From Idealism to Atheism: Theodore Parker and the Projection Theory of Religion .....	123
Chapter VII. The “Cures for Atheism”: Emerson and Jakob Böhme.....	149
Chapter VIII. “A World Without God”: Emerson and Arthur Schopenhauer.....	173
Conclusion .....	201
Selected Bibliography .....	205
Index .....	215



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The chapters on David Friedrich Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Arthur Schopenhauer draw on articles that first appeared in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* (vol. 40 (1994); vol. 42 (1996); vol. 47 (2001)). Chapter VI goes back to an article in *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* (vol. 26 (1999)). Chapter VII appeared in slightly different form in *ZAA: Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* (vol. 53 (2005)).





## INTRODUCTION

This book sets out to shed light on what is specific to American Transcendentalism by comparing it with the atheistic vision of German philosophers and theologians like Ludwig Feuerbach and Arthur Schopenhauer. The term “atheism” literally means “without theism” or without belief in the existence of God. This is sometimes sub-divided into “positive atheism,” which includes an outright denial of the very idea of God, and “negative atheism,” implying a world-view that insists on the absence of God. Atheism technically refers both to the belief that there is no personal God as an object of faith and the claim that a God cannot exist. The present study demonstrates that the former position became a powerful challenge but also an expressible belief among American Transcendentalists. This is not to suggest that all the thinkers discussed were atheists in the true sense of the word, since the term atheism was often used as an accusation against critics of religion who seemed to present a threat to established beliefs. However, this study does argue that atheism was part of the discursive and religious context from which American Transcendentalism emerged.

The first published works of the young Transcendentalists led to an enormous outcry from the representatives of Unitarian establishment. They attacked not only the new style and the new content but also the writers themselves. Among the many epithets hurled at the Transcendentalists one finds terms like “infidel,” “agnostic,” “skeptic,” “dissenter,” and “freethinker.” Of this list of accusations, infidel was the most pervasive. In the context of the Unitarian-Transcendentalist debates, infidelity became the most common term for an atheism that referred primarily to the rejection of the supernatural God of historical Christianity. Within the Unitarian-Transcendentalist tradition, which is the focus here, atheism had many other faces. A comprehensive description of the New England debate over atheism would, among other things, have to trace the corrosive implications of Lockean empiricism, Hume’s skepticism, and French materialism. While these aspects of the battle over atheism have been explored by many scholars, the present study examines the distinctive contribution of German

“infidels” whose alleged atheism eventually was to move beyond a mere debunking of historical Christianity.

For Unitarian critics, the Transcendentalists’ “infidelity” was primarily a result of their growing receptivity to the religious and philosophical models of Germany. Thus the Unitarian Andrews Norton traced in the Transcendentalists’ works the omnipresence of the “modern German school of infidelity.” American Transcendentalists absorbed a wealth of learning and philosophy from this school, but no single source was their mentor. The present study is therefore not primarily a source study; rather, it argues that tendencies toward atheism were inherent in Transcendentalist thought. The threat of atheism was thus not as new as Unitarian critics like Samuel Osgood assumed; it was already latent in the Transcendentalist platform long before the menacing shades of German atheism became known to larger audiences. The atheist scenario came to the surface in the controversy about Emerson’s “new views.” Emerson was repeatedly criticized for solipsism. The deity Emerson worshipped was, it seemed, himself. God became an index of the inner life of man. Emersonian Transcendentalism thus anticipated some of the central concerns in the works of German atheists like Feuerbach.

Beyond illuminating the atheistic tendencies that accompanied the rise of Transcendentalism, the story of German “infidelity” in New England also brings into sharper focus the intellectual forces that carried Transcendentalism beyond historical Christianity into disbelief in God as an object of faith—a conclusion explicitly confronted in Theodore Parker’s sermons on *Theism, Atheism, and the Popular Theology* (1853), Orestes Brownson’s *Essay in Refutation of Atheism* (1873), and Frederic Henry Hedge’s study *Atheism in Philosophy and Other Essays* (1884). In particular Parker’s detailed discussions of German atheism attest to the prevalence of the atheist issue among New England divines, belying James Turner’s assertion in *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (1985) about the “freakishness” and “exotic” nature of “out-and-out disbelief in God” before the 1860s.

The following chapters examine the variety of positions implied by the phenomenon of “unbelief” and argue that the charge of atheism leveled against the Transcendentalist “new school” was not just projected into its devaluation of evidential theology but rather also pointed to an anthropocentric strain implicit in the Transcendentalist platform. A study of this aspect of Transcendentalist thought sheds light on a largely overlooked critique of Transcendentalism, one less con-

cerned with the “new school’s” rejection of historical Christianity and more focused on its threat to religion in general. Parker’s and Emerson’s contemporary critics were acutely aware of tendencies toward an implicit atheism that emerged from an extreme transhistorical idealism. According to critics like Brownson, the transcendental idealist was prone to an anthropotheistic viewpoint that dissolved the divine in man. From idealism to atheism seemed but a short step.



## CHAPTER ONE

### “THE SPIRIT OF INFIDELITY”: RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND HARVARD’S EARLY GÖTTINGEN STUDENTS

Shortly before leaving Göttingen University in 1825, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s brother William was convinced that after his theological studies he was no longer in accord with “traditionary opinions.” Defying family expectations, William decided to “sacrifice his influence” and announced that he no longer wanted to pursue the ministry as a career.<sup>1</sup> William had emerged from ministerial and academic training that aligned rationalism with credence in supernaturalism. This alignment represented a summation of tendencies long at work in the Unitarian tradition and was nurtured by a rich background in seventeenth and eighteenth-century English theology. Unitarians like Henry Ware Jr. and Andrews Norton drew in particular on the evidentialist argument employed by Samuel Clarke that “there was a Necessity of some particular Divine revelation, to make the whole Doctrine of Religion clear and obvious to all Capacities.”<sup>2</sup> In this context biblical

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–1994), 1:352 n. 37; hereafter cited parenthetically as *L*, with volume and page number. The following Emerson texts are cited parenthetically and abbreviated as: *J*, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910–1914); *W*, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–1904); *JMN*, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman and Ralph H. Ort et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1960–1982); *CW*, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson and Joseph Slater et al., 6 vols. to date (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971–); *EL*, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1959–1972); *TN*, *The Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph H. Ort et al., 3 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990–1996); *S*, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank, 4 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989–1992).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Clarke, *The Works of Samuel Clarke, D.D.*, 4 vols. (1738; New York: Garland, 1978), 2: 667. See also Lilian Handlin, “Babylon est delenda—The Young Andrews Norton,” in *American Unitarianism, 1805–1865*, ed. Conrad E. Wright (Boston: Mas-

revelation, like scientific propositions, could be verified empirically. The evidentiary appeal of facts and of empirical implications that they had taken on in the natural sciences was transposed to the realm of biblical interpretation. The theological conception of biblical events accordingly belonged to the realm of reliable and verifiable evidences. This argument functioned as a pervasive intellectual consensus that put exegesis to the cause of reassurance. Under the tutelage of this exegesis, Norton affirmed the biblical narratives as a factually reliable repository of historical Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

What William Emerson encountered at Göttingen University were new ideals of biblical research that removed the Scriptures from narrow theological grounds and subjected them to a criticism that evaluated the historical reliability of the biblical texts.<sup>4</sup> The challenge to the evidentialist framework came from the branch of biblical studies designated as “higher criticism” which forced discussions on the authority of Scripture, the meaning of history, and the nature of faith.<sup>5</sup> Higher criticism posed a serious threat to exegetes who had canvassed eighteenth-

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sachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989), 53–85. For a discussion of supernatural rationalism, see Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians* (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 5–12.

<sup>3</sup> For a specialized treatment of nineteenth century biblical criticism at Harvard, see Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800–1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969). See also Eugene R. Chable, “A Study of the Interpretation of the New Testament in New England Unitarianism” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> For a description of the biblical and historical studies at Göttingen, see Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 39–41. The visits of Ticknor, Everett, Cogswell and Bancroft were largely the outcome of the correspondence, from 1795 to 1812, of the Hamburg historian Christoph Daniel Ebeling with William Bentley of Salem. This exchange of letters contributed to the outstanding reputation of Göttingen’s late eighteenth-century historical school as it was represented in particular by Johannes von Müller, who pioneered in the application of the critical method in the historical and social sciences. The tradition of this school was continued in theology first by Johann Lorenz von Mosheim and then Johann Salomo Semler, Johann David Michaelis, and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. See Henry August Pochmann, *German Culture in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 328–329, 515 n. 161, 533 n. 131; and Jürgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 13–15, 75–77.

<sup>5</sup> For a general discussion of the history and background of German biblical criticism, see Fred Gladstone Bratton, *A History of the Bible* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), 281–328; Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*. Trans. S. McClean Gilmour and Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abington, 1972).

century evidentialists for corroborating testimony that Christianity was a lawyer-proof religion based upon a historical revelation for which Scripture was the source book. In the hands of Norton, the new skills and approaches of biblical study were associated with a deep historical skepticism. Norton was acutely aware that the higher criticism challenged the authenticity and authority of the Bible. Its advocates, Norton judged, had been “infected with the spirit of infidelity” and undermined the validity of Christianity as a “divine revelation.”<sup>6</sup> According to Norton, the supernatural truths of Christianity rested on evidences relating faith to history. With the higher criticism these evidences were called into doubt. Norton welcomed the higher criticism of the Bible as a weapon against Trinitarianism, but he was slow to absorb the full range of German critical scholarship when it came to the historical claims of revealed Christianity. However, Norton could not prevent the new biblical criticism from making inroads in major theological seminaries and New England pulpits.

Between 1810 and 1830, Unitarians were increasingly confronted with a subtle questioning of the evidentialist framework that undermined the tenuous connection of faith to history and seemed to prepare the ground for a denial of God, as Norton charged.<sup>7</sup> This new development began in the 1810s, when George Ticknor, Edward Everett, Joseph Cogswell and, in a second wave, John Motley, Henry Dwight, William Emerson, George Calvert, and George Bancroft were exposed to the historico-critical procedures prevalent among Göttingen’s biblical critics.<sup>8</sup> The Harvard–Göttingen axis produced transitional men who increasingly realized the inadequacy of a theology grounded in

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<sup>6</sup> Andrews Norton, *A Statement of Reasons for not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians, Concerning the Nature of God and the Person of Christ*. 4th ed. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1819), 16.

<sup>7</sup> See Andrews Norton, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity. With Notes* (Cambridge, Mass.: John Owen, 1839), 30.

<sup>8</sup> The Harvard–Göttingen axis is described in Orie William Long, *Literary Pioneers: American Explorers of European Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935); Daniel B. Shumway, “Göttingen’s American Students,” *German-American Review* 3 (1907): 21–24; Reginald H. Phelps, “The Idea of the Modern University—Göttingen and America,” *The Germanic Review* 29 (1954): 175–190; Cynthia Stokes Brown, “The American Discovery of the German University: Four Students in Göttingen, 1815–1822” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1966); Fred L. Burwick, “The Göttingen Influence on George Bancroft’s Idea of Humanity,” *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* 11 (1966): 194–212; and Elisabeth Hurth, “Sowing the Seeds of ‘Subversion’: Harvard’s Early Göttingen Students,” *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1992, 91–106. For an analysis of the Harvard–Göttingen axis in the context of the historical Jesus quest, see Elisabeth

historical fact. The impact of the Harvard–Göttingen axis thus shows that the Transcendentalists’ “new views” were inherent in a Unitarian framework that was broad enough to include both critics and defenders of a firm reliance on the evidences of historical Christianity.

The insight into the declining potency of an evidential theology played into a crisis of faith that made the Harvard–Göttingen students like William Emerson renounce the ministry. A decade before the rise of the Transcendentalist movement, the Harvard–Göttingen students realized that Unitarianism needed a new spiritual and epistemological foundation. Confronted with the historical skepticism of the new biblical criticism, the Harvard–Göttingen men found themselves with nowhere to turn but inward against an apologetic framework which asserted that one needed history to establish faith. The Harvard–Göttingen axis thus undermined the foundations of the post-Lockean theology of evidence and sowed—in Norton’s view—the seeds of “infidelity” and “irreligion” within the Unitarian ranks.<sup>9</sup> These seeds fed into Ralph Waldo Emerson’s long-standing uncertainty about his profession and calling, an uncertainty particularly pressing for a minister who not only struggled with professional difficulties and parish disfavor but also with the theological problem concerning the validity of historical revelation. Emerson could find a model for his predicament in the crisis William had suffered after his studies under Göttingen’s higher critics, leading him outside the forms and traditions of historical Christianity. In 1832, Ralph Waldo was to fall in line and “sever[ed] the strained cord” that “bound” him to his Boston pastorate (*L*, 1:357).

## I

When Harvard’s early Göttingen students arrived at the German university, they were subjected to a program that encompassed a variety of historical and philological fields of study which had entered into the historico-critical approach to the Bible. The rigorous drill the young Harvard students underwent at Göttingen is perhaps illustrated best in the schedule of daily routine that Bancroft sent to Norton in 1819: “5–7, Hebrew and Syriac; 7–8, Heeren in Ethnography; 8–9, Church

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Hurth, *In His Name: Comparative Studies in the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1989), 119–141.

<sup>9</sup> See Norton, *A Statement of Reasons*, 16. See also *Discourse*, 11, 43, 48–49.



history by the elder Planck; 9–10, Exegesis of the N[ew] T[estament] by old Eichhorn; 10–11, [Exegesis] of the O[ld] T[estament] [by old Eichhorn]; 11–12, Syriac by old Eichhorn; 12–1 pm, Dinner and walk; 1–2, Library; 2–4, Latin or French; 4–5, Philological Encyclopedie by Dissen; 5–7, Greek; 7–8, Syriac; 8–9, Tea and walk; 9–11, Repetition of the old lectures and preparation for the new.”<sup>10</sup> This schedule shows that biblical criticism at Göttingen was largely dominated by Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, who had come to Göttingen in 1788 as professor of Oriental languages after an outstanding career at Jena during which he had gained popularity for his unorthodox interpretation of the Bible. In Eichhorn’s higher criticism the time-honored doctrines of scriptural inspiration and authenticity were questioned by a literary and historical analysis that studied the Bible as a collection of documents presenting the same problems as any other ancient writing. Eichhorn’s interest in the Bible as the product of a particular historical and cultural conditioning not only undermined the uniqueness of the biblical narratives but, more importantly, also brought the factual question about the historical veracity of the Bible into the arena of theological debate.

A distinguished scholar in theology, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, history, philosophy, and author of the influential *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (1780), Eichhorn deeply impressed and intrigued Harvard’s Göttingen students. But they quickly sensed that Unitarian scriptural exegesis did not draw on the same exegetical spring as the Göttingen critics, who were preoccupied with the “doctrine respecting the origin and formation of the Gospels.” This “doctrine” issued from “the supposition of an original written history which [the Evangelists] all followed” and which was chiefly compiled from pre-existent documents in the Aramaic dialect.<sup>11</sup> Eichhorn, Norton observed, postulated that “*the text of the Original Gospel*” had been subjected “to continual alterations and additions, ... before it assumed that form in which it was used by the first three [E]vangelists.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, ed. M.A. DeWolfe Howe, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1908), 1:58.

<sup>11</sup> George Ticknor to Elisha Ticknor, 5 November 1815, in *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, ed. George Hillard, 2 vols. (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1876), 1:79; Horatio B. Hackett, “Synoptical Study of the Gospels and recent Literature pertaining to it,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 3 (1846): 11.

<sup>12</sup> Andrews Norton, *The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, vol. 1 (Boston: John B. Russel, 1837); vol. 2, 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: John Owen, 1844), 1:13.

When Ticknor dealt with the criticism of the Gospel accounts in Eichhorn's "Course of Lectures on the Exegesis of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the four concluding chapters of John," he did not delve into the problems of the Proto-Gospel and synoptical relationships; rather, Ticknor equated Eichhorn's position with an attack on the factuality and historical reliability of the biblical narratives of Jesus. Eichhorn, Ticknor thus complained, "takes from the N[ew] T[estament] all that distinguishes it from any other ancient book. He denies to it and to all its parts the lowest degree of inspiration, explains its miracles into delusions or the natural consequences of natural causes, ... calls the death and resurrection a suspension of animation and subsequent revival."<sup>13</sup> For Norton, Eichhorn's criticism amounted to a rejection of Christianity as a miraculous revelation. This rejection, Norton charged, was bound to clear a path to atheism. Ticknor could not agree more and prayed that he would never be led to "listen with pleasure to such flip-pant witticisms as Eichhorn has been ... making on all that [he had] been taught to consider solemn and important."<sup>14</sup> Both Norton and Ticknor were ready to acknowledge the argument that the literary relationship between the Gospels issued from a common Proto-Gospel, but historico-critical considerations that moved into the realm of mythical embellishment and accretions were primarily considered as a threat to the claims of historically grounded faith.

To Ticknor, the trying and testing of the life of Jesus narratives in Eichhorn's historical criticism seemed to make a spectacle of what he had grown to accept as sacrosanct supernatural claims of Christianity. Higher criticism, Ticknor judged, not only posed a general threat to biblical truth but also called into question the historical veracity of the Jesus tradition. Norton concurred; if, as Eichhorn supposed, "during the first two centuries, it was so common to enlarge the histories of Jesus Christ, ... and to alter and remodel them," then, Norton argued, one could "hardly pretend to rely with much confidence upon those histories which now exist."<sup>15</sup> For Norton, issues of factuality remained central and spurred the apologetic concern to demonstrate that historico-critical findings did not reduce "the Scriptures ... to a human book."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> George Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, "Four Students in Göttingen," 111.

<sup>14</sup> George Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, "Four Students in Göttingen," 110.

<sup>15</sup> Norton, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, 1:17–18.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Cunningham, "The Biblical Repository," *Christian Examiner* 10 (1831): 350.

The Harvard–Göttingen men acutely sensed that the higher criticism had consequences for the significance of the historical Jesus himself. Thus Ticknor observed that Eichhorn put the life of Jesus on the same level as that of other historical figures. Eichhorn’s “faith in Christ is, as far as I can understand it,” Ticknor complained, “precisely like his faith in Socrates.”<sup>17</sup> To Unitarian believers, this position seemed to undermine the biblical Jesus portrait and came close to rationalistic atheism. Bancroft found in German theology “everything which learning and acuteness can give, and ... nothing, which religious feeling and reverence for Christianity give.”<sup>18</sup> Bancroft therefore judged this “theology ... to be anything but [Christiani]ty”; it was merely designed “to scoff at the [B]ible and laugh at Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

The Harvard–Göttingen men associated the new skills and approaches of higher criticism with the deist “heresy” and learned “irreligion.” As to Eichhorn’s “personal faith,” Ticknor observed, “it is certainly but feeble. As far as I can judge from his books and lectures, from his general reputation and my personal acquaintance with him, I believe that he is nothing more than a Deist.”<sup>20</sup> There was scarcely any American practitioner commenting on historico-critical procedures during this early period of influence who did not similarly equate higher criticism with deism and with mere “irreligion” or atheism. Thus Bancroft observed that he “never heard anything like moral or religious feeling manifested in [the] theological lectures” at Göttingen. To Bancroft, there was “a great deal more religion in a few lines of Xenophon, than in a whole course of Eichhorn.”<sup>21</sup> Everett agreed. “Mr. Eichhorn,” Everett complained to Bancroft in 1818, “unfortunately has adopted a style of lecturing little adapted to the seriousness of the subject ... and irreverent as regards the great topics in discussion.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> George Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, “Four Students in Göttingen,” 111.

<sup>18</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:64.

<sup>19</sup> George Bancroft, letters of 21 May 1819 and 10 July 1819; MS at the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), quoted by permission.

<sup>20</sup> Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, “Four Students in Göttingen,” 110.

<sup>21</sup> George Bancroft, letter of 15 January, 1820; quoted in Long, *Literary Pioneers*, 120. See also 121.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Everett to George Bancroft, 13 April 1818; quoted in Stuart Joel Horn, *Edward Everett and American Nationalism* (Ph.D. diss., The City University of New York, 1973), 61.

Given the apparent impiety and immorality of the new biblical critics, the Harvard–Göttingen men were determined to assure their sponsors that they had “nothing to do with ... [Göttingen’s] infidel systems.”<sup>23</sup> This charge of infidelity, however, distorted the higher critical position. The critics around Eichhorn sought to re-affirm the religious relevance of the biblical record against attacks on historical positivity. Eichhorn was not prepared to accept the life of Jesus narratives at face value as historical occurrences, but he did not conclude from this that the accounts flowed from deceit and delusion. Eichhorn’s argument was intended constructively. By the “freeing of the Primal Gospel from its accretions,” Eichhorn argued, “countless doubts with which Jesus, his life, and his teaching have been assailed become completely meaningless.... By this separation of the apostolic from the nonapostolic which higher criticism recommends ... the means are found to establish the credibility and truth of the gospel story on unshakable foundations.”<sup>24</sup> The Harvard–Göttingen students did not acknowledge this affirmative intention. They sought to stand firm against the threat of “infidelity” and were not prepared to “rival ... Eichhorn in his profane indecency.”<sup>25</sup> The Unitarian bonds still seemed strong enough to make the Harvard–Göttingen men conform to tradition.

## II

But while the Harvard–Göttingen men were trying to dispel their sponsors’ misgivings about the dangerous impact of higher criticism, anxieties of influence became more and more apparent. Thus Bancroft wrote reassuringly that he “should be unwilling to give [his] friends any reasonable ground for fearing [he] should lose [his] belief in, or respect for Christianity.”<sup>26</sup> Yet Bancroft and his colleagues increasingly found that the impact of the Göttingen scholars could not be limited to what was “merely *critical*” and instead affected their “philosophy” as well.<sup>27</sup> After his first year at Göttingen, William Emerson was taken aback by the effects of biblical criticism on his own thought. “I do not think nor

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<sup>23</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:55.

<sup>24</sup> Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1804–1827), 1:458–459. See also Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 78–79.

<sup>25</sup> George Bancroft, letter of 10 July 1819, MHS.

<sup>26</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:42.

<sup>27</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:55.

feel nor act as I have ever done before,” William confessed, “my mind seems to have undergone a revolution which surprises me. I cannot avoid tracing much of this to the books and lectures of Eichhorn.”<sup>28</sup> Everett, who had been sent to Göttingen to take a doctorate with Eichhorn himself and get a translation of his *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* under way, experienced a similar intellectual “revolution.” In his *Defense of Christianity Against the Work of George B. English* (1814), Everett did question typological exegesis, yet he still affirmed that Jesus had been miraculously inspired to give an authoritative revelation.<sup>29</sup> Upon his return from Göttingen, however, Everett was closer to the skeptical position he had himself initially set out to refute and was alienated from the ministerial profession to which his studies abroad were supposed to contribute.

What concerned Everett above all else was the discrepancy between the “public worship of God,” and “arbitrary facts” uncovered by historico-critical methods, a discrepancy the German theologian Gotthold Ephraim Lessing referred to as the “ugly ditch” between accidental historical truths and necessary truths of reason.<sup>30</sup> The crux of Lessing’s metaphor of disjunction lay in his insistence that historical evidence could not produce conviction. Historical truth could not be assigned the certainty of demonstrated truth. To Everett, Lessing’s “ugly broad ditch” was irreconcilable with the Unitarian position because it wielded the axe of criticism against the historical roots of Christianity. It seemed questionable to rest one’s faith on historical assertions that could not lay claim to a high degree of reliability. A seminal answer to this disparagement of scriptural revelation was to be found outside Eichhorn’s biblical criticism. “Of the two parties, which are now waging war with one another,” Bancroft observed of the theological spectrum at Göttingen, “the rationalist and the orthodox, it is hard to say, which is the most to be feared; the one retaining nothing of [Christi]ty but its principles, the other clinging to all the particulars of the orthodox and

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<sup>28</sup> William Emerson, letter of 8 August 1824, in Karen Kalinevitch, “Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Older Brother: The Letters and Journal of William Emerson” (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1982), 123.

<sup>29</sup> See Edward Everett, *Defence of Christianity Against the Work of George B. English* (Cambridge: Hilliard, 1814), 260. See also Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Everett, letter of 5 January 1816; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 40. See also Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and Power,” in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, ed. Henry Chadwick, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53. See also 51, 56.

joining mysticism and darkness to their unlimited faith.”<sup>31</sup> Of the two camps, it was the latter that came closest to the Harvard–Göttingen students’ concerns and carried them from Göttingen’s biblical critics to the experiential theology practised at Berlin by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who seemed to stem the rising tide of infidelity.

At Berlin, Bancroft observed during his study year there, “atheists” like Eichhorn “were no longer going forward so triumphant as before.”<sup>32</sup> What prevailed instead was Schleiermacher’s emphasis on the religious consciousness of human nature—a subjective theology that flanked the inroads made by historico-critical analysis on the historical foundations of revealed religion. By appealing to man’s immediate God-consciousness, Schleiermacher’s religious experience theology minimized supernaturalist presuppositions about the life of Jesus. The Harvard–Göttingen men who had the opportunity of extending their studies from Göttingen to Berlin were immediately struck by the possibilities Schleiermacher’s position held out for a re-ordering of religious experience and knowledge. Drawing on the terms of Schleiermacher’s experiential theology, William Emerson wrote to his brother Edward in 1824: “I too am a Son of God, and ... I need but throw off my shackles, these bonds of habit ... to attest my relation to the Divinity.”<sup>33</sup> A similar shift toward religious subjectivism and intuitionism showed in the idealistic strain of Bancroft’s writings after his sojourn at Berlin. Impressed by Schleiermacher’s lectures on education, Bancroft considered principles and plans for “Germanizing American secondary education.”<sup>34</sup> Bancroft also came under the spell of Schleiermacher’s “mode of preaching” and insisted on an “internal sense” that placed man in direct contact with the decrees of God.<sup>35</sup>

The Harvard–Göttingen men thus began to advance claims for the divinity and creative power of religious consciousness that were remarkably similar to Transcendentalist assertions. The twin influence of biblical criticism and an experiential theology supplied the terms of a spiritual epistemology on which Transcendentalist assumptions could

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<sup>31</sup> George Bancroft, letter of 5 November 1820, MHS.

<sup>32</sup> George Bancroft, letter of 5 November 1820, MHS.

<sup>33</sup> William Emerson, letter of 27 June 1824, in Kalinevitch, “William Emerson,” 111. On Schleiermacher’s intuitive theology of experience, see Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, 297–298.

<sup>34</sup> Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 531 n. 108.

<sup>35</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:97; George Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 409, 410.

grow and cohere. The Harvard–Göttingen group applied this influence selectively, however, slighting it when it seemed to counteract scriptural integrity and enforcing it when it seemed directed against empirical-mechanistic “bonds of habit.” Thus Bancroft approved Schleiermacher’s canon as an affirmative theology that left the integrity of biblical narratives of the life of Jesus intact. With Schleiermacher, Bancroft judged, “the strict humanity of Christ [is not] in any way doubted.” “Schleiermacher has remained a Christian, true to the moral principles of ... Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> When it came to the historical Jesus, the Harvard–Göttingen men unanimously agreed that the concrete historical figure of Jesus was not to be downplayed or questioned. This did not entail a way back to supernatural rationalist apologetics; rather, with Schleiermacher, the Harvard–Göttingen men came to believe that the import of the biblical narratives of Jesus could not be identified with their factual accuracy and was rooted instead in the religious subject. From here it was only a small step to the affirmation of religious inwardness that accompanied the rise of Transcendentalism.

### III

The young students at Göttingen University acutely sensed that the higher critical approach was unlikely to be met with approval by conservative Unitarians. The more Bancroft delved into historico-critical studies, the less likely it seemed to him that his new learning would be accepted after his return. “’Tis out of the question,” Bancroft wrote to Everett from Göttingen, “to expect, that in any American University whatsoever, the station of Professor of theology would be offered me or anyone else, who had got his theology in Germany.” “Who is there in America that cares for all this?” “Who would dare to interpret in America the epistles to the Hebrews, the Apocalypse, but above all the O[ld] T[estament] as it must and ought to be done. The cry of heresy will attend the first attempt.”<sup>37</sup> Bancroft’s assessment was correct. The *Christian Examiner* observed with regard to the reception of Johann Jakob Griesbach’s edition of the New Testament at Harvard that “any argument founded on the principles of biblical criticism, is

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<sup>36</sup> George Bancroft, letters of 24 December 1820 and 3 December 1820, MHS.

<sup>37</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:65; George Bancroft, letters of 10 July 1819 and 1 August 1819, MHS.

received with a great deal of uneasiness and suspicion.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Moses Stuart judged after Everett’s early attempts at translating Eichhorn that Eichhorn’s “speculations” would be “obnoxious” to American critics.<sup>39</sup>

Initially, the Harvard–Göttingen men did not want to set themselves apart from the conservative Unitarian camp at Harvard and therefore turned their studies to what was acceptable theologically and exegetically. Under the impact of Göttingen’s biblical critics, Bancroft wanted to devote himself to “raising [in America] a degraded and neglected branch of study, which in itself is so noble, and to aid establishing a thorough school of Theological Critics.”<sup>40</sup> Yet Bancroft’s efforts after his return never yielded any such results. Similarly, Everett did not “regret the time ... [he had] spent in studying divinity.”<sup>41</sup> But upon his return from Göttingen, Everett refused to make further contributions to biblical studies, transposing the new critical methods instead to the study of the classics. Once again the exposure to higher criticism did not lead to stringent critical exegesis, and the philological aspects of the new procedures seemed to be a less troublesome issue than the theological.

In the case of Bancroft, Everett, and William Emerson, the uneasiness and suspicion accompanying the confrontation with the new biblical criticism and life of Jesus research also contributed to a severe crisis of profession. Bancroft had been sent to Göttingen to “pursue [his] theological studies” so that he might be able to “defend the Revelation of God.”<sup>42</sup> But upon his return, Bancroft lasted in the ministerial profession only until 1823 and made a step sideward toward the academy and later to a political and historical career. In a similar manner, the Harvard–Göttingen axis shaped the career of Everett. Though originally determined “to separate ... the public teaching of duty from all connection with arbitrary facts,” Everett’s exposure to the new biblical criticism eventually shattered his conviction concerning life in the ministry.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Anon., “The New Testament in the Common Version, conformed to Griesbach’s Standard Greek Text” *Christian Examiner* 6 (1829): 353.

<sup>39</sup> Moses Stuart to Edward Everett, 25 December 1813; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:54. See also Herbst, *The German Historical School*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Everett, letter of 5 January 1816; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:33

<sup>43</sup> Edward Everett, letter of 5 January 1816; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 40.



After the confrontation with the historico-critical studies, William Emerson also broke with the ministerial office. But while Everett refused to teach at Harvard what he had learned from Eichhorn and sidestepped critical findings that threatened his cherished assumptions about the Jesus figure and Christian history, William Emerson was ready to apply historico-critical exegesis, in particular to the issue of the Lord's Supper. “William's mind was exact and judicial and his conscience active,” Edward Waldo Emerson observed in 1883 of his father's elder brother who had departed from the ministry after his Göttingen studies. “The German philosophy and the Biblical criticism shook his belief in the forms and teaching of the religion in which he had been brought up” (*W*, 4:367 n.). According to Edward Waldo Emerson, this corrosive influence of the new critical studies became most apparent in William's rejection of the traditional view of the Lord's Supper and his belief “that the rite of the Lord's Supper was not authoritatively established by Jesus for [continued] observance as a sacrament by Christians” (*W*, 4:367 n.).<sup>44</sup>

William's consideration of the issue of the Lord's Supper was in line with a rich tradition of historical precedents. In 1667, Solomon Stoddard had devalued the Lord's supper by terminating its exclusivity and by accepting profession of faith and repentance as prerequisites for church membership and communion. With William Emerson, the Lord's Supper underwent a different devaluation. William did not set out to blur the distinction between saints and sinners by opening communion to all parishioners; rather, in a letter to Ezra Ripley, he stated that he did not believe “that the Communion rite was enjoyed by Jesus for perpetual observance” (*W*, 11:551 n.). For Ripley, the Lord's Supper was an obligatory ceremony that pointed to the revelatory significance of Christ's sacrifice. For William, however, whose “private articles of faith” had been shaken by the higher criticism, the view of the Lord's Supper as an obligatory ceremony was no longer tenable.<sup>45</sup>

William had first encountered this devaluation of the significance of the Lord's Supper in the biblical criticism taught at Göttingen and Berlin. Griesbach and Eichhorn demonstrated that the words “Do this in remembrance of me” did not appear in all manuscripts. Schleiermacher, whom William singled out during his Berlin sojourn as one of the

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<sup>44</sup> See Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 160.

<sup>45</sup> Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 107.

critics contributing to substantial progress in theology, treated the rite of communion in the context of the Jewish feast of the Passover and argued that one could not “conclude from Christ’s own words as they [were] reported in the three Gospels that [he] instituted this as a permanent rite of the Christian church.”<sup>46</sup> Another attack on the Lord’s Supper came from the anti-supernatural criticism of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, who read the sacrament against the background of primitive Christianity. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Reimarus argued, “were not instituted by Jesus, but rather created by the early church on the basis of certain historical assumptions” designed to account for the delayed parusia.<sup>47</sup> These literary and historical arguments against the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper entered into William Emerson’s skepticism about the universal, permanent significance of the Lord’s Supper as well as the special authority of the historical Jesus. And “respectfully but with great clearness,” William stated that he regarded the Lord’s Supper merely as an external ceremony (*W*, 4:367 n.). The “new critical spirit” had left its mark.<sup>48</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson was soon to follow in his brother’s footsteps.

#### IV

In 1822 Mary Moody Emerson set out to draw Ralph Waldo’s attention to the biblical criticism practiced in Germany. “There is,” she wrote, “one idea of dramatic representation [that is] interesting, that of Eich[h]orn respecting the Apocalypse of St. John. The learned German you know believes all passed in Patmos in scenic order. And ... this [may] be a key to many revelations. In the infancy of the world men were taught by signs. It would seem that the higher and last made [of] instructions from Heaven applied to Reason as well as Sentiment. And I am glad to escape from all sorts of earthly dramas” (*JMN*, 2:375–376). While this letter attests to Mary Moody Emerson’s sympathetic interest in Eichhorn’s biblical criticism, she was prepared to accept this

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, ed. Jack C. Verheyden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 392.

<sup>47</sup> *The Aims of Jesus and his Disciples: A further installment of the Anonymous Wolfenbüttel Fragments*, ed. Gotthold E. Lessing (Brunswick, 1778); quoted in Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954), 24.

<sup>48</sup> Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 50.

criticism only as long as it stayed within tradition. She disagreed with German higher criticism when it led to a denial of the historical revelation of God’s being in the person of Christ. The belief in this special revelation, she hoped, would “prevail, [and] German madness may be cured” (*JMN*, 2:383).

But with Emerson “German madness” would not be cured, although he acutely sensed the dangers lurking in the new biblical criticism. In the application of this criticism, Emerson determined that the religious element was “somewhat lost.” “Our theological sky blackens a little,” he observed of the impact of the Harvard–Göttingen students, “or else the eyes of our old men are growing dim. But certain it is, that, with the flood of knowledge [and] genius poured out upon our pulpits, the light of Christianity seems to be somewhat lost. The young imagine that they have rescued [and] purified the Christian creed; the old, that the boundless liberality of the day has swept away the essence with the corruption of the gospel and has arrived at too sceptical refinements” (*L*, 1:127–128). Yet Emerson himself arrived at “sceptical refinements” that worked to dissolve the foundations of historical Christianity.

William Emerson’s influence prepared the stage for this shift. In letters from Göttingen, William time and again emphasized to his brother the “rapid advances in theology” made by Eichhorn and Schleiermacher and praised “the results of so many centuries of struggle against superstition and ignorance.”<sup>49</sup> Ralph Waldo further had numerous opportunities to observe how the new critical studies changed the direction of ministerial careers. He listened first-hand to the reports of Harvard’s first Göttingen students who had seen how their religion dissolved in the crucible of historico-critical scrutiny. In 1821 Emerson attended several of Ticknor’s lectures at Harvard; he also fell under the spell of Everett’s and Bancroft’s reports, all of which gave him a growing sense of the exegetical and theological context in which the higher criticism was practiced (cf. *L*, 1:127).

Emerson’s sermons show the process of transition and reveal a gradual advance towards historico-critical methods. Consonant with historico-critical procedures, Emerson acknowledged the importance of literary form, the uses of symbolic language, and historical circumstances

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<sup>49</sup> William Emerson, letter of 2 March, 1825, in Kalinevitch, “William Emerson,” 207.

for a proper interpretation of scriptural texts. As a result, the significance of historical revelation was devalued. "It is not a revelation," Emerson argued, "that taught us the rudiments of our religion" (*S*, 1:72). Having learnt from Eichhorn that the Gospels represented the outcome of a long compositional process that resulted in discrepancies and inaccuracies, Emerson was prepared to acknowledge that the historico-critical data of the new biblical studies contradicted the Unitarian claim that the center of religious authority rested on the Gospel accounts. Emerson in effect encouraged his parishioners to question scriptural authority. The "skillful hands" of the biblical narrators, Emerson reminded his audience, did not always "sketch" events with "fidelity" (*S*, 1:88). The Scriptures, Emerson reiterated, were written by human hands and were not to be trusted as historically reliable reports. Emerson became in his sermons increasingly reluctant to base the truth of Christianity on historically recorded testimony. Christian faith could not be bound up with historical statements that were questionable and no longer valid as authenticated facts. The "proof of the Being ... of God," Emerson argued, did not derive from "learned" evidences but rather from the insight that "God is within us" (*S*, 1:205, 208).

Emerson's position soon gave rise to rumors that the young minister at Second Church did not treat the Bible with sufficient reverence. In 1829, Ware insinuated that Emerson "did not look to the Scriptures with all the same respect as others" (*L*, 1:273). The Harvard-Göttingen men, when appropriating the new methods of biblical criticism, were confronted with similar suspicions. Bancroft, who had been sent to Göttingen to "become an accomplished philologist and biblical critic," time and again assured his patron that he would not give way to the "irreligious" and "heartless formality" of the Göttingen critics: "Of their infidel systems I hear not a word; and I trust I have been too long ... under your inspection to be in danger of being led away from the religion of my Fathers."<sup>50</sup> The New Englanders who listened to Bancroft's sermons after his return from Göttingen judged differently. Bancroft's sermon audiences listened with discomfort to the use of phrases like "our dear pelican Christ" in Cambridge pulpits.<sup>51</sup> The vocabulary of the new biblical criticism was still incompatible with

<sup>50</sup> George Bancroft, letter of 4 August 1818, MHS; Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:33, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 63.

Unitarian christological affirmations, and Bancroft’s audiences more than welcomed his abandonment of a ministerial career in the spring of 1823.

To Unitarians nourished in a theology of evidences, the skeptical inquiries into the historicity of the Jesus tradition were deeply troubling. Boston pulpits did not hesitate to express their strong aversion towards the biblical critics’ tools and charged that they endangered faith itself. The “descended being the Companion of God before time, living [and] suffering as he did, ... [t]his deep and high theology,” it was hoped, would “prevail” (*JMN*, 2:383). With Emerson, however, it did not “prevail”; on the contrary, by the late 1820s Emerson had yielded to the procedures of the higher criticism and was determined to put them into use. In March 1831, Emerson set up a series of vestry lectures on the origin, authorship, and authenticity of the Gospels.<sup>52</sup> The vestry lectures bore ample witness of Emerson’s appropriation of standard evidentialist works, namely Nathaniel Lardner’s *The Credibility of the Gospel History*, George Campbell’s *The Four Gospels* and James Macknight’s annotated *New Literal Translation of all Apostolic Epistles* as well as his *Harmony of the Four Gospels*. But Emerson’s vestries also revealed his familiarity with the techniques and principles of the new biblical criticism. In keeping with the premises of German biblical critics like Griesbach and Eichhorn, Emerson’s vestries scrutinized the literary tradition behind the canonical gospels, examined the traditional ascriptions of authorship and date, and studied the historical circumstances of writer and audience. Emerson could model the application of these principles after the work of Harvard’s first Dexter Lectures, but he also did a substantial amount of independent study of German biblical critics. The application of the higher critical exegetical tradition might have been hardly of interest to the audience Emerson hoped to attract, but it became for him increasingly a most welcome tool in his efforts to move away from a rigid reliance on historical revelation.

While some of Emerson’s vestry lectures were in keeping with the traditionalist view of the authority and historical veracity of the biblical narratives, the vestry on “The Origin of the Three First Gospels” departed from evidentialist studies to make substantial borrowings from Herbert Marsh’s edition of Johann David Michaelis’s *Introduction to the New Testament*. Emerson’s appropriation of Michaelis’s study in his

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<sup>52</sup> *The Vestry Lectures and a Rare Sermon*, ed. Kenneth W. Cameron (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1984); hereafter cited as *VL*.

fourth vestry reveals that he infused his writings with what Marsh's reviewers termed a "[t]incture of the spirit of skepticism" about the "authenticity integrity, credibility and inspiration of the Gospels."<sup>53</sup> The key point of departure for Emerson was the "synoptic problem": "The relation of the three books of Matthew, Mark [and] Luke to each other is very remarkable. If you will look at a Harmony and take their narratives of the same fact, you will find that they frequently agree not only in relating the same things in the same manner but in the same words" (*VL*, 4:12). Emerson based his observation on James Macknight's *Harmony* as well as Newcome's edition of Griesbach's *Synopsis Evangeliorum*. Macknight's *Harmony* was largely concerned with paraphrasing and harmonizing the four Gospels so as to produce a unilateral account. Griesbach's *Synopsis*, by contrast, denied that a harmonization of the first three Gospels was possible.<sup>54</sup> In the fourth vestry lecture, Emerson also broke with harmonizing transpositions and reminded his audience that "even eye witnesses of the same facts if they write their report independently of each other, will never relate them ... in the same manner ... and even the circumstances which they observe in common, they will arrange and combine in such a manner in their own minds as to produce two representations, which though upon the whole the same, widely differ in the choice and position of the respective parts" (*VL*, 4:12). According to this insistence on the variation and personal viewpoint that each of the Evangelists contributed, the Evangelists were individual witnesses and historians and not servile copyists, as conservative biblical critics maintained.

Emerson could draw for this view on Connop Thirwall's 1825 translation of Schleiermacher's *Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke*. Schleiermacher and his translator presented in their studies detailed descrip-

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<sup>53</sup> John Randolph, *Remarks on Michaelis's Introduction to the New Testament* (London: J. Bensley, 1802), 5.

<sup>54</sup> On Griesbach's *Synopsis*, see Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 5:304–311. On Emerson's acquaintance with Griesbach, see *JMN*, 3: 354–355. For a discussion of the impact of higher critical views on Emerson as preacher at Second Church, see Wesley T. Mott, *The Strains of Eloquence: Emerson and His Sermons* (Penn State: Penn State University Press, 1989), 56–60. See also Karen Kalinevitch, "Turning from the Orthodox: Emerson's Gospel Lectures," *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1986. 69–112; Barbara Packer, "Origin and Authority: Emerson and the Higher Criticism", in *Reconstructing American History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 67–92; and Elisabeth Hurth, "William and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Problem of the Lord's Supper: The Influence of German 'Historical Speculators,'" *Church History* 62 (1993): 190–206.

tions of Eichhorn’s solution of the synoptic problem. On the basis of these descriptions, Emerson declared in his fourth vestry: “Eichhorn ... supposes that our Gospels ... are only four out of many records of the same kind and that all were derived from one common document which he supposes to have been written in Aramaic or the vulgar Hebrew of the time.... He [also] supposes that ... Matthew, Mark and Luke used different copies of this document which had [been] enriched or varied by the particular information of the transcribers, and that they may account for the variation in their gospels” (*VL*, 4:12–13). Discussing this theory of an Aramaic Proto-Gospel in his *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, Norton condemned Eichhorn as an infidel whose “notions respecting the Gospels ... essentially affect[ed] the belief of their genuineness.”<sup>55</sup> In 1831, Emerson, however, stood already firmly in the tradition of the new biblical criticism and was in no way repelled by Eichhorn’s assumption that the synoptic Gospels, as second-century variations of an originally Aramaic account of the life of Jesus, could no longer be regarded as reliable historical data. Emerson was even prepared to go beyond Eichhorn’s Proto-Gospel hypothesis, arguing that the common source for the synoptic Gospels was the oral tradition. The main exposition of this view was, as Emerson pointed out in his fourth vestry lecture, given by Johann Karl Ludwig Gieseler, who had attempted to show that the synoptic Gospels were different forms of a primitive oral Gospel that had been adapted to the missionary preaching of the different apostles.<sup>56</sup> Emerson made full use of this theory and argued with Gieseler that “not enough attention seems to have been paid to the fact that ... oral instruction was the great mode of communication in that age of early Christianity” (*VL*, 4:13).

The principles stemming from Gieseler’s emphasis on the flux of the oral tradition upon which the Synoptics had drawn—the fragmentation of the Gospels, the recognition of several of their pericopes as bearing no relation to the actual events of Jesus’ life—all counteracted Norton’s claims about the genuineness of the biblical narratives and contributed to Emerson’s growing devaluation of the historical evidences of supernatural revelation. At the exegetical and hermeneutical juncture, however, the historico-critical tools were somewhat at variance with Emerson’s intentions. The preacher-exegete in the evidentialist

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<sup>55</sup> Norton, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospel*, 1:17.

<sup>56</sup> On Gieseler’s reception in Transcendentalist New England, see Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 209, 307.

tradition could rely on a common bond between preacher and congregation, on a shared familiarity with the text and its interpretation. The higher criticism, by contrast, with its focus on historical milieu, literary origin and interpretative traditions, drove the wedge of exegetical intricacies and hermeneutical theory between the audience and the text. This wedge turned out to be scarcely suitable to Emerson's vestry project. With the vestry lectures Emerson had hoped to attract in particular the young members of his parish, yet the vestry enterprise failed. To Emerson, it seemed that if his "poor Tuesday evening lectures (horresco referens) were to any auditor the total of his exposition of Christianity," it would leave only "a beggarly faith" (*J*, 3:315). The tools and techniques of higher-critical exegesis belonged more to the province of the academically trained theologian than to the popular piety of the general lay church member. Yet in the final months of his Boston pastorate, Emerson applied the tactics of this exegesis.

## V

As had been the case with his brother William, it was the issue of the Lord's Supper that served for Emerson as a catalyst of a professional choice. Emerson was ready to resign his pastorate unless he were permitted to dispense with the rite of the Lord's Supper.<sup>57</sup> Emerson was prepared to utilize historico-critical exegesis to break with the Second Church, and he was acutely aware that this exegesis could be exploited to provoke a confrontation with the Unitarian clergy. William had already set the example for this strategy. William's dismissal of the Lord's Supper as an external ceremony and the critical principles that induced it had a significant impact on Emerson's own objections against the sacrament. In his sermon on the Lord's Supper, the young minister of Second Church entered "in a way unusual and remarkable for him, into a critical and systematic consideration of the scriptural authorities of the rite," a mode of analysis that was, as Edward Waldo Emerson suggests, "supplied by the elder brother" (*W*, 4:367 n.).

While minister at Second Church, Ralph Waldo Emerson shared close intellectual contact with William. Thus Emerson would ask his brother: "Prithee, dear William send me some topics for sermons, or if

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<sup>57</sup> See Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 160–161.



it please you better the whole model ‘wrought to the nail’” (*L*, 1:211). Significantly, Emerson had also urged his brother in 1830 to supply him with information from his Göttingen studies. He wrote William “to make a synopsis of the leading arguments against Christianity... He also wanted him to mark, in the works of Eichhorn or others, the passages that would tend to destroy a candid inquirer’s belief in the divine authority of the New Testament.”<sup>58</sup> And in February of 1832, five months before he would deliver the “Lord’s Supper Sermon” to the Second Church, Emerson again mentioned to his aunt the “German commentators” who questioned the historicity of the biblical narratives (*JMN*, 3:328).

The influence of these commentators in the Lord’s Supper sermon was clear to Edward Waldo Emerson because of his father’s “unusual and remarkable” rational exegesis. This rational exegesis was by no means unusual for Ralph Waldo but rather accorded with the exegetical principles and techniques of his vestry lectures. Thus Emerson built his argument in the Lord’s Supper sermon by first reminding his parishioners of the differing versions of the words of institution. Using the close textual and literary exegesis also characteristic of the synoptic analysis in his vestries, Emerson stressed that the words “this do in remembrance of me” do not appear in Mark’s and Matthew’s accounts of the Lord’s Supper, whereas in John the “whole transaction is passed over without notice” (*W*, 11:5). Emerson then proceeded to bring the Fourth Gospel into special prominence, emphasizing that “[i]t only differs in this, that we have found the Supper used in New England and the washing of the feet not.” Given the account of the Fourth Gospel, the interpretation of the Lord’s Supper as a permanent institution appeared arbitrary to Emerson: “I cannot help remarking that it is not a little singular that we should have preserved this rite and insisted upon perpetuating one symbolical act of Christ while we have totally neglected all others” (*W*, 11:11).

The interpretation so far followed the terms of the biblical critics whom the Harvard–Göttingen students had encountered first hand. Emerson’s arguments were in keeping with Schleiermacher’s observations on the Lord’s Supper in the *The Life of Jesus*, which entertained a pronounced preference for St. John’s Gospel and regarded the symbolic act of feet-washing to be of equal rank with the Lord’s Supper.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 152.

<sup>59</sup> See Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, 393.

Schleiermacher further pointed out that “some of the narratives contain[ed] no ... injunction” to “institute a permanent rite” and that against the ceremony of feet-washing the interpretation of the Lord’s Supper as a “perpetual and universal institution” could not be justified.<sup>60</sup> And in the same manner that Emerson reiterated in his sermon that he could not “bring himself to believe that ... Jesus looked beyond the living generation ... and meant to impose a memorial feast upon the whole world,” (*W*, 11:7), Schleiermacher argued that the Last Supper was “an affair only of a small number of [Jesus’] disciples.” It did “not follow that [Jesus] intended the whole Christian church to observe it.”<sup>61</sup>

Emerson’s exegesis also accorded with arguments of a work long acknowledged to be the major source for his sermon on the Lord’s Supper, namely Thomas Clarkson’s *Portraits of Quakerism*. Emerson’s reading of the Lord’s Supper “followed Clarkson in detail: the absence of any intimation of permanence in Matthew and Mark, the especial significance of the silence of John, ... the mention of Luke, who was not present, but whose authority need not be rejected.”<sup>62</sup> In addition to Clarkson’s influence, however, Emerson’s sermon also attests to the appropriation of a different exegetical tradition—the historico-critical method of exegesis. Here Emerson found a formidable critical tool that he had already used in the vestries he delivered in the months before the sermon on the Lord’s Supper. Moreover, the exegetical apparatus of his approach to Scripture, which had been such a strain for Emerson’s vestry audiences, now fully met the demands of the deacons and members of the congregation who expected from their minister an elaborate and weighty exegetical argumentation.

Emerson’s application of historico-critical principles did not stop with his recognition of the importance of the Jewish tradition which helped shape the form of the Lord’s Supper. Emerson also applied the sharp edge of historico-critical exegesis to the liturgic formula of the rite itself. Jesus’ words at the Passover, Emerson argued, were in keeping with the metaphorical language characteristic of all his teachings: “He always taught by parables and symbols. It was the national way

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<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 643.

<sup>61</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, 392.

<sup>62</sup> Mary C. Turpie, “A Quaker Source for Emerson’s Sermon on the Lord’s Supper,” *New England Quarterly* 17 (1944): 96–97.

of teaching, and was largely used by him. Remember the readiness which he always showed to spiritualize every occurrence” (*W*, 11:9–10). Emerson here again drew on the critical mode of exegesis that he had applied in his vestries and used observations on symbolic form to reduce the Lord’s Supper to a ceremonial institution. He consciously applied biblical criticism to undermine claims to universality.

Emerson’s rejection of the Lord’s Supper as an empty ritual was aligned with a christology that played down the revelatory significance of the human figure of Jesus. This devaluation questioned the special authority of Jesus as “the Mediator” (*W*, 11:18). On this issue, Emerson could draw once more on his brother’s Göttingen studies. William had been exposed to Eichhorn’s insistence on the opposition between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith.” Reconstructing the original Gospel upon which the Evangelists had laid a body of mythical accretions, Eichhorn arrived at the historical Jesus, the ethical teacher of Nazareth. In his sermon on the Lord’s supper, Emerson focused in a similar way on the historical Jesus, carefully separating the Gospel accounts of Jesus from what Jesus taught in compliance with the tradition of his Jewish milieu. Emerson then advanced an alternative form of “remembrance” of Jesus which focused on him primarily as a human figure rather than “the Mediator” with unique revelatory significance: “I will love him as a glorified friend, after the free way of friendship” (*W*, 11:20).

This humanistic emphasis on Jesus and the elimination of all sacrificial overtones of the Last Supper provided the basis for the closing argument of Emerson’s sermon—the rejection of the Lord’s Supper as a “worthless” “form”. “Forms are as essential as bodies,” Emerson observed, “but to exalt particular forms, to adhere to one form a moment after it is outgrown, is unreasonable, and it is alien to the spirit of Christ” (*W*, 11:20). This rejection of a Christianity of “forms” forced Emerson all the more to affirm a new basis of religion. If “decent forms” and “saving ordinances” could only serve as the “sandy foundations of falsehoods,” then the proof of the validity of revelation had to be sought somewhere else—not in historical and external evidences but rather within the heart (*W*, 11:21).

In this context a crucial impetus to “sever the strained cord” that “bound” Emerson to the Second Church was provided by the experiential theology of Schleiermacher. In his vestries Emerson repeatedly took note of the striking way in which Schleiermacher corroborated his own growing reliance on the intuitive testimony of the heart. Com-

menting on the effects of the historico-critical approach to biblical narratives in the fourth vestry, Emerson used Schleiermacher to reiterate that “if we leave the letter and explore the spirit of the apostles and their master, we shall find there is an evidence that will come from the heart to the head, an echo to every sentiment taught by Jesus” (*VL*, 4:15). Underlying this passage was Schleiermacher’s subjective synthesis of the rationalistic principles of historico-critical exegesis with a religion of the heart through which Schleiermacher sought to mediate between the experience of faith and the intellectual demands of the new biblical criticism. Confronted with the historical skepticism induced by the higher criticism of Eichhorn, William Emerson had welcomed this religious experience theology with its insistence on man’s immediate consciousness of divinity. Similarly, his brother realized that the reliance on religious self-consciousness liberated religion from the externally grounded truth afforded by miracles and inspired Scripture.

Emerson could also draw support from a man who uniquely corroborated the claims of a religion of the heart. “I am entering into acquaintance with Goethe who just died,” he wrote to Mary Moody Emerson on August 19, 1832 (*L*, 1:354). Significantly, William, too, had become acquainted with Goethe at a time when, under the impact of his Göttingen studies, he was gradually moving away from the claims of historical Christianity. “To William, beset by distressing doubt at Göttingen,” Edward Waldo Emerson writes, “it occurred that, but eighty miles away at Weimar, lived the wisest man of the age. He forthwith sought him out, was kindly received, and laid his doubts before him. He hoped, no doubt, that Goethe could clear these up, and show some way in which he could honourably and sincerely exercise the priestly office” (*W*, 4:367–368 n.). William’s conversation with “the gentle and venerable poet” made a deep and lasting impression on him. “I was half an hour with him,” William wrote to his aunt in October 1824, “and it was a half hour I shall not soon forget” (*L*, 162 n. 12). The advice William received was in effect to consider that “we had nothing to do with the different systems of philosophy, but that the highest aim of life should be for each one to accommodate himself as perfectly as possible to the station in which he was placed” (*L*, 1:161 n. 12). But on his return journey to Cambridge during a very stormy crossing of the Atlantic, when he was several times “compelled,” as he later wrote Mary Moody Emerson, “to make up ... [his] last accounts with this world,” he “could not go to the bottom in peace with the intention in

his heart of following the advice Goethe had given him.”<sup>63</sup> And reporting the incident to Waldo in 1825, William told his brother that he had decided against the ministry and wanted to pursue a career as a lawyer.

While William received from Goethe the advice to satisfy his parishioners’ expectations and keep his opinions to himself, Emerson seized upon the German poet for just the opposite advice—to receive confirmation for a religion that relied on the inner testimony of the heart. Emerson’s journal entries during the months in which he was preparing to leave the ministry bore ample witness of this significance of Goethe for the young minister. Quoting from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, Emerson wrote in September 1832: “Think of Living” (*JMN*, 4:40). A month earlier he had confirmed the “present deity at [his] heart,” the “God within” (*JMN*, 4:40, 39). With the insistence on the intuitive emotional principles of the heart, Goethe completed for Emerson what the criticism of the German higher critics had already precipitated—the rejection of a rigid reliance on scriptural authority, on the “external evidences” of an “effete superannuated Christianity” (*JMN*, 4:27).

“[E]very candid theologian after careful study will find himself wide from the traditionary opinions of the bulk of his parishioners.” Thus William Emerson had tried to explain to his family in 1825 that he was going to “sacrifice his influence” rather than his “conscience” (*L*, 1:352 n. 37). In like manner, his younger brother wrote to Mary Moody Emerson on August 19, 1832 that he was determined to leave the ministry. Emerson expressly referred to his decision as a “German” behavior: “[T]he least leaf must ... grow after the fashion of *its own* lobes [and] veins [and] not after that of the oak or the rose, and I can only do my work well by abjuring the opinions [and] customs of all others [and] adhering strictly to the divine plan a few dim inches of whose outline I faintly discern in my breast. Is that not German en[ough]?” (*L*, 1:354).

In describing his decision to place the claims of his heart over and above the “opinions and customs” of the ministry as a “German” behavior, Emerson referred in particular to the higher critics who had reinforced his own acute sense of the disparity between individual conscience and scriptural authority. For Norton, the historical skepticism of the new biblical criticism was bound to lead to “infidelity”. To tam-

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<sup>63</sup> Letter to Mary Moody Emerson, 27 October 1825; quoted in Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 113.

per with the historic foundation of faith was to undermine faith itself. For Emerson, by contrast, the higher criticism became an initial platform for his Transcendentalist beliefs—a faith based on the inductive authority of intuition and experience. The overriding thrust of the new biblical criticism was to move toward an expressly immanent position. The incompatibility between the historical testimony of Scripture and revelation increasingly led to the affirmation of a truth that had to be sought independently of biblical revelation, in the “spirit” rather than the “letter.” The new biblical criticism was in this respect in accord with what would become the trademark of Emerson’s full-fledged Transcendentalist position: the conception of revelation as gradual and progressive, and, more importantly, the use of subjective religious experience as a new foundation for spiritual truth.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE “CREDENTIALS” OF FAITH: THE MIRACLES CONTROVERSY IN NEW ENGLAND

“The Unitarians must break into two schools,” Convers Francis acutely observed in 1836, “the Old one, or English school, belonging to the sensual and empiric philosophy,—and the New one, or the German school . . ., belonging to the spiritual philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> The “old school” affirmed the historical veracity of the biblical record and believed that all “knowledge of Christ and Christianity” was “derived not from consciousness or intuition, but from outward revelation.”<sup>2</sup> The Transcendentalist “new school,” by contrast, insisted that the primary validation of religion was inner consciousness. The “new school’s” philosophy of intuition came to the fore in the miracles controversy of 1836 which by 1840 had quickly broadened into an open conflict about the historicity of the Jesus tradition.

For the “new school,” miraculous evidence could no longer serve as the pristine channel of revelation. Christianity rested more upon the teachings of Jesus than on his supposed deeds. “[W]e hold it to be an unsound method,” George Ripley declared in the *Christian Examiner* in 1836, “to make a belief in [miracles] the essential foundation of Christian faith, or the ultimate test of Christian character.”<sup>3</sup> It is impossible “to establish the truth of any religion merely on the ground of miracles.”<sup>4</sup> Ripley’s assertion moved an intuitive religion into the foreground, challenging the “old school’s” claim that the miracles Christ performed attested to the veracity of an “outward revelation” that was “not innate” but rather “super-induced.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Weiss, *Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Convers Francis* (Cambridge: Priv. print., 1863), 28–29.

<sup>2</sup> Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Boston Unitarianism, 1820–1850: A Study of the Life and Work of Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1890), 169.

<sup>3</sup> George Ripley, “Martineau’s Rationale”, in Perry Miller (ed.), *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 131.

<sup>4</sup> George Ripley, “Herder’s Theological Opinions and Services,” in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Frothingham, *Boston Unitarianism*, 169.

When it came to the miraculous evidence of “outward revelation,” Unitarians were confronted head-on with the “Scotch Goliath,” David Hume, who argued that it was not reasonable to believe on the basis of reported evidence that a miracle had taken place (*L*, 1:138). In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume pointed out that a miracle implied a violation of the laws of nature. These laws, however, Hume insisted, were drawn from experience which in itself contained a factual proof against the possibility of miracles.<sup>6</sup> From German higher criticism came another powerful challenge of the Unitarian belief in miraculous evidence. The Harvard–Göttingen men had painfully experienced how biblical critics like Eichhorn rendered the historical reliability of the biblical narratives uncertain and adduced data questioning the uniqueness of the life of Jesus accounts. Eichhorn thus belonged to “that class of German critics” who, as Norton formulated, “reject the belief of any thing properly miraculous in the history of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> For Unitarians at home and abroad, the rejection of the miraculous character of Christianity as well as of the “the genuineness of the Gospels” seemed to explode cherished conceptions of revealed religion. Thus Norton judged that “in proportion as suspicion is cast upon the genuineness and authenticity of the [Gospels], the history of Christ becomes doubtful and obscure.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Ticknor did not have any “objection to a serious and thorough examination of the grounds of Christianity.” But “learned” teaching “that the New Testament was written in the latter end of the second century and ... that a miracle is a natural and a revelation a metaphysical impossibility” was incompatible with the beliefs of a Unitarian who held that Christianity was a doctrinal system validated in particular by miracles of which the New Testament gave a historically accurate account.<sup>9</sup> Eichhorn’s “rules of criticism,” Bancroft judged, are “in general right tho[ugh] not unlimitedly right, but their application is sadly

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<sup>6</sup> On Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, see Robert J. Fogelin, “Hume’s scepticism,” in David Fate Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 90–116.

<sup>7</sup> Norton, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, 1:94.

<sup>8</sup> Norton, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, 1:16, 95.

<sup>9</sup> George Ticknor to Thomas Jefferson, 14 October, 1815; quoted in Orie Long, *Thomas Jefferson and George Ticknor: A Chapter in American Scholarship* (Williamstown, Mass.: McClelland Press, 1933), 15.



wrong." "Eichhorn does not hold to the Miraculous of Revelation, nor treat the subject in any other light than an historical and moral Phenomenon."<sup>10</sup>

The higher critics thus subverted the Unitarian position on the special authority of Christian revelation. For the Unitarian "old school," there was no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth lived, preached, performed miracles, died, and rose again. The biblical miracle narratives were faithful testimonies of God's supernatural intervention. Accordingly, the argument from miracles proved the existence of God. Miracles do occur, Unitarians argued, therefore there *is* God. Under the aegis of this premise, Unitarians followed the watchword "Except you see signs and wonders, you will not believe" (John 4, 48). Take these "signs" away and the supernatural rationalist temple would collapse and open the way for an "infidelity" that questioned the veracity of the "history of Christ."

## I

In the long controversy that began in 1836 over the value of intuitive testimony as opposed to miraculous evidence, the influence of the Harvard-Göttingen students' experiences was still to be felt, as the example of Emerson shows. Emerson repeatedly urged his brother William in Göttingen to "send information of a sort relating to Colleges, politics, institutions, & of which creditable use may be made by the Neady writers at home." Having "made some embryo motions in [his] divinity studies," Emerson was anxious to avail himself of "any useful hints from the Paradise of Dictionaries [and] Critics" (*L*, 1:143). William fulfilled his brother's request and regularly sent descriptions of Eichhorn's lectures and also aroused Waldo's interest in Lessing and Schleiermacher. Under this influence, Emerson came to accept a relativistic view of revelation that refuted the importance placed in the historical witness of Scripture. Historical evidence, Lessing had argued, is an insufficient basis for religious belief. Emerson was prepared to confront the consequences of this disparity between "accidental" history and the faith-claims of revelation. "I am curious to know," Emerson asked in August 1827, "what the Scriptures do in very deed say out

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<sup>10</sup> George Bancroft, letter of 12 September 1818; MHS.

about that exalted person who died in Calvary, but I do think it at this distance of time [and] in the confusion of languages to be a work of weighing phrases [and] hunting in dictionaries" (*L*, 1:208).

Emerson's question reveals a skepticism that reflected the influence of the higher critics' concern with historical positivity. But Hume's influence was also unmistakable. On 16 Oktober 1823, Emerson worried about the "Scotch Goliath" and wondered, "who is he that can stand up before him & prove the existence of the Universe, & of its Founder?" (*L*, 1:138). As a writer in the *Edinburgh Review* put it in an article on Dugald Stewart that Emerson read: "[T]he doctrine of Mr. Hume ... is not that we have not reached the truth, but that we can never reach it. It is an absolute and universal system of skepticism, professing to be derived from the very structure of the understanding."<sup>11</sup> To refute Hume's nihilistic assertions, Emerson shifted the burden of evidence and appealed to "internal evidence" as it exists within man (*JMN*, 3:214). But precisely this attempt to get around Hume's skepticism was shattered by the higher critics. "The objections the German scholars have proposed," Emerson realized, "attack the foundations of external evidence, and so give up the internal to historical speculators and pleasant doubters" (*J*, 2:83). Emerson was thus led to serious theological doubts. "Who is he," Emerson asked in January 1827, "that has seen God of whom so much is known, or where is one that has risen from the dead? Satisfy me beyond the possibility of doubt of the certainty of all that is told me concerning the other world and I will fulfil[] the conditions on which my salvation is suspended. The believer tells me he has an evidence historical [and] internal which make the presumption so strong that it is almost a certainty that it rests on the highest probabilities.... But now it must be admitted I am not certain that any of these things are true .... I never beheld [God]. I do not know that he exists" (*JMN*, 3:69).

The questioning of historical and internal evidences in the criticism of German "pleasant doubters" turned traditional scriptural concepts and doctrines into a spectacle in which the historical Jesus himself was questioned. Christianity seemed at best to forfeit its "certainty" and could not be sure about any alleged event if the actual historical evidence was meager. The very obvious consequence of this position was not only skepticism but atheism: "[T]he august Founder, the twelve

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<sup>11</sup> Anon., "Stewart's Introduction to the Encyclopedia," *Edinburgh Review* 36 (1821): 259; quoted in Richardson, *Emerson*, 31.

self-denying heroes of pious renown, ... the martyrs, ... the boundless aggregate of hearts and deeds which the genius of Christianity touched and inspired, ... all these must now pass ... into the rhetoric of scoffer and atheist as the significant testimonies of human folly, and every drunkard in his cups, and every voluptuary in his brothel will roll out his tongue at the Resurrection from the dead; at the acts, the martyrdoms, the unassailable virtues and the legendary greatness of Christianity" (*J*, 2:84–85).

Emerson was unwilling to accept "atheist" "rhetoric," but given the historico-critical findings, he could no longer follow Norton's view that "evidence, which, in the view of a Christian, establishes the truth of his religion" was a matter of "certainty."<sup>12</sup> By the early 1830s, Emerson had arrived at an intuitive religion that dismissed the miraculous evidences of Christianity as irrelevant. Jesus, he argued, did not intend miracles as verifications of the truth of his message; rather, Jesus revealed man's divine potential. In his sermons, Emerson thus no longer settled for a single historical Jesus as an example of human perfectibility. The Unitarian emphasis on the unique figure of Jesus gave way instead to the model of the universal man. Jesus was removed from the status as mediator and stripped of supernatural power. In his sermon on the Lord's Supper, Emerson made the idea of a non-divine, desupernaturalized Jesus explicit. A thoroughly humanized Jesus was described as a "glorified friend" (*W*, 11:20).

In his journals, Emerson further downgraded Jesus to a prophet whose role is equal to that of numerous other historical figures. Jesus "remind[s] us of all great men" (*JMN*, 5:72). He is no longer the object of faith but rather exemplifies having faith, a faith that validates the "God within" (*JMN*, 4:39). The God incarnate in Christ is in every other individual. Hence Jesus is not an exclusive object of reverence. According to Emerson, Jesus proclaimed the divinity of each individual and did not ask for adoration of his own person: "If Jesus came now into the world, he would say—You, YOU! He said to his age, I" (*JMN*, 5:362). As a representative of the perfection of humanity, Jesus becomes the "perfect man" (*JMN*, 5:71). Emerson was always in search of such a great man who exemplified the perfection universally available to each individual, a special genius who embodied most completely the divine essence. However, Emerson did not stick to a single historical figure as

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<sup>12</sup> Norton, *Discourse*, 30.

a guide to divine potential. For Emerson, what nature accomplished in Jesus could also be accomplished in other historical personage. Thus Emerson brushed aside the uniqueness of Jesus.

Following Emerson's shift away from Unitarian christology, Ripley presented Jesus as the propounder of truths that were independent of miracles as authenticating events. Ripley relegated the historical Jesus to the role of a teacher who derived his authority on the basis of natural human sentiments rather than supernatural occurrences. As in the case of Emerson's humanistic christology, the significance of the historical Jesus derived with Ripley from "the Immutability of the religious truths which he taught."<sup>13</sup> Ripley's departure from the Unitarian view of miracles involved above all a reconsideration and restatement of theological positions on religious "truth." "Religion," Ripley asserted in his ordination sermon at Canton, "Jesus Christ, the Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever," "is demanded by the Heart" and "is independent of forms, . . . of human reasoning [and] of speculative doctrines." "Religion has always existed, and in its essential elements is always the same. Its ideas are inseparable from man. They grow out of the unchangeable nature of things." The entire argument of miraculous evidence thus became passé. Jesus relied neither on miracles nor on "tradition" or "authority," but rather on the inward "character" of his teaching. Jesus embodied religious truths that were "everlasting realities" and existed before his coming; the testimony of miracles was therefore dispensable.<sup>14</sup> From this break with supernatural rationalist securities, it was for Ripley only a small step to assert—against evidentialist psychology—the indwelling "God-consciousness" as belonging to every man. In this intuitionist context, the historico-critical reconstruction of the particularities of Jesus' history was not of primary importance. As shown by the official outbreak of the miracles controversy, Ripley envisioned the Jesus figure as a cypher for the notion of the infinitude of man, a symbol of timeless truth whose validity was independent of the particular history of Jesus.

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<sup>13</sup> George Ripley, "Jesus Christ, the Same Yesterday, Today and Forever," in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 285–286.

<sup>14</sup> Ripley, "Jesus Christ," 293, 291, 286.

## II

In a November 1836 review of the British Unitarian James Martineau's *Rationale of Religious Inquiry*, Ripley reasserted his rejection of the evidential value of miracles. Ripley's review asked for a "revision of theology," a "revision" in which "a firm faith in Christianity [was] cherished independently of miracles."<sup>15</sup> Miracles, Ripley argued, were not sufficient to authenticate divine authority, nor where they needed to confirm the truth of a religion of the heart. The question of historicity was not at issue for Ripley. Ripley did not question or examine whether Christ had walked on the water, fed the five thousand, or healed the sick. Ripley granted that these events had occurred; yet one did not arrive at religious conviction by emphasizing their evidential value. Ripley argued that "the purpose of miracles" was not to confirm "supernatural endowments," but to accomplish quite a different purpose—to affirm that everyone was naturally inspired with "divinity in ... [his] own nature."<sup>16</sup>

Ripley's position soon met ardent criticism. In an open letter on the Martineau review, Norton refused to side with Ripley. Norton's inflammatory response solidified Ripley's position as a strong opponent of the prevailing systems of theology. For Norton, the "genuineness" of biblical miracles formed the prerequisite for belief in the authority of Jesus as a divinely inspired messenger. To question miraculous evidence was, according to Norton's generalizing terms, to clear a path to "atheism." "The rejection of ... evidence, which ... establishes the truth of ... religion," Norton argued, amounted to a "rejection of Christianity, ... the denial of the truth of the Gospel history."<sup>17</sup>

Ripley's reply to Norton reiterated that the issue at stake was not the "genuineness" and "authenticity" of Jesus' miracles, but rather the "divinity" of the human soul. This argument followed a straightforward sequence, namely to "begin with establishing [the] coincidence [of Jesus' faith] with the divine testimony of our spiritual nature; and [then] ... proceed to shew the probability of miracles."<sup>18</sup> However, Ripley argued in his *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion* (1836) that this

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<sup>15</sup> Ripley, "Martineau's Rationale," 130, 131.

<sup>16</sup> Ripley, "Martineau's Rationale," 131.

<sup>17</sup> Norton, *Discourse*, 22, 11, 30. See also Andrews Norton, "Ripley's Martineau," in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 159.

<sup>18</sup> George Ripley, "To Andrews Norton," in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 161.

latter issue was irrelevant if human nature correlated with nature's divine language, if there was something "in the nature of man, which may enable him to become a partaker of the divine nature," something which recognizes in the nature of man the signatures of divinity. Here and here only lay "the example of Jesus Christ." His "teaching" affirmed man's "immediate perception of Truth," his endowment with "a faculty, which enables him not merely to count, to weigh, and to measure, to estimate probabilities and to draw inferences from visible facts, but to ascertain and determine certain principles of original truth."<sup>19</sup>

Ripley correctly sensed that as long as Unitarians adhered to religious tenets grounded in verifiability, the historical basis would be vulnerable. Ripley therefore re-stated the relation of history and faith, cutting the cord between religious truth and historical verifiability and shifting emphasis from a reliance upon historical factuality to internalized testimony. This was not to argue that Jesus' miracles were the outcome of mythical embellishment nor to say that history was to be abandoned; rather, Ripley maintained that one had to accept faith on its own spiritual face without the external corroborations historical apologetics had accumulated. Once this was done, testimony could be internalized to verify intuitionism under the watchword: "Let the study of the theology commence with the study of human consciousness."<sup>20</sup>

Ripley's "revision of theology" did not simply brush the claims of history aside, as Norton charged. Ripley drew support for his position from sources that did not undermine the historicity of biblical narratives. In Ripley's reading, Schleiermacher held "with perfect faith, to the supernatural character, the miracles, and the divine mission of Jesus Christ," while the German theologian and poet Johann Gottfried Herder "did not call in question [the] historical truth [of miracles].... They are so interwoven with the whole history of our Saviour, so appropriate to his person and character as the Messiah, that Christ would be no longer Christ, if we denied these facts concerning him."<sup>21</sup> Yet for Ripley, this did not entail that one could "rest the divine authority of Christianity upon the evidence of miracles." A miracle could "direct attention to the doctrine, ... clothe the person of the teacher with out-

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<sup>19</sup> George Ripley, *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion*, in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Ripley, "Martineau's Rationale," 132.

<sup>21</sup> Ripley, "Schleiermacher as a Theologian," 101; "Herder's Theological Opinions," 96.

ward consideration, ... [or] even give him external creditability, according to the notions of the age." But "the truth of the doctrine, it [could] never prove." And this, Ripley insisted, was "acknowledged by Christ himself... He announced truth, which should make the heart of man alive and free. And the proof of this, he placed in the experience of every individual. To this, outward miracles could contribute nothing."<sup>22</sup>

Ripley sought a reform of theology in which the living faith of the heart took the place of bondage to a dead letter. Arguing that the presence of God manifests itself in the inward nature of man, Ripley detached the claims of religion from the bondage of historical verification. Ripley did not align his arguments with the issue of scriptural interpretation, nor did he spell out any exegetical or hermeneutical readjustments. In Schleiermacher, Ripley noted, "the Scriptures [were] submitted to critical examination of great extent and thoroughness, the doctrines of theology discussed on all sides."<sup>23</sup> With Ripley, by contrast, the emphasis on the nature of religious experience far outweighed the focus on exegetical and doctrinal issues. Ripley's concern was a "revision" of the approach to religious truth and not biblical criticism. For Ripley as for Emerson, hermeneutical and critical exegetical techniques receded behind the programmatic assertion of an intuitional idealism in which man had "immediate" access to the divine.<sup>24</sup>

### III

In the course of the altercations between Ripley and Norton, the miracles controversy developed into a much broader argument over the nature of religious truth. This argument sharpened when William Henry Furness contributed to the debate his *Remarks on the Four Gospels* (1836) and deliberately put the history of Jesus to Transcendentalist uses. Reviewers charged that Furness's *Remarks* posed a serious threat to "Christianity as a system of revealed truth" by "*philosophizing* away the peculiarities of the Gospel."<sup>25</sup> But the exegetical and theological foundations of Furness's position reveal that his allegedly "startling" "propo-

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<sup>22</sup> Ripley, "Herder's Theological Opinions," 96, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Ripley, "Schleiermacher as a Theologian," 99.

<sup>24</sup> Ripley, *Discourses*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther Hurlbut, "Review of *Remarks on the Four Gospels*, by W.H. Furness" *Christian Examiner* 22 (1837): 122, 104.

sitions” were in fact far less provocative and revolutionary than critics like Martin Luther Hurlbut made them out to be.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Furness, whom the Transcendentalists welcomed in 1836 as an ally in their cause against historical Christianity and the Unitarian fortress of miracles, may be read as an exemplar of a Unitarian who turned Transcendentalist without surrendering the evidentialist premises of “genuine historical faith.”<sup>27</sup> The pervasiveness of Furness’s evidentialist aesthetics, his pronounced emphasis on the veracity and reliability of the life of Jesus narratives reveal that, when it came to the issue of the historicity of the Jesus tradition, no stark gulf or opposition existed between the Transcendentalist gospel and Unitarian Christianity. Confronted with German critics who seemed to dissolve the life of Jesus narratives into the realm of mythical embellishment, Furness, no less than Norton, drew back to an apologetic defense of a Jesus figure that carried the distinct imprints of an empirical, historical personage rather than a mythical Christ.<sup>28</sup>

Furness’s *Remarks* refused to make religion primarily a matter of miraculous evidence. This evidence constituted for Furness only an appendage to the evidences of the heart, an inner evidence which perceived “that every existing thing [had] a relation, not only to [man’s] understanding, but also to [the] higher principle of [his] nature, in popular language, to [his] heart, [his] soul.”<sup>29</sup> Furness’s position presented a direct challenge to historic christology that insisted on the testimony of an inward revelation addressed to a “spiritual force.” Miracles, Furness argued, “were not put forth merely for the sake of the influence they might have upon the understandings of others, but, like the glorious creations of genius, they were the simple, natural, irrepressible manifestations of that mighty spiritual force which was the inmost, God-inspired life of Jesus.”<sup>30</sup> The validity of the life of Jesus thus was

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<sup>26</sup> Hurlbut, “Furness,” 111.

<sup>27</sup> William Henry Furness, “Origin of the Gospels,” *Christian Examiner* 70 (1861): 60.

<sup>28</sup> See Francis Bowen, “Greenleaf and Strauss: The Truth of Christianity,” *North American Review* 63 (1846): 402.

<sup>29</sup> William Henry Furness, *Remarks on the Four Gospels* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1836), 198. On Furness’s significance in the miracles controversy, see Elisabeth Hurth, “The ‘Signs and Wonders’ of Divinity: The Miracles Controversy in New England, 1836–1841,” *ATQ: The American Transcendental Quarterly* 4 (1990): 294–297. For an account of the miracles controversy, see also William Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 52–97; and Hurth, *In His Name*, 142–158.

<sup>30</sup> Furness, *Remarks*, 198–199.



expressly declared to be independent of historical proofs from miracle or prophecy. These alleged proofs, Furness argued, were not sufficiently probative to produce faith and in effect presupposed it. The "authority" of Jesus was in Furness's conception not to be experienced physically and objectively as an empirical omnipotence or omniscience; rather, the supreme significance of Jesus was vindicated by an internal miracle within the religious consciousness.

Furness thus arrived at "a very startling proposition," namely "that all men are endowed with miraculous powers; that the human mind, as such, possesses a 'supremacy over' material things."<sup>31</sup> The "indwelling of [the] wonderworking power of Jesus," Furness asserted, "heightens [man's] sense of moral greatness."<sup>32</sup> Miracles accordingly "disclose[d] the essential, natural sovereignty of mind over matter, of the spiritual over the physical."<sup>33</sup> This assertion also touched on the more inclusive issue of the basis of religious belief and knowledge. In wrestling with this issue, Furness refashioned Unitarian christology into his own rhetorics by arguing—as Ripley and Emerson did—that the indwelling of the divine in man was not confined to the historical Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth thus emerged as a "grand ... model of humanity" whose "divinity" was determinative for every human being.<sup>34</sup> Jesus, then, was the exemplar insofar as he presented the actualization in history of what is at the core of the human self.

Furness's humanistic christology played down the key theological issue of critical life of Jesus research: the difficulty of keeping together the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Furness confidently highlighted Jesus as the pre-eminent example of the divinity of the soul. As with Ripley and Emerson, the need for a critical, exegetical reconstruction of the historical outlines of the life of Jesus went underground in an experiential religion located in the modality of spiritual forces. What attracted Furness to the human figure of Jesus was not a biblico-exegetical concern but rather the interest in exemplary uses of Jesus. Furness therefore shifted the theological argument away from biblical grounds to an intuitionist hermeneutics.

This hermeneutics played directly into the position Ripley asserted against Norton. Consonant with the Transcendentalist cause, Furness's

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<sup>31</sup> Hurlbut, "Furness," 111.

<sup>32</sup> Furness, *Remarks*, 195.

<sup>33</sup> Furness, *Remarks*, 164.

<sup>34</sup> Furness, *Remarks*, 164.

treatment of the life of Jesus located religious authority in the experience of individual believers and thus coincided with the intuitional argument of the Transcendentalist party. Furness set out “to bring the man of Nazareth, ... the Revealer of God and man, more within the reach of human sympathies,” and therefore he devalued the “supernatural influence” of Jesus, highlighting instead his “human form.”<sup>35</sup> Like Ripley, Furness in this way relegated the role of Jesus to that of an outstanding figure whose authority lay in his teaching rather than in the uniqueness of his person. Jesus’ teaching was “the same yesterday, today, forever,” independent of doctrine, creed, or the establishment of theological systems.

Furness reassured Norton that this position stood within orthodoxy. Yet the Unitarian camp, now with Hurlbut as spokesman, aligned Furness’s position with Ripley’s critique of the miracle narratives. According to Hurlbut, Furness maintained that all men naturally had miraculous powers. At this, Hurlbut gasped. That Jesus should be the pre-eminent representative example of the divinity of the soul turned, in Hurlbut’s inspection, the historical Jesus into a projection of an ideal notion of humanity and dissolved all claims of historicity. But Hurlbut found that Furness even went “much further than this” by approaching a “mere naturalism” that regarded the miracles of the Gospel “as ‘natural facts.’” And in this very reduction of “the miracles of the Gospels ... to natural laws,” revealed Christianity, Hurlbut judged, “ceases to be.” The “credentials” of faith seemed to crumble.<sup>36</sup>

Historically, Furness’s position came close to the German life of Jesus researcher Heinrich Eberhard Paulus, who attempted to resolve the miracles of the New Testament into ordinary occurrences by the familiar and regular “laws of nature.”<sup>37</sup> Paulus, Professor of Theology at Heidelberg University, belonged to the rationalistic camp of life of Jesus researchers. Evaluating the significance of miraculous history in terms of historical positivity and rationalistic factuality, Paulus narrowed the biblical narratives down to a matter-of-fact kernel. Paulus’s rationalistic exegesis granted the facticity of Jesus’ existence and his claim to Messianism, but the religious meaningfulness of historical revelation, as opposed to the factual reference or ostentative meaning of the Gospel narratives, was demonstrated in Paulus’s *Leben Jesu* on the basis

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<sup>35</sup> Furness, *Remarks*, 335.

<sup>36</sup> Hurlbut, “Furness,” 111, 104, 122, 110.

<sup>37</sup> Hurlbut, “Furness,” 107.

of the category of inner spirituality. Paulus thus read external miraculous events as direct expressions of Jesus' qualitative being. Beneath the husk of miraculous accretions, Paulus held, there was the "kernel," the historical Jesus with his Gospel of morality. In this context, miraculous history was not based on the disruption of natural law; rather, it was the unique being of Jesus himself in his moral character that was truly miraculous. "The miraculous about Jesus is Jesus himself," Paulus asserted, "his pure disposition which is a genuinely human example for man to imitate and emulate."<sup>38</sup> The authority of Jesus of Nazareth as the moral man was independent of external corroborations from the arsenal of miraculous evidence.

Examining the New Testament miracles in his *Leben Jesu*, Paulus relied on the theory of gradual miraculous embellishment. In this rationalistic account, the miracles of raising the dead were interpreted as cases of coma, Jesus' walking on the water as a visual deception, and the feeding of the five thousand as a chain reaction among people sharing their own food. The death and resurrection of Jesus fell into the same category. Here too, Paulus argued, the Evangelists had merely infused natural phenomena with supernatural explanation. The superficial piercing of Jesus' side was caused by the service of a phlebotomy, while the cool grave as well as aromatic unctions ensured the process of Jesus' re-animation from a death-like trance.<sup>39</sup>

In aligning the *Remarks* with this rationalistic critique of the miracle narratives, Hurlbut ignored the apologetic intentions of Furness's position. Furness himself was anxious to make clear that he was "not advocating the method of the German theologian, Paulus, who undertook to reduce the extraordinary events of the New Testament to ordinary occurrences, assuming the narratives to be mere exaggerations."<sup>40</sup> For Furness, the historical Jesus did work miracles. Commenting on the "Character of Christ" in 1834, Furness affirmed that "no skill less than that which produced it, certainly not the skill of man, and least of all of such men as the authors of the Gospels appear to have been, could fab-

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<sup>38</sup> Heinrich Eberhard Paulus, *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 3 vols. (Heidelberg: C.F. Winter, 1828), 1:XI. See also Schweitzer, *Quest*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> See Paulus, *Leben Jesu*, 1:244-248, 349-357, 357-360; 2:277-305. See also Schweitzer, *Quest*, 52-55.

<sup>40</sup> William Henry Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted and Jesus Becoming Visible* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), 44.

ricate miracles in such exact accordance with the life of Jesus.”<sup>41</sup> Furness’s *Remarks* did not undermine this position. Furness bypassed the scientific and historical problems posed by miracles by referring them to natural causes beyond human understanding and hence expressive of a spiritual force. Accordingly, Furness focused on an inward criterion—the personality of Jesus, his character, and his inner life. In this focus, the professed allegiance to Jesus as a miracle-worker was replaced by the adherence to a code of ethical idealism and correspondingly to Jesus as “a man ... of unequalled moral greatness.”<sup>42</sup>

While Furness’s subjectivistic position did follow Paulus’s exemplarist view of Jesus, it departed clearly from his theory of miraculous embellishment. Furness accepted as a fact that the body of Jesus had disappeared from the tomb. He did not doubt that Jesus had distributed bread to his followers and to the multitude who had gathered to hear him preach. Furness did undermine the supernatural status of miraculous history, yet he never cast doubt on the general credibility and integrity of the scriptural accounts. On the latter issue, Furness proceeded to advance conclusions that almost coincided with evidentialist assertions. According to Furness, “the authors of [the Gospels] were wholly unconscious of any design to make out a case to do anything but state facts.” Furness found in them “none of the art of fraudulent design—none of the incoherence of self-Delusion. [The Evangelists’] histories command ... cordial confidence.”<sup>43</sup> Like Norton, Furness had no place for speculations concerning the historical veracity of the Jesus figure or for considerations of the very difficulty of reconstructing the historical Jesus. “We know enough of [Jesus],” Furness confidently asserted, “to be able to form a distinct idea of his moral lineaments, of the pervading tone of his character.”<sup>44</sup> Shortly after German life of Jesus researchers had set the possibility of such “character” portraits of the historical Jesus at naught, one of the allegedly leading spokesmen of the “new school’s” position on miraculous testimony was at one with the Unitarian rejection of historical skepticism regarding the biblical Jesus portrait.

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<sup>41</sup> William Henry Furness, “The Character of Christ,” *Christian Examiner* 15 (1834): 291.

<sup>42</sup> Furness, *Remarks*, 60.

<sup>43</sup> Furness, *Remarks*, 34, 51.

<sup>44</sup> William Henry Furness, “The Miracles of Jesus,” *Christian Examiner* 22 (1837): 285.

## IV

The subversive criticism Hurlbut had deplored in Furness was made explicit in July of 1838 with Emerson's "Divinity School Address." Emerson advanced his address "through the forms already existing," but he was not willing to base his religious belief on debatable historical "evidences" (*CW*, 1:92). Miracles were of one piece with the normal processes of nature; they exemplified the premise Emerson appropriated from Schleiermacher's discourses on religion, namely that "man's life was a miracle" and that therefore "the very word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is a Monster" (*CW*, 1:81). Emerson's critique coincided with Ripley's assertion that the locus of revelation is religious consciousness and not historical event.

The "Address" introduced Jesus as "the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of man" (*CW*, 1:82). He had come to proclaim the divinity of man, not his own divinity. In this anti-deific view of Christ, Jesus' claim of divinity was democratized. The divinity of Christ is available to all people: "He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts, through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think'" (*CW*, 1:81). In positing Jesus as a "prophet" who proclaimed the divinity of the human soul, Emerson subtly turned Unitarian christology around: Now man was the "wonderworker" whose faith could "blend with the light of rising and of setting suns" (*CW*, 1:85, 89). This shift from making assertions about Jesus' miraculous displays of power to re-claiming for man powers like Jesus' no longer had any place for historical Christianity and its concern with the "*person* of Jesus" (*CW*, 1:82) but rather looked to the example of critics like Herder, who "loved to regard [Jesus] chiefly in his human relations, as a being possessing all human sympathies, subject to all human feelings, clothed with all human virtues, in truth, as the type and complete expression of perfect humanity."<sup>45</sup>

That a just estimate of Jesus' character could no longer follow the traditional investigation of Jesus in the categories of divine and human subsistences or "persons," was also acknowledged by Emerson's contemporaries in the "new school" whose appeal to the figure of Jesus

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<sup>45</sup> Ripley, "Herder's Theological Opinions," 97.

evinced an expressly antidogmatic bias. “Jesus ... exerted an energy,” James Freeman Clarke was convinced, that “broke down the most stony mass of bigotry which has ever this world petrified around the form of true religion.” “Jesus Christ taught no formal system—the Apostles laid down no fixed standard of opinions.”<sup>46</sup> Jesus’ aim, Convers Francis similarly maintained in 1836 in *Christianity as a Purely Internal Principle*, was “to purify and sweeten the fountains in the deep places of the soul.”<sup>47</sup> In this context, the mediating role of Jesus consisted in the “conveyance of that holy power, by which the soul is saved from spiritual death, and brought into spiritual life.” As in Emerson’s “Address,” the traditional role of Christ as Savior-God was minimized. “The ministry of Jesus,” Francis pontificated, “can serve us only by kindling the life of God in our souls, ... only by rousing us ... to a quickening sense of our eternal relations.”<sup>48</sup>

For Emerson’s fellow Transcendentalists, then, the themes of the “Address” were not unusual or startling but rather in accord with what Frederic Henry Hedge termed a “religion carried into action,” opening the mind to a “larger range and livelier apprehension of all truth,—instead of confining it, as devotion to a creed does, within a given circle of ideas.”<sup>49</sup> But Emerson’s “Address” fell into a Unitarian camp in which evidential theology had held its own and in which the “new theology” was charged with atheism and pantheism. Norton put this theological critique on one level with an epistemological point and equated intuitional idealism with a denial of historicity and “genuineness.” Emerson’s “pantheistic” theology, Norton charged, sought “to separate ... Christianity from its historical relations.”<sup>50</sup> This correlation of faith and historicity, however, was quite different from the “new school’s” position. Norton urged the believer to accept miracles on the antecedent foundation of the belief of facts. For the “new school,” by contrast, the premises of intuitionism were clearly set apart

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<sup>46</sup> James Freeman Clarke, *The Well-Instructed Scribe; or Reform and Conservatism* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1841), 6–7; *The Unitarian Reform*, in *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association*. 1st. ser., 12, no. 138 (Boston: James Munroe, 1839), 6.

<sup>47</sup> Convers Francis, *Christianity as a Purely Internal Principle*, in *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association*. 1st. ser., 16, no. 105 (Boston: Leonard C. Bowles, 1836), 8.

<sup>48</sup> Convers Francis, *Christ the Way to God*, in *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association*. 1st. ser., 16, no. 181 (Boston: James Munroe, 1843), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, *Practical Goodness, the True Religion* (Bangor, Maine: S.S. Smith, 1840) 5; *A Sermon on the Character and Ministry of the late Rev. William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (Bangor, Maine: S.S. Smith, 1842), 6.

<sup>50</sup> Norton, *Discourse*, 43, 50.

from the issue of historicity. Ripley's reply to Norton's charges dispelled the charge of historical unbelief. "The question at issue," Ripley claimed, "is not concerning the divine mission of Jesus Christ. ... Nor is it whether Jesus Christ performed the miracles ascribed to him in the New Testament."<sup>51</sup> The veracity of "historical relations" was left untouched by the claims of "consciousness." These claims, the "new school" alleged, were addressed to the "better nature" of man and independent of the historical positivity of external evidences.<sup>52</sup> What remained unchallenged in this context was the assumption that the history of Jesus could not really be undermined by speculative criticism. The figure of Jesus carried a warrant and guarantee of truth that established this figure as the "representative" "great man" and therefore presumed the validity of the history of this "hero" (*CW*, 4:6, 18). Thus Emerson's "Address" did not dissolve the figure of Jesus into the realm of mythical embellishment but rather affirmed Jesus as the "true man" against the "formalist" minister (*CW*, 1:81, 85). With regard to the validity of the historical Jesus, then, there was no substantial cleavage between the Unitarian camp and the "new school." Despite their intuitionist framework, the "new school" advocates did not question the historical veracity of the Jesus tradition and firmly relied on the "uses" of Jesus as the "perfect man."

## V

After the "Divinity School Address," the miracles controversy witnessed a subtle shift of argument from an emphasis on subjective religious truth to the historical reliability of the biblical narratives. This shift was marked by the entry of Theodore Parker into the Ripley-Norton altercation. Under the pseudonym "Levi Blodgett," Parker in 1840 set out to change the scope of the debate. While Ripley had dealt with the question whether "men believe in Christianity solely on the ground of miracles," Parker first dealt with a more preliminary issue: "How do men come to have any religion, or, in other words, on what evidence do they receive the plainest religious truths?"<sup>53</sup> On this question, Parker

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<sup>51</sup> Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *George Ripley* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882), 100, 101.

<sup>52</sup> Ripley, "Herder's Theological Opinions," 97.

<sup>53</sup> Theodore Parker, *The Previous Question between Mr. Andrews Norton and His Alumni*

returned to the position Ripley had initially affirmed against Norton. Religious belief was not a matter of credentials but rather innate with man. There was “nothing interposed between Conscience and God, or between Him and the religious [s]entiment” (145). Intuitive belief, intuitive testimony was to Parker “more satisfactory evidence of [Jesus’] divine authority, than all his miracles, from the transformation of water into wine, to the resurrection of Lazarus” (157).

At the core of Parker’s argument lay his adherence to the historical Jesus, the simple Galilean detached from the supernatural framework of evidences and from soteriological doctrines pertaining to atonement and justification. Parker could “conceive of no man who [would] more fully represent the moral and religious side of our nature.” Jesus’ “absolute religion” was “not limited by creeds, legends, rites or symbols” and was independent of critical concerns whether there was something “fictitious or legendary from Genesis to Revelations.” (150, 159). On this premise, Parker was prepared to confront the possibility of the historical unreliability of the life of Jesus accounts. Parker’s “Levi Blodgett” pamphlet acknowledged that the German life of Jesus researcher David Friedrich Strauss had uncovered the Gospels as a texture of myth and therefore largely unhistorical.<sup>54</sup> Strauss had advanced his myth criticism in a controversial life of Jesus published in 1835. In Germany, Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* was confronted with charges and accusations that exposed the life of Jesus research itself to the overall charge of negativity in historical criticism. “Scarcely ever,” Albert Schweitzer comments on the reception of Strauss’s *Leben Jesu*, “has a book let loose such a storm of controversy; and scarcely ever has a controversy been so barren of immediate result. The fertilizing rain brought up a crop of toad-stools.”<sup>55</sup> The “toad-stools” were primarily the fierce debates concerning miracles triggered by Strauss’s interpretation of the relationship of the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith, sterile debates without equal in scriptural scholarship which had already consumed a considerable amount of theological energies. But Strauss’s work also brought

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*Moved and Handled, in a Letter to All Those Gentlemen by Levi Blodgett* (1840), appendix to John Edward Dirks, *The Critical Theology of Theodore Parker* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 138, 140. Unless otherwise noted, further quotations will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>54</sup> See also Theodore Parker, “Review of *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, by David Friedrich Strauss,” *Christian Examiner* 28 (1840): 308–310. Unless otherwise noted, further quotations will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>55</sup> Schweitzer, *Quest*, 97.



about a more lasting and "fertilizing" development: the resolution of the deadlock between the two camps of rationalism and supernaturalism. Strauss subtly undermined the presuppositions of the two camps by changing the state of the question on both fronts and by shifting the focus from the explanation of events to the narratives that represented them. There were, Strauss argued, other considerations to be taken into account than merely those of positive historicity. According to Strauss, the "Messianic ideas" of Jesus held by the early Christians, their faith in the risen Christ determined the portraits of the historical Jesus. The biblical narratives were therefore not to be read as historical annals but rather as literary, mythopoetic compositions.<sup>56</sup>

Strauss thus cut through the stalemate that divided theologians into the two camps of rationalism and supernaturalism. Strauss pushed the quest of the historical Jesus beyond the polarities of these two positions and also undermined the presuppositions of Schleiermacher's life of Jesus research. According to Strauss, Schleiermacher took for granted that Jesus was historically available in the New Testament. The events recorded in the life of Jesus narratives had actually occurred; it was just a matter of interpreting how they took place. It was precisely the history-like character of the biblical accounts, however, that Strauss set out to call into question, thus disagreeing with three competing schools of thought: the supernaturalist citadel of the historical accuracy of the Gospels; Reimarus' view that biblical narratives were designed to conceal and distort genuine history; and the rationalist attempt to rescue the narratives' historicity by considering the miraculous in the sacred history as a drapery which needed only to be drawn aside in order to disclose the pure historic form. For Strauss, by contrast, the life of Jesus did not consist of a chain of miracles and fulfilled prophecies, nor did it consist of natural events which the Evangelists mistook or embellished as miraculous; rather, the Gospels accounts presented records of "myth," narrative expressions of the early Christian community's understanding of Jesus in terms of contemporary messianic expectations (86–87).

In New England, Strauss's myth criticism entered the miracles controversy at a point in the debate when the issue of historical verification had been suppressed by the "new school's" arguments. Strauss's criticism, Parker judged in his "Levi Blodgett" pamphlet, made this issue

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<sup>56</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 86. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically.

central by applying the category of myth to the text of the Gospels. Strauss's attempt to sever history from theology fell on a ground unprepared to settle for the historical unreliability of the life of Jesus narratives. Parker was convinced that the historical basis of Jesus' life could not simply be knocked away. "I do not," he declared, "express any doubt on my own part of the *general* accuracy of [the Evangelists'] history of Christ" (157). Parker was obviously not prepared to let the actual history of Jesus fade into obscurity. Yet Parker did not, as Robert D. Richardson Jr.'s discussion of his involvement with the higher criticism suggests, emerge from Strauss as a "historical-minded critic who found the mythical view essentially negative and destructive."<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, Parker acutely perceived the mythical approach as a useful tool for legitimating the intuitive basis of religion against the Unitarian reliance on biblical miracles. Emphasizing the subjective experiential verification of religious truth, Parker asserted that religious belief was primary and universal, flowing from the "germs of religion" that inhered in human nature and were therefore independent of scriptural revelation. "Religion ... thus *caused* by the innate germs ... in the soul; thus *occasioned* by the outer world, thus *promoted* by inspired men," needed no mediation of sacrament, creed or Scripture (149). Miracles accordingly confirmed man's original capacity to apprehend primary religious truth intuitively. On this basis, Parker welcomed Strauss's conclusions and acknowledged that "Strauss ... ha[d] explained a great deal of the New Testament into *Mythi* ... which had no foundation in fact" (156). For Parker, the theory of mythical accretion affirmed that "absolute religion" did not depend on miraculous evidence and was not determined by "the legendary, ritual and symbolic" (150).

Although Strauss's approach fed into Parker's conception of "absolute religion," Parker was not willing to accept Strauss's assertion of the impossibility of miracles. Parker was convinced that "Jesus, like other religious teachers, wrought miracles" (154). Nor was Parker prepared to embrace Strauss's interpretation of Jesus as the mythical embodiment of an idea. Parker's "Levi Blodgett" pamphlet remained firmly committed to a historical figure, the simple Galilean who "receive[d] ... direct religious and moral inspiration from God" (150). The significance of this historical figure could not simply be dissolved into the realm of myth. For Parker, "Christianity [was] not a thing of specu-

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<sup>57</sup> Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 47.

lation"; rather, it carried the imprints of a "historical faith" based on the significance of Jesus as the "perfect man" who was to be "construct[ed] ... historically" (159, 150).

This was an affirmation of the historical validity of the life of Jesus that had marked all previous "new school" references to the uses of Jesus as the "representative" man. Yet Parker was well aware that with Strauss it was no longer possible to seek Jesus in history if the accounts about his life were myths. The historical Jesus lost his significance for faith. The life of Jesus seemed to evaporate in a haze of myth.<sup>58</sup> The adherence to the historicity of the Jesus tradition which had been a common bond between the two schools of the Unitarian-Transcendentalist tradition became in this position dispensable. The miracles controversy had arrived at a point which, as Samuel Lathrop recalled in 1888, "disintegrated the clergy and the whole body of Unitarians."<sup>59</sup> Evidentialism now stood completely opposed to the questioning of the historical positivity of the Jesus tradition and the biblical records. But as the reception of Strauss's *Leben Jesu* in New England was to show, evidentialism could still be called in to substantiate the validity of the historical Jesus against his dissolution into myth. The destructive evidence Strauss waged against the fortress of miracles finally worked to bring "new school" advocates closer to "old school" affirmations of historical faith than is commonly assumed.

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<sup>58</sup> See also the Centenary Edition of *The Works of Theodore Parker*, 15 vols. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1907–1913), 4:21. Unless otherwise noted, future references to this edition will be cited parenthetically, by volume and page number.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel Lathrop, *Some Reminiscences of the Life of Samuel Kirkland Lathrop* (Cambridge: J. Wilson, 1888), 202; quoted in Clarence Faust, "The Background of the Unitarian Opposition to Transcendentalism," *Modern Philology* 35 (1938), 322.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE ARCH-FIEND OF CHRISTIAN FAITH: DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS AND NEW ENGLAND DIVINITY

Strauss's *Leben Jesu*, as it was presented to New England audiences by Parker, not only changed the course of direction in the miracles controversy, it also brought up new charges of "atheism" and "impiety." Strauss, New Englanders judged, put forward a "theory which substituted mythical figment for historic fact" and thus seemed to "ma[k]e havoc of historical Christianity."<sup>1</sup> But there was another threat issuing from Strauss's work that "perfectly paralyzed" New England divinity "with terror," as James Freeman Clarke observed in 1838.<sup>2</sup> This reaction was provoked by a crucial premise underlying Strauss's "bold onslaught ... upon historical Christianity."<sup>3</sup> Strauss not only asserted that the Gospel narratives were myths; more fundamentally, he also offered a reinterpretation of Christianity in which the historical Jesus was replaced by collective humanity as the true subject. The "key to the whole of Christology," Strauss argued, is neither the rationalist view of Jesus as an exemplary teacher, nor Kant's ideal of moral perfection, nor Schleiermacher's conception of Jesus as the archetype of perfect God-consciousness, but rather the Christ-idea, the idea of God-manhood that found no realization in the historical Jesus. The unity of God and man, Strauss reiterated, is not manifested in any single individual: "In an individual, a God-man, the properties and functions which the church ascribes to Christ contradict themselves; in the idea of the race, they perfectly agree" (780). The Jesus of history is therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, "The Mythical Element in the New Testament," in *Ways of the Spirit*, and *Other Essays* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1877), 316; Octavius B. Frothingham, "Review of *Christ the Spirit*," *Christian Examiner* 73 (1862): 315. Further quotations from Hedge's essay will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> James Freeman Clarke, *Western Messenger* 6 (1838), 57; quoted in Stanley M. Vogel, *German Literary Influences on the American Transcendentalists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew P. Peabody, "Strauss and the Mythic Theory," *North American Review* 91 (1860): 130.

not the Christ of faith; rather, the truth of christology resides in the fact that the human species is the God-man.

To the “theological world,” Frederic Henry Hedge judged, this speculative approach “seemed to be the last impiety of criticism” (316). Yet the “dread” with which Strauss was “regarded by ... American divines” and the emotional shock that “[t]he German critic, terror of his time,” caused in devout Christians did not stem the influence of his life of Jesus in New England.<sup>4</sup> From 1837 to 1865, the *Princeton Review*, the *North American Review* and, above all, the *Christian Examiner* participated substantially in the dissemination of Strauss’s book.<sup>5</sup> In 1843, the first American edition appeared in New York, three years after the first French version but three years before the British translation by George Eliot.<sup>6</sup> In the preface to the American edition, the publisher confidently asserted that Strauss “afforded every biblical student a rational interpretation, on which the disinterested of every sect [could] agree.”<sup>7</sup> Yet American evidentialist theologians represented by Harvard Unitarians formed a strong phalanx of opposition to “the theory of Strauss, which resolve[d] the Gospels into mythical or legendary compositions [and] ... regard[ed] them as unconscious exaggerations, spontaneous inventions of credulity.”<sup>8</sup> For Norton, Jesus was a divine messenger who had taught a pristine system of religion. To reduce this character to the status of “fiction” was to leave Christianity “destitute of historical truth.”<sup>9</sup> According to Norton, Christianity was rooted in history and depended for its validity on the actuality of certain historical events. Norton therefore opposed Strauss’s attempt to deny all claims to the “genuineness” and historical factuality of the Gospel tradition by “an exhibition of the

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<sup>4</sup> August Neander, *The Life of Jesus Christ in its Historical Connexion and Historical Development*. Translated from the fourth German edition by John McClintock and Charles E. Blumenthal (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858), “Translators’ Preface,” XIII; Frothingham, “review of *Christ the Spirit*,” 315. Further quotations from Neander’s work will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Strauss’s impact on New England shores, see Elisabeth Hurth, “‘The Last Impiety of Criticism’: The Reception of D.F. Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* in New England,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 40 (1994): 318–352. See also Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 140–152.

<sup>6</sup> On publication history, see Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 111.

<sup>7</sup> *The Life of Christ or, A Critical Examination of His History*. By Dr. David Friedrich Strauss. Translated from the German (New York: G. Vale, 1843), “Preface by the American Publisher,” III.

<sup>8</sup> George Edward Ellis, “Review of *Internal Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, by Andrews Norton,” *Christian Examiner* 58 (1855): 126–127.

<sup>9</sup> Norton, *Discourse*, 23, 46. See also Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 90–91.

evidences of the truthfulness of the Gospels drawn from their representation of the character of Jesus as delineated in his teachings and in his actions."<sup>10</sup> This apologetic, which culminated in Norton's voluminous *Internal Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* (1855), accordingly accused the German study of being "founded on the boldest assumptions of blank atheism."<sup>11</sup>

The Transcendentalists, by contrast, claimed to find in Strauss a pronounced rejection of evidentialist presuppositions and a devaluation of the institutional basis of religion. The Transcendentalist camp thus discovered in Strauss a conception of Jesus as the Christ "myth," a poetic symbol validating the "new school's" premise that the indwelling of the divine in man belonged to humanity as a whole. Strauss in this way seemed to concur with the intentions of a movement whose mission was to supplant the supernatural foundation of religion with the intuitive perception of spiritual truth.<sup>12</sup> In the context of the Unitarian-Transcendentalist debates, then, Strauss's position seemed to accord well with the intellectual and theological framework that gave rise to Transcendentalism, feeding into the rhetoric of a generation of thinkers who sought release from historical Christianity. Yet despite these affinities, the immediate influence of Strauss's life of Jesus was comparatively slight. The Transcendentalists were not unanimously prepared to align Strauss's premises with the extreme position of Emersonian intuitionism and self-reliance. Convers Francis, James Freeman Clarke, and Frederic Henry Hedge, notable Transcendentalists who advanced a conservative stance preserving the objective, historical pole of God's self-disclosure, rejected the Hegelian substructure of Strauss's interpretation of the life of Jesus and relied on the "reconcilers of all antagonism, such as ... [Wilhelm Martin Leberecht] De Wette, Schleiermacher, [and August] Neander," who did not impugn the necessity of a "historical manifestation" of the "idea" of the God-man.<sup>13</sup> Consonant with the Unitarians' persistent reiteration of the "genuineness" of the history of Jesus, the Transcendentalist "new school" was in no way prepared to participate in the recurrent attempts of *Leben Jesu* researchers after Strauss to deny the historicity of the Christ-event. The scope of

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<sup>10</sup> Ellis, "Review of *Internal Evidences*," 135.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis, "Review of *Internal Evidences*," 130.

<sup>12</sup> See Ripley, "Martineau's Rationale," 132.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Osgood, "Modern Ecclesiastical History," *Christian Examiner* 48 (1850): 423; Theodore Parker, "Thoughts on Theology," *The Dial* 2 (1841-1842): 522.

responses to Strauss was broad enough to encompass the transhistorical intuitionism of Emerson and Amos Bronson Alcott, yet the consensus was that “[w]ithout some history of Christ, there could have been no belief in Christ, and no . . . Christianity.”<sup>14</sup>

At this very juncture, the reception of Strauss’s life of Jesus in liberal New England supports the marked reorientation that has taken place over the last decades in interpretations of the intellectual relationship between Transcendentalism and Unitarianism. Calling into question Perry Miller’s assumption of a Transcendentalist revolt or rebellion against the Unitarian school, intellectual and literary historians now highlight the continuity between the “old” and the “new schools” of New England divinity and insist that Unitarianism was diverse and lively enough to harbor even its chief rebel, Emerson.<sup>15</sup> While this reevaluation has clarified the kinship between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism from the perspective of intellectual and literary history, another strand of criticism still asserts hard lines of theological division and emphasizes the difference in historico-critical methods. According to distinguished studies, Transcendentalists and Unitarians held very different conceptions of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus. While Unitarians interpreted this self-disclosure as a unique, unrepeatable historical revelation, Transcendentalists read it as a recurring revelation in personal experience that found pristine expression in Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Against this background, it has become a critical commonplace to assert that the higher criticism of the Bible, with its questioning of the traditional ascription of authorship and date and its focus on historical credibility, provided

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<sup>14</sup> Francis W.P. Greenwood, “Historical Christianity,” *Christian Examiner* 28 (1840): 166.

<sup>15</sup> See David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 3. For further examples of this trend in scholarship, see Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers*; Conrad Edick Wright, *American Unitarianism, 1805–1865* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); and the 2nd ed. with new introduction (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); and David Robinson, “‘A Religious Demonstration’: The Theological Emergence of New England Transcendentalism,” in Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wright (ed.), *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and its Contexts* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 49–72.

<sup>16</sup> Major studies are Philip F. Gura, *The Wisdom of Words: Language, Theology, and Literature in the New England Renaissance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981); and Mott, “*The Strains of Eloquence*.”



“new school” advocates, most notably Emerson, with a hermeneutic tool to dismantle the historical and institutional authority of the evidentiary Unitarian interpretation of the Gospel narratives. A prominent example of this trend in scholarship, Richard A. Grusin’s *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible* (1991), softens the story of defiance by arguing that the discovery of history, mediated for the “new school” by the higher criticism, did not involve anti-institutionalism per se; yet in Grusin’s account the theological battle lines still remain firmly drawn.<sup>17</sup>

The story of the reception of Strauss in New England, however, illustrates the very difficulty of setting up hard theological boundaries between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. What is remarkable is that, in the responses to Strauss’s mythical Christ, the hard lines of theological opposition dissolved. On the issue of the historicity of the Gospel narratives and the religious significance of the historical Jesus, the Transcendentalists cannot be credited with a clear-cut rejection of Unitarian orthodoxy. Both parties were confident that the essential features of the historical Jesus could not be effaced by historical speculation. The life of Jesus narratives carried the imprints of an empirical Christ and not a “fabulous Christ.”<sup>18</sup> This common bond strikingly counters the allegedly anti-historical bias of the Transcendentalist movement and reveals a conservative strain in a movement commonly identified with intuitional idealism. Beneath the Transcendentalist response to Strauss lay the continuing commitment to Jesus as a historical personage, a commitment that led the majority of Transcendentalist practitioners to draw back from Strauss’s questioning of the historicity of the Gospel accounts and his Hegelian abandonment of the “germ of personality” in favor of “ghastly Universals.”<sup>19</sup> Even Theodore Parker, who fully absorbed Strauss’s myth criticism, was conservative in his belief that one could not simply discard the historical

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<sup>17</sup> Richard A. Grusin, *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). For other examples of this line of argument, see Julie Emerson, *Emerson’s Romantic Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Packer, “Origin and Authority: Emerson and the Higher Criticism,” 67–92; Kalinevitch, “Turning from the Orthodox,” 69–112; and Mark G. Vásquez, *Authority and Reform: Religious and Educational Discourses in Nineteenth-Century New England Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Bowen, “Greenleaf and Strauss: The Truth of Christianity,” 402. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Henry Allen, “Review of Current Literature,” *Christian Examiner* 63 (1857): 433.

uniqueness of Jesus. The Transcendentalist preoccupation with Jesus as a “representative” man was on this count moving toward a position in which the line of cleavage between an intuitionist and an evidentialist hermeneutics no longer mattered.

The parties of New England divinity also came together on another front. Both appreciated the allegedly antimaterialist sentiments of Strauss much more than his theological and historico-critical premises. The concern with the historical Jesus thus did not entail a substantial reordering of theological discourse and religious experience comparable to the studies of Strauss or Hegel. This sort of reconstruction was present only in Emerson and Parker, and here, too, it failed to grow into a stable position. The problem of faith and history was still defined quite differently in New England than it had been in the life of Jesus research of the Straussian variety, and the pervasive imprints of historical faith were still too strong to be erased completely. What needs to be stressed here is that Strauss certainly did not realign the parties of New England divinity, but the threat of “his nihilistic tendency,” the “dangerous tendency set in the direction towards mere ... unbelief” that was perceived to his “fatal flaw,” did give rise to a sense of shared tradition, a religious thrust that was hostile to the “saucy rationalism” of Strauss’s Hegelian philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Both “old” and “new school” camps were in their response to Strauss thus primarily “spiritual and practical rather than metaphysical.”<sup>21</sup> Regarding “the tendencies and the wants of theology” both camps therefore agreed: “We want no metaphysics which are elaborated with a preconceived purpose of sustaining a theological hypothesis.... We do want a more simple and intelligible analysis of the intellectual, moral, and religious nature of man.”<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the American response to Strauss confirms William D. Wilson’s prediction in the *Dial* that the members of New England divinity would “be known in church history, not so much as reformers in theology, as in the character of champions for the rights of the soul.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Allen, “Review of Current Literature,” 437, 433; Joseph Henry Allen, “More Open Questions,” *Christian Examiner* 80 (1866): 213.

<sup>21</sup> Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1951), 304.

<sup>22</sup> George W. Burnap, “The Tendencies and the Wants of Theology,” *Christian Examiner* 45 (1848): 240.

<sup>23</sup> William D. Wilson, “The Unitarian Movement in New England,” *Dial* 1 (1840–1841): 424.

## I

Strauss's *Leben Jesu* did not doubt the simple historical framework of the life of Jesus. Jesus, Strauss affirmed, grew up in Nazareth, let himself be baptized by John, collected disciples, went about teaching in the Jewish land, but eventually fell victim to the hatred and envy of the Pharisaic party and died on the cross. Genuinely historical events, then, did for Strauss undergird the life of Jesus. The Jesus of Nazareth was "historisch"; he continued John's preaching about the coming messianic kingdom and he carried out a ministry in Galilee. But Strauss significantly qualified this assertion by observing that the historical framework of the life of Jesus was enveloped in complex and imaginative pious reflection in which all the ideas which primitive Christianity had concerning its departed Master were woven into his life. As the outcome of a tangled web of pious reflection, the Gospel accounts contained therefore no positive historical contribution to the life of Jesus. This devaluation of the historical positivity of the Gospel narratives was intended constructively. Strauss's exhaustive historical critique did not undermine "the essence of the Christian faith" (LII). Strauss was prepared to agree with Reimarus that Christianity arose from a natural set of circumstances, but against Reimarus he preserved the "kernel" of religious nonhistorical truth (91). For Strauss, the religious meaningfulness of the scriptural accounts was left untouched by the strictures of historical criticism. With Strauss, it was just a matter of carrying these strictures further, to the point of renouncing the historical facticity of the text. But this was done with the express intention of preserving the spiritual substance of the narratives by "re-establish[ing] dogmatically that which ha[d] been destroyed critically" (757).

Strauss obviated the need to read the Gospel narratives as scaled-down versions of the historical life of Jesus and highlighted instead the question of their religious significance. This shift of emphasis had important repercussions for the relevance of the miracle issue within the context of the "kernel" and "husk" theme. Until Strauss, Schweitzer observes, the dominant interest of the lives of Jesus was the question of miracles. With the advent of Strauss, this problem found a solution according to which these events were regarded as mythical elements in the sources. For Schweitzer, this did not mean that the problem of miracle was permanently solved. "From the historical point of view," Schweitzer explains, "it is really impossible to solve it.... What has been gained is only that the exclusion of miracle from our view of history has

been universally recognized as a principle of criticism, so that miracle no longer concerns the historian either positively or negatively.”<sup>24</sup> Within the course of the quest of the historical Jesus, Schweitzer’s estimation emerges as a legacy of Strauss. Strauss effectively dissolved the horns of the problems posed by the miracle narratives, making the necessity to establish the historicity of the Gospel miracles appear irrelevant. In this context, the “husk” embodied in the miracle narratives faded away, while the “dogmatic significance” of the “kernel” stood reasserted and “inviolable” (91, LII).

On New England ground, Strauss was at first not credited with any such reassertion, nor did his work lay the problem of miracles to rest; rather, his *Leben Jesu* was read as an attack on the historical Jesus himself. Strauss, his New England critics charged, turned the historical Jesus into a “fable” and thus fell prey to an absurd form of atheism. Confronted with Strauss’s myth criticism, “old school” advocates around Norton continued to correlate the validity of the historical Jesus with the “evidences” afforded by miracles. The rejection of miracles could not be “separated from the rejection of Jesus Christ. Without them he becomes a mere fable... Without miracles the historical Christ is gone.”<sup>25</sup>

Unitarians were sharply aware of “infidel” publications by German “antisupernaturalists” who “rejecte[d] Christianity as a supernatural revelation” and undermined the significance of the historical Jesus.<sup>26</sup> The theological spectrum of antisupernaturalism that Norton branded as “the modern German school of infidelity” encompassed diverse approaches to the history of Jesus. There were critics like Reimarus, who considered “[t]he scheme of Jesus essentially a plan for his self-aggrandizement,” “naturalists” like Paulus, who resolved “[e]verything in the history of Jesus that is supernatural ... into the false perceptions ... of the narrators,” and, finally, myth critics like Strauss, who regarded “the whole history of Jesus Christ ... [as] an imaginative amplification of certain vague and slender traditions.”<sup>27</sup>

According to “old school” members, all three “infidel” approaches came together in the attempt to “resolve the events in the history of

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<sup>24</sup> Schweitzer, *Quest*, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, *Reminiscences of Rev. Wm. Ellery Channing, D.D.* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880), 423–424.

<sup>26</sup> George R. Noyes, “State of Religion in Germany,” *Christian Examiner* 19 (1835): 41.

<sup>27</sup> John Brazer, “Evidences of Christianity,” *Christian Examiner* 36 (1844): 385, 386.

Jesus into what is merely ideal.” Stimulated by a painful awareness of this threat, Unitarians were anxious to “[rest] the truth of Christian faith ... upon common, naked, historical truth” and resorted to conservative works that provided reassurance.<sup>28</sup> This need for comfort was satisfied by harmonies of the Gospels in the mode of the English writer Lant Carpenter, who correlated the main data of the life of Jesus narratives without naturalizing and psychologizing them. Carpenter’s *Apostolical Harmony of the Gospels*, reviewers judged, showed “the agreement between the narratives of the Four Evangelists” and bolstered the “general confidence in the record.”<sup>29</sup> In this apologetic context, critical lives of Jesus could not take hold. Unitarian critics championed works like Henry Ware Jr.’s *Life of the Saviour*, which did not move into the “wider sphere” of “original history” but rather confined itself in the manner of the harmonist to scriptural history, “to the materials ... the Evangelists ... furnished.”<sup>30</sup> Doubts concerning the historical reliability of the life of Jesus accounts lay outside Ware’s evidentialism. Consonant with his belief in “credible” historical events, Ware’s concern throughout was to establish the “truth” of the “real gospels.”<sup>31</sup> Without the testimony of miracles the “historical Christ” simply evaporated: “No such being is left us; and in losing him, how much is lost! ... Christianity [is reduced] to a set of abstract ideas.”<sup>32</sup>

Reviewing Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* for the *Christian Examiner*, Parker became in 1840 one of the first American critics to spell out its implications for evidentialist lives of Jesus in the mode of Ware and for the corresponding supernatural rationalist framework. Parker showed that Strauss undermined the very basis of historical Christianity by calling the Gospel accounts “spurious” and “unauthentic,” ascribing to them “only a little historical matter, around which tradition ... wrapped legends and myths” (285, 309). Moreover, Strauss not only “mistrust[ed] the numerous miracles of the Gospels” but also “presuppose[d] that a miracle is utterly impossible” (299, 307). In the case of Parker, this argument fell on inhospitable ground. For Parker, Strauss’s assertion that the Gospels were “neither genuine nor authentic” accounts but rather pious fabrications was one of the “absurdities of the theory Mr.

<sup>28</sup> Norton, *Discourse*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> James Diman Green, “Review of *A Harmony of the Gospels, on the Plan proposed by Lant Carpenter*,” *Christian Examiner* 10 (1831): 358, 361.

<sup>30</sup> Hackett, “Synoptical Study of the Gospels,” 2.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Ware Jr., *The Life of the Saviour* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1833), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 423–424.

Strauss support[ed]” (308, 309). “His mythical hypothesis has carried him away,” Parker charged (308). Although Parker welcomed Strauss’s questioning of the “genuineness” of the Gospels, he was not prepared on that account to reject “historical faith” (310). The New Testament “rests on historical ground,” Parker was convinced, “though it is not common historical ground, nor is it so rigidly historical that no legendary or mythical elements have entered it.” But despite these “mythical elements,” Christianity still had to rely on the biblical record for the “historical” statement of its “facts.” “Men do not make myths out of the air, but out of historical materials” (309). With this adherence to “historical faith,” Parker stayed on the side of those Christian euhemerists who found a solid historical base behind mythic overlay.<sup>33</sup> In Parker’s conception of the mythical nature of the Gospels, myth thus always “cover[ed]” historical “facts” and not merely “an [i]dea, as Strauss affirm[ed]” (309).

At this nonspeculative juncture, Strauss’s controversial approach directly involved the crucial issue of the merely accidental relation of the historical Jesus to Christian faith. Strauss, Parker acutely realized, not only destroyed the historical basis of Christian faith by arguing that almost nothing could be known about Jesus; his abstraction of the Christian principle from Jesus also severed the archetypal “idea” from the historical individuality of Jesus. According to Strauss, Parker observed in his review, “neither [Jesus] nor any man ever did, or can realize the Idea; it must be realized in the race” (306). Without marking its Hegelian underpinnings, Parker thus spelled out the most provocative contention of Strauss’s christology, the denial of the possibility that a single individual could serve as the embodiment of God-man unity. For Strauss, Parker recapitulated, “the Ideal ... cannot be concentrated in an individual” (307). In this account, the Christian faith could be explained without continued reference to the historicity of Jesus. The figure of Jesus merely constituted the occasion for the development of a myth that encapsulated the underlying unity of God and man. Once this “idea” entered history, it was no longer dependent on the original event; it no longer needed the person of Jesus or his history.

Parker’s review showed him unwilling to surrender the historical Jesus to a Hegelian christology. Strauss’s assertion “that the Idea precedes the man, who is supposed to realize the idea, ... does not sat-

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<sup>33</sup> See Richardson, *Myth and Literature*, 42–43.

isfy us,” he declared (307). “Where,” Parker asked, “did [we] obtain the [i]dea? This question [Strauss] answers poorly” (309). Strauss’s conception of the messianic “idea” as “preceding” its realization thus remained to Parker a mere “presupposition” and was part and parcel of Strauss’s “destructive” and “sad convictions” that surrendered the historical point of departure for Christian faith (307, 308). Strauss, Parker deplored, “makes a belief in the resurrection and divinity of Christ spring up out of the community, take hold on the world, and produce a revolution in all human affairs perfectly unexampled; and all this without any adequate historical cause” (310). Once again Parker thus emerged as an advocate of the validity of “historical faith” committed to a “historical Christ” (310).

Parker’s review did not, however, completely lay Strauss’s controversial argument to rest for him. By 1842, Parker was ready to corroborate even Strauss’s position regarding the inauthentic character of the Gospels. In *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, Parker informed his audience that “it is by no means clear when [the synoptics] were written, by whom, or with what documentary materials of history... Fact and fiction are mingled together in all these three gospels” (1:226). Since “myth” and “history” were blended in the life of Jesus narratives, the historical value of the Gospel record could not be determined with any certainty. Bolstering Strauss’s conclusions, Parker therefore reiterated that the “legendary and mythical character” of the “Christian records” “did not warrant full confidence in their narrative” (1:223). A similar skepticism applied to the miracles narratives of the life of Jesus. In 1840, Parker did not deny that Jesus “wrought miracles.”<sup>34</sup> By 1842, he had shifted to Strauss’s position that miracles attest to the mythical mode of first-century Palestine. In this rejection of supernatural elements, miracles could not “be admitted as facts.”—“I cannot,” Parker declared emphatically, “believe such ... facts on such evidence” (1:248).

But although Parker now followed Strauss’s categorical exclusion of miracles, he ultimately did not doubt the historical basis of the Gospels, the “foundation of fact.” “We must proceed with great caution,” Parker warned, “in accepting the statements of the Gospels.... Still there must have been ... a great spirit to have commenced such a movement as the Christian, a great doctrine to have accomplished this, the most profound and wondrous revolution in human affairs” (1:223). On this

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<sup>34</sup> Parker, *The Previous Question*, 154.

ground, Strauss's "speculative theory," in which "philosophy drain[ed] away the blood from history," remained unacceptable to a critic who was not prepared to let the historical Jesus escape into the realm of pious fabrications.<sup>35</sup> "We can learn few facts about Jesus," Parker conceded, "but measure him by the shadow he has cast into the world.... Shall we be told, such a man never lived; the whole story is a lie? Suppose that Plato and Newton never lived; that their story is a lie. But who did their works, and thought their thought? It takes a Newton to forge a Newton. What man could have fabricated a Jesus? None but a Jesus" (1:330).

## II

Parker's *Leben Jesu* review offered a reassertion of the significance of "historical faith" that was to characterize practically all Transcendentalist references to the uses of Jesus as the "perfect man." Yet Parker himself, in his contemporaries' judgment, did not persist in this position and seemed to fall prey to Strauss's Hegelian christology. At a 19 May 1841 ordination in South Boston Church, Parker delivered *A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, which carried, both in its substance and its title a borrowing from Strauss, the distinct imprints of the *Leben Jesu*. Parker now arrived at the negative conclusions arising from Strauss's historical skepticism. In "actual Christianity," Parker argued, "transient things form a great part of what is commonly taught as religion. An undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines.... But they are only the accident of Christianity, not its substance" (4:6). The "permanent" substance of Christianity resides in "a method of attaining oneness with God" (4:30). On this count, Parker was unwilling to invest the "personal authority of Jesus" with "permanent" status and found it "hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid or Archimedes" (4:18). Parker's negative conclusions, however, went beyond this rejection of the personal authority of Jesus. Not only the "infallible authority of the New Testament" but also the historical Jesus himself was merely "accidental" to Christianity (4:21, 19). The figure of Jesus seemed to

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<sup>35</sup> Allen, "Review of Current Literature," 433.



have become dispensable to Parker: “So if it could be proved—as it cannot—in opposition to the greatest amount of historical evidence ever collected on any similar point, that the Gospels were the fabrication of designing and artful men, that Jesus of Nazareth had never lived, still Christianity would stand firm, and fear no evil” (4:21).

Parker’s sermon raised a violent storm of protest in which he was condemned as an “unbeliever,” “infidel,” and “atheist” (13:324). What this public protest virtually ignored was the fact that Parker, in borrowing the phrase “transient and permanent” from Strauss, had actually gone back to an essay in which the German critic retreated from his radical christology. The point of reference for Parker was the third edition of *Das Leben Jesu*, published in 1838 together with two companion pieces, “Transient and Permanent Elements in Christianity” and “Justinus Kerner.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast to 1835, Strauss now offered a more positive assessment of the historical Jesus and counted the Jesus figure among those “geniuses” distinguished by “the harmonious shape of the inner life.”<sup>37</sup> In the third edition and the accompanying essays, the mythical Christ gave way to an individual hero who contributed uniquely to the development of humanity’s spiritual life.

It is to this “genius”-Jesus that Parker’s allegedly “radical” and “infidel” sermon refers. As a historical divine personage, the “genius”-Jesus was by no means dispensable for Parker. If this Jesus had never lived, Parker explained, there would have been the “irreparable loss” of “the example of that character, so beautiful, so divine, that no human genius could have conceived it, as none ... seems fully to have comprehended its lustrous life” (4:21). Significantly, Parker’s subsequent sermons and published works refer to the historical “genius”-figure rather than to the God-man as the totality of the human species who was present in Strauss’s first *Leben Jesu*. Parker went on to follow those critics of Strauss who deliberately “put the Person before the thing, the fact above the idea” (1:221). Thus in sermons like “The Relation of Jesus to His Age” (1844), he eulogized Jesus as a “great man” with “majestic character” who “was the greatest fact in the history of man” (4:40, 56). Parker here deliberately bypassed the mythical Christ and concerned himself with

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<sup>36</sup> The third edition of Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* was provoked by his changed opinion about the historical accuracy of the Fourth Gospel. This edition went almost unnoticed by American reviewers.

<sup>37</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, “Ueber Vergängliches und Bleibendes im Christentum,” reprinted in *Zwei friedliche Blätter* (Altona: J.F. Hammerich, 1839), 111.

the “character” and “personality” of Jesus in the manner of German critics like August Neander, whose Jesus portraits set out to lay a secure historical foundation for Christian faith.

Support for Parker’s departure from a speculative christology came from De Wette, a critic who combined the stances of the “philosopher” and “historian” with that of a “humble disciple of Christ” disinclined to “speculative ... suppositions.”<sup>38</sup> De Wette’s critical exegetical work and his novel *Theodore; or, The Skeptic’s Conversion* offered a system of historical interpretation in which reviewers from both “new” and “old school” camps approvingly noted “the prevalent feeling of reverence for the Bible” and “profound piety.”<sup>39</sup> Parker’s edition of De Wette’s *Critical and Historical Introduction to the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament*, published in two volumes in 1843, mediated between the destructive “infidelity” of Strauss’s approach and avowed supernaturalism. De Wette’s exegetical scholarship was, as Parker stated in his introduction, “historico-critical; that is, the Bible is to be considered as an historical phenomenon ... and entirely subject to the laws of historical inquiry.”<sup>40</sup> This approach, however, did not “rob ... [Scripture] of all sanctity, as the infidel [did]”; on the contrary, as Unitarian reviewers were prepared to concede, it affirmed a “historic basis, and regard[ed] the superstructure rather as the work of faith than of fraud.”<sup>41</sup>

As Parker and his Unitarian compatriots acutely realized, De Wette stopped well short of Strauss’s historical skepticism and did not equate myth with the unhistorical. “Even where he recognize[d] mythology rather than history,” Samuel Osgood observed, “he trace[d] the origin of the myth rather to poetic fancy or credulous belief, than to wilful deceit.”<sup>42</sup> Parker’s adherence to “actual historic proof” makes his views appear less a break from the Unitarian party than an outgrowth of a shared allegiance to “historical theology.”<sup>43</sup> Parker in fact never reverted

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<sup>38</sup> Cyrus A. Bartol, “Theodore; or, The Skeptic’s Conversion,” *Christian Examiner* 31 (1842): 355.

<sup>39</sup> George R. Noyes, “Review of Current Literature,” *Christian Examiner* 65 (1858): 141; Parker, “Review of *Das Leben Jesu*,” 308.

<sup>40</sup> Theodore Parker, *A Critical and Historical Introduction to the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament, from the German of Wilhelm Martin Leberecht De Wette* 2nd ed., 2 vols., (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850), 1:3.

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Osgood, “Parker’s De Wette on the Old Testament,” *Christian Examiner* 35 (1844): 308.

<sup>42</sup> Osgood, “Parker’s De Wette,” 310.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Osgood, “De Wette’s Views of Religion and Theology,” *Christian Examiner* 25 (1838): 2.

to a position that reduced the historical Jesus to an ineffectual figure. With regard to religious philosophy, De Wette emerged as a positive example of “a philosophical mind going through all the mazes of speculation and doubt, and finally sitting at the feet of Jesus, and in humble faith, entering the kingdom of heaven like a little child.”<sup>44</sup> And allegiance to this figure of Jesus, Parker was convinced, entailed a professed acceptance of Christian faith both as a “historical fact, and a spiritual symbol,” an acceptance that countered the dissolution of the historical pole of revelation that Parker sensed in Strauss’s first *Leben Jesu*.<sup>45</sup>

For orthodox Unitarians, however, Parker was and would remain an “infidel” and “unbeliever.” Parker’s *Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, Samuel Lathrop judged in his own *Reminiscences*, “dealt a blow from which Unitarianism ha[d] not, and probably ... never [would] recover.”<sup>46</sup> To those accustomed to proving the genuineness of the Gospels by marshaling authentic evidences, Parker seemed to have demolished the entire historical foundation of Christian faith. Reviewing Parker’s *Discourse* for the *Christian Examiner*, Andrew P. Peabody accused him of positing a Christianity “known independently of Christ.”<sup>47</sup> The wedge that Parker’s text drove between faith and history was traumatic for conservative Unitarians, and it spurred a theological debate that evinced the very futility of the counteractions against Parker: “[F]or months the Unitarians have been urged from without and from within to denounce or renounce, Mr. Parker,” Ezra Stiles Gannett observed, “yet [they] have not found out how to do it, [which] shows that it is strange work for them.”<sup>48</sup> What was “strange” about Parker’s work was that by adapting the Straussian distinction between the “transient” and the “permanent,” he effectively destroyed the evidential basis for supernatural rationalism and raised inescapable questions about historical Christianity—questions about the relation of faith to knowledge and of history to idea that were to haunt the Unitarian theological scene from that point on.

However “strange” Parker’s argument may have been, the conservative camp around Norton soon managed to reach a consensus in

<sup>44</sup> Osgood, “De Wette’s Views of Religion and Theology,” 22.

<sup>45</sup> Osgood, “De Wette’s Views of Religion and Theology,” 5

<sup>46</sup> Lathrop, *Reminiscences*, 202.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew P. Peabody, “Review of ‘A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity’ . . . , by Theodore Parker,” *Christian Examiner* 31 (1841): 112.

<sup>48</sup> Ezra Stiles Gannett, “Mr. Parker and His Views,” *Christian Examiner* 38 (1845): 272.

response to it, correlating the veracity of the historical Jesus with the evidences afforded by miracles and equating Parker's approach with Strauss's questioning of the historical basis of Christian faith. In this reading, Strauss seemed to be one of "those who den[ie]d the authenticity of the Gospels", and in the course made the figure of Jesus largely irrelevant to Christian faith by presenting "Christianity without Christ."<sup>49</sup> Strauss's arguments led among Unitarians to considerable unanimity in using history to prove faith. The groundwork that lay beneath this apologetic was the claim that Scripture represented a historically reliable repository of faith, of "what in current phrase [was] termed historical Christianity" according to which "the *truths* of the gospel ... [were] connected with the most stupendous series of facts."<sup>50</sup> From the Unitarians' perspective, the main threat of Strauss's life of Jesus did not issue from its Hegelian conclusion but from its pronounced historical skepticism. Confronted with this threat, Unitarian biblical scholarship became dominated by a remarkable emphasis on historical testimony and the facts of the life of Jesus. This evidentiary view, however, ignored the affirmative thrust of Strauss's myth criticism which sought to purge the Gospels of everything fictional and mythical in the hope of uncovering a spiritual core. For conservative Unitarian exegetes, the concern with the historicity of biblical miracles and the attempt to authenticate the historical consistency and authorship of the Gospels became so central that Strauss's positive impetus was completely lost.

Significantly, Norton's massive work on the *Internal Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* identified the key disparity between Strauss's *Leben Jesu* and Unitarian doctrine in the issue of the authenticity of the Gospel tradition, an issue that Norton had been pressing since the 1820s and that he had projected from the first into the "new school's" devaluation of evidential theology.<sup>51</sup> Strauss, Norton charged, sought "to disprove the genuineness ... of the Gospels" and left Christianity without any authentication (85). Rather than utilizing Strauss's argument to examine the early Christian communities as myth-makers, Norton simply subjected the *Leben Jesu* to the terms of the fact-fiction

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<sup>49</sup> John H. Morison, "The Genuineness of the Gospels," *Christian Examiner* 56 (1854): 69; George E. Ellis, "Christianity without Christ," *Christian Examiner* 40 (1846): 78.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew P. Peabody, "Review of *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* ...," by Andrews Norton," *Christian Examiner* 27 (1839): 221.

<sup>51</sup> See Andrews Norton, *Internal Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1855), 85. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically.

question, fighting fiercely to show that “the Gospels [were] the works of eyewitnesses” and “were written by those to whom they have been ascribed” (96, 11). Time and again Norton countered Strauss’s charge that the Gospel narratives were “entitled to no historical credit” by arguing that they were grounded in fact (71). This apologetic, however, directly opposed Strauss’s attempt to shift the ground of discussion from history to the literary and kerygmatic nature of the Gospel accounts as confessional testimonies. Norton’s evidentialist argument rebuffed these claims, reducing the testimony of the early Christian tradition to mere historical documentation and reaffirming the Gospel narratives as reliable guides to the life and teachings of Jesus.

More accurately than other critics, Norton singled out as “the distinguishing characteristic of the theory of Strauss ... the supposition that the ‘*mythi*’ or fictions in the history of Jesus were not intentional fabrications for the purpose of deception, but that they sprung up, as it were, spontaneously” (34). For this characterization, however, Norton found almost no followers among conservative reviewers of Strauss. “Myths” here were regarded as “fictions” “by [which] the true historic account of Jesus became supplanted.”<sup>52</sup> The consensus was that myths left only “a slender thread of actual history.”<sup>53</sup> “In its most obvious and literal sense,” Francis Bowen explained, “a *myth* is a *fable*; to say that the life of Jesus is mythical is to affirm that it is a fiction, a lie” (401). For Strauss, by contrast, myths were by no means deliberate inventions but rather embodiments of ideas, imaginative expressions of inner experience and hence integral to the attempt to dissociate faith from factuality and historicity. This dissociation, however, was unacceptable to Unitarian reviewers like Stephen G. Bulfinch, who charged Strauss’s criticism with “[setting] the Evangelical history at nought,” with “reduc[ing] the definite and particular accounts, in which all the Gospels agree, to an unreal vision of some self-deceived fanatics.”<sup>54</sup> This “*caput mortuum* of Christianity which mythicism [left]” spurred an increased adherence to the proofs and signs of the historicity of the Gospel tradition, an adherence that became thematic for the Unitarian reviewers of Strauss.<sup>55</sup> Critics from Henry Ware Jr. to George Edward

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<sup>52</sup> Ellis, “Review of *Internal Evidences*,” 127.

<sup>53</sup> Peabody, “Strauss and the Mythic Theory,” 132.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen G. Bulfinch, “Strauss’s Life of Jesus:—The Mythic Theory,” *Christian Examiner* 39 (1845): 156.

<sup>55</sup> Bulfinch, “Strauss’ Life of Jesus,” 160.

Ellis thus came together on Norton's "conclusive proposition, that, if the Gospels can be traced to their alleged authors, the theory of Strauss at once falls to the ground."<sup>56</sup>

The life of Jesus that most closely realized this apologetic was Simon Greenleaf's *Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists, by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*. This harmonistic life, produced by the Harvard lawyer in 1846, set out to bring the life of Jesus narratives "to the tests to which other evidence is subjected in human tribunals" in order to show that "the foundation of our religion is a basis of fact."<sup>57</sup> Considering Greenleaf's *Examination* against the background of Strauss's *Leben Jesu* for the *North American Review* in 1846, Francis Bowen preferred Greenleaf, "the cool and clear-headed jurist," to the "mystical doctor," with his "perverse ingenuity and misapplied learning" (385, 386). What appeared "untenable" and "perverse" to Bowen was not so much Strauss's biblical criticism but a more christological point (386). "According to Strauss," Bowen observed, "the whole human race, the totality of mankind, is Christ; the idea is thus realized on a magnificent scale" (429). This speculative premise of the *Leben Jesu* was injurious to the testimony of the Scripture history that Greenleaf and Bowen sought to render creditable. With Strauss, the personality and deeds of the historical Jesus were replaced by the interest in the religious consciousness of the early Christians. With Bowen and his Unitarian cohorts, however, the historical Jesus remained normative; Bowen therefore unflinchingly placed "as the *subject of the predicate which the church assigns to Christ* ... an individual," and not an "idea" (428).

On this point, even orthodox Trinitarians and Unitarians were prepared to forget all dogmatic lines of opposition. On the crucial questions posed by Strauss's speculative christology—whether accidental concrete individuality could realize the idea of God-manhood and whether historical reliability could be assigned to the life of Jesus narratives—the orthodox and liberal camps converged by asserting that the content of the history of Jesus was verifiable and authentic. In 1831, Francis Cunningham confidently declared that "German Theology is to be used, as far as it can in any way be reconciled with the peculiar views of the Andover theologians."<sup>58</sup> But when it came to Strauss,

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<sup>56</sup> Ellis, "Review of *Internal Evidences*," 128.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists* (1846), appendix to John W. Montgomery, *The Law above the Law* (Minneapolis: Dimension Books, 1975), 92–93.

<sup>58</sup> Cunningham, "The Biblical Repository," 346.

no such “reconciliation” was possible. In fact, Andover’s house journal, the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, equated Strauss’s criticism with the deist assaults on historical revelation. Horatio B. Hackett’s review of the *Leben Jesu* in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* argued that for Strauss the life of Jesus narratives consisted largely of “religious ideas” that had been “clothed in a historical form,” a form that was “pure fiction, having no foundation whatever in any actual occurrences, but arising solely from the tendency of the human mind to give spiritual truths an outward representation.”<sup>59</sup> In this view, Strauss merely arrived at the mythical embodiment of an idea and therefore ran counter to what Hackett regarded as a crucial tenet of the orthodox theologians at Andover, namely that faith is organically related to history. Strauss’s work asserted that the alleged historical factuality of the life of Jesus narratives could not stand up to critical scrutiny. Through the method of opposing “myth” and history, “all history loses its certainty,” Hackett sensed, “and becomes a mere phantom, an illusion.”<sup>60</sup>

The distrust of Strauss revealed yet another stream of continuity within the otherwise varied currents of New England divinity. The need to affirm the historicity of the life of Jesus accounts against speculative criticism was a rallying point for conservative Presbyterians at Princeton Theological Seminary. Here, too, Strauss’s inroads worked to draw divergent parties together. The bond emerged most clearly when, at the height of the debate over Parker’s and Strauss’s views, Norton managed to ignore for a while the old antipathy between Calvinists and Unitarians and published, under the title *Two Articles from the “Princeton Review,” Concerning the Transcendental Philosophy of the Germans and of Cousin, and Its Influence on the Opinion in This Country*, contributions by Princeton professors J.W. Alexander, Charles Hodge, and Albert Dod that combined common sense realism and scholastic Calvinism in service of the view that biblical narratives represented a compilation of hard facts.<sup>61</sup> With regard to this issue, Norton was ready to battle alongside Princeton theologians. When it came to the historical veracity of the life of Jesus narratives, then, differences of theology and denomination were quickly set aside to dismiss Strauss’s attack on the historicity of the Jesus tradition as a learned infidelity that “could hardly

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<sup>59</sup> Horatio B. Hackett, “Critique on Strauss’s Life of Jesus,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2 (1845): 58.

<sup>60</sup> Hackett, “Critique on Strauss’s Life of Jesus,” 61.

<sup>61</sup> See Hutchison, *Transcendentalist Ministers*, 86.

have originated anywhere but in Germany... [It is not] easy," Andrew P. Peabody observed, "for a well-ordered Anglo-Saxon mind to conceive of its being seriously propounded and actually believed."<sup>62</sup> "It needs a German mind and education to do this," Moses Stuart concurred.<sup>63</sup> The "atheistic philosophy" and "reckless spirit" that reviewers found in Strauss thus seemed to confirm once more that in "the domain of Theology," Germany was "still the mother of all things new and strange."<sup>64</sup>

### III

Within the "new school" of Transcendentalism, a complex of divergent influences reinforced assumptions about the innate moral and intellectual powers of man. Among these influences, the "German school" of theology, which New Englanders largely identified with De Wette and Schleiermacher, sparked a critical transition in the shift toward spiritual idealism. Here the German "preeminence" was "mainly owing to the influence of ... philosophy," to a theory of knowledge and to what the "new school" designated as "the transcendental method."<sup>65</sup> Transcendentalists made use of German sources not out of doctrinal concerns but rather because of what they perceived to be a shared rejection of the assumptions of Lockean empiricism.<sup>66</sup> In the conspicuous turn toward idealism, they read De Wette's and Schleiermacher's concept of religious "self-consciousness" as an affirmation of the inadequacy of "sensationalist" psychology. "The theologians of the new German Rational school," Richard Hildreth explained to Norton, "do not place Religion ... among the natural sciences.... They dispense with the special miracle ... and ascribe the perception of divine truth to a native capacity of the human mind."<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Peabody, "Strauss and the Mythic Theory," 131.

<sup>63</sup> Moses Stuart, *Miscellanies* (Andover: Allen, Morill, and Wardwell, 1846), 196.

<sup>64</sup> George Edward Ellis, "The Mythical Theory Applied to the Life of Jesus," *Christian Examiner* 41 (1846): 354, 343; Allen, "Review of Current Literature," 431.

<sup>65</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, "Coleridge," in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 71; see also Francis Bowen, "Review of *Nature*, by Ralph Waldo Emerson," *Christian Examiner* 21 (1837): 371–385.

<sup>66</sup> See Francis Bowen, "Locke and the Transcendentalists," *Christian Examiner* 23 (1837): 180–182.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Hildreth "A Letter to Andrews Norton," in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 222, 224.



For the affirmation of this capacity, Strauss could be of use. Thus within the “new school” of Transcendentalism, a pronounced consensus against Strauss was not at first apparent. On the contrary, “new school” advocates like Ripley and Alcott put forward assertions about the spiritual and creative nature of man that were remarkably at one with Strauss’s substitution of religious consciousness for the historical Jesus and with his incarnation principle as an ontologically universal relation common to all human beings. Thus Alcott, who resided with Emerson at the more extreme end of the Transcendentalist spectrum, presented Jesus as “a glimpse of the Apotheosis of Humanity,” a perfect exemplification of the divine human soul.<sup>68</sup> Ripley concurred that Christianity is valid, not because it is recorded in history and attested by miracles, but because “the soul of Man bear[s] the impress of God.”<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, Ripley was averse to metaphysical speculation on the person of Jesus Christ and presented him as a prophet who affirmed the signatures of divinity. In the Ripley-Norton altercation, Strauss put this position to the test and provided additional support for a premise Ripley had already discovered in Herder: Jesus embodied “everlasting” realities that were not dependent on his miraculous deeds.<sup>70</sup>

Emerson insisted on a similar universalization of the status of the historical Jesus. Jesus, he reiterated in his journals from 1830 on, proclaimed the potential divinity of each individual and did not represent an exalted mediator. Indwelling divinity is not restricted to the historical Jesus but instead determinative for every human. Accordingly, Jesus as “the perfect man” has a significance for “all great men” (*JMN*, 5:72). This watchword downplayed the historical figure. Christianity, Emerson argued in the “Divinity School Address” “dwells ... with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus. The soul knows no persons” (*CW*, 1:82). From this critique, it was only a small step to Strauss’s assertion that God-manhood could not be realized in the individual Jesus because his relation to the archetypal idea was merely “accidental.” It seemed “monstrous” to Emerson that critics believed the “Jewish apoloque of the poor Jewish boy” and “contrived to attach that accidental history to the religious idea” (*JMN*, 8:196).

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<sup>68</sup> Amos Bronson Alcott, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture* (Boston: John Munroe, 1836), 5.

<sup>69</sup> Ripley, *Discourses*, 140.

<sup>70</sup> Ripley, “Jesus Christ,” 286.

This christological point struck a raw nerve in more conservative New England thinkers who also identified precisely this point as the defining characteristic of Strauss's "atheism." For the "new school," however, Strauss's speculative christology clashed with the notion of Jesus as the "representative" man. Strauss's conception of a "fabulous Christ" was not sufficient for the uses of Jesus as an exemplary ideal of man's infinite potentialities and seemed to leave no valid historical figure for any such use at all. On the latter count, the "new school" increasingly judged that Strauss was "often mistaken." He "underrates the historical elements," Parker acutely observed in an 1842 review of Philip Harwood's restatement of Strauss's position in *German Anti-Supernaturalism*, "and [he] sometimes comes hastily to his conclusion, which therefore, cannot be maintained, though long ago we believed he was doing a signal service to Christianity itself."<sup>71</sup>

The "new school" was not prepared to submerge the history of Jesus and the exemplary uses of his person but continued to base its tenets on the biblical portrait of the historical Jesus, regardless of whether or not that portrait could be credited with historical veracity. The common denominator for the "new school" was the acknowledgment of Christ as the example of the spiritual and moral perfection universally available to all men. Even the Transcendentalists on the more extreme edge of the "new school's" spectrum did by no means submit to a rapturous type of Transcendentalism in which the "key" to the historical Jesus was "lost" (*JMN*, 8:196). What every member of the "new school" camp shared at bottom was the assumption that the figure of Jesus could be reconstructed and that the Gospels had some basis in historical fact. On this issue the "new school's" position was indistinguishable from that of the critics around Norton.

The reluctance to obliterate the pristine status of Jesus as a historical divine personage even came to the fore in the "new school" representative who in 1838 emphatically urged Harvard Divinity School graduates to follow the impulses of the moral sense with no regard for the person of Jesus. Emerson was convinced that one could "receive truth immediately from God without any medium" (*JMN*, 3:279). But this intuitionist stance did not dissolve objective-historical categories, as did Strauss, but rather used the historical Jesus to illustrate the transparency of the "perfect man" (*JMN*, 5:71). Instead of discarding the

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<sup>71</sup> Theodore Parker, "German Anti-Supernaturalism," *Dial* 2 (1841-1842): 535-536.

historical Jesus, Emerson's "Address" affirmed him as the perfect example of the "infinite of man" (*CW*, 1:89). Emerson's view of the historical Jesus thus made myth "indispensable to ... heroic vision" and conceived Jesus as the representative "great" man, a figure typified by the hero-Jesus of the third edition of Strauss's *Leben Jesu* rather than the "fabulous Christ" of the first edition (*JMN*, 5:72).<sup>72</sup>

Significantly, the uses of the historical Jesus as both source and exemplar for the fully spiritual nature of man became one of the most compelling topics for the "new school's" life of Jesus literature. It spanned the whole spectrum of the "new school's" camp, including Orestes Brownson, who would eventually return to a supernatural Christ; Convers Francis, who from the very outset shunned Emerson's intellectual radicalism; and Amos Bronson Alcott, who, by contrast, joined Emerson's campaign for "an original relation to the universe" (*CW*, 1:7). Brownson championed the historical Jesus as an exemplary "teacher of the masses" who preached a "Gospel of human brotherhood."<sup>73</sup> For Francis, Jesus conveyed a "holy power", by which the soul was "brought into spiritual life."<sup>74</sup> Finally, Alcott in his *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* read "the life of Christ ... [as] the Record of an attempt to unfold the Idea of Spirit from the Consciousness of Childhood, and ... [t]o this end [presented] the character of Jesus ... as the brightest Symbol of Spirit."<sup>75</sup> The uses of this symbol, however, presupposed a commitment to Jesus as a historical divine personage, which the first edition of Strauss's speculative *Leben Jesu* seemed to render ineffectual.

What attracted the "new school" to Schleiermacher and Herder rather than to Strauss on this score was their emphasis on the example of Jesus Christ, an example personified in a historical individual not to be dissolved into a fictitious Christ. In this view, the need for a critical, exegetical reconstruction of the historical outlines of Jesus' life receded in importance against an experiential religion located in the modality of feeling. The "new school" deliberately placed the religio-philosophical emphasis on the nature of religious experience far above biblical-critical

<sup>72</sup> Richardson, *Myth and Literature*, 89.

<sup>73</sup> Orestes Brownson, *A Discourse on the Wants of the Times* (Boston: James Munroe, 1836), 18.

<sup>74</sup> Convers Francis, *Christ the Way to God* (1842); quoted in Catherine Albanese, *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), 93.

<sup>75</sup> Amos Bronson Alcott, *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (1836-1837), in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 152.

investigations. Consequently, the “new school” rejected approaches in which the academically trained theologian took recourse to a distancing, exegetically freighted theological discourse and was more inclined to follow an original inspiration “*from within*” based on the intuitive revelation implanted in every man (*CW*, 2:170). Since this intuitionist theory eliminated incentives for scrutinizing the authorship, historicity, and background of the biblical narratives, Transcendentalist reviewers of Strauss drew no vital impulse from his work and established no independent critical exegetical tradition to deal with his premises.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

### THE CLAIMS OF HISTORY: STRAUSS'S "MYTHO-MANIA" AND AFTER

Strauss's *Leben Jesu* rocked the foundation of Unitarian faith. Strauss, in denying that the divine idea of God-man unity could be identified with a particular historical individual or event, parted company with contemporary tradition not only in exegesis but also in philosophy. On the exegetical front, Strauss left his New England audiences with a Christianity desupernaturalized and stripped of miracles. On the philosophical front, Strauss arrived at a Christianity depersonalized and anonymous, reducing Jesus to nothing more than a gifted genius whom legend had gradually deified. In this account, the Christian faith could be explained without reference to the Jesus of history. Strauss in this way firmly stayed on the side of the negative critique. He did not arrive at a historical core of the life of Jesus, nor did he in fact set out to inquire after one.

Against an apologetic mode of appropriation that sought to embrace the findings of the new historical criticism without sacrificing the framework of evidentialism, Strauss's "speculative" approach "had a bad name." With thinkers like Norton, Octavius Brooks Frothingham's history of Unitarianism judged, Strauss was a "man of straw" who relinquished all claims to the genuineness and historical factuality of the Gospel tradition.<sup>1</sup> Strauss, Frothingham observed, completely knocked away the historical basis of Jesus' life. It now seemed methodologically impossible to write a life of Jesus. Frothingham also noted that Strauss even called for a suspension of all efforts to seek the Jesus of history.

New England divines were not prepared to accept the apparent impossibility of reaching the historical Jesus described in the Gospels. "There are two ways of writing the life of Jesus," the *North American Review* observed in 1864. "The one is simply to ascertain and arrange the facts of his external history; the other is, then to go on and so interpret and explain those facts as to make it seen and felt what

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<sup>1</sup> Frothingham, *Boston Unitarianism*, 70–71.

manner of man he was in spirit and purpose.” A “life” of this latter kind seemed to the *Review* “still ... eminently needed.” It was necessary to have “first, ... a conviction founded on internal and external evidence that Jesus is the name of a real man, and not of a fictitious one; ... then, ... to appreciate his true relation at once to God and to man. And then, too,” it was believed, “the life of Jesus [would] be brought into such a light that it [could] be seen to be the *Gospel of to-day*.”<sup>2</sup>

This step of transmuting the teaching of the historical Jesus into “the Gospel of to-day” was undertaken in Ernest Renan’s literary adaptation of the life of Jesus. Unlike Strauss, Renan was convinced that a good deal of historical data on the life of Jesus could be recovered. Renan’s historical romance of Palestine was thus sharply set apart from the critical tradition of *Leben-Jesu*-researchers like Strauss. Renan’s portrayal of the historical Jesus invested the narrative of Jesus’ life with an immediacy and dramatic force that readers were accustomed to associate with secular romances. Renan’s literary portrait did not produce a “theoretical” Christ, but rather “the historical Christ, who bore the name of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Under this premise Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (1863) presented a figure not of dogma and doctrine but of psychology, a “gentle,” “delightful,” “charming” preacher of a lakeside idyll who propagated amid the picturesque Galilean countryside a “religion de l’humanité.”<sup>4</sup> “As often happens in very elevated natures,” Renan observed of his “great man,” “tenderness of the heart was transformed in him into an infinite sweetness, a vague poetry, and a universal charm.” This “poetic” approach to history posited “a form, a solidity” in scriptural history which affirmed, instead of an “abstract being” who might be said never to have existed, an “admirable human figure,” “a man living and moving.”<sup>5</sup> Renan thus attested that the synoptics contained a history of the ministry of Jesus which permitted the reconstruction of authentic data and not merely of the attributes of “symbol” and “myth.” For Unitar-

<sup>2</sup> Charles Timothy Brooks, “Renan’s Life of Jesus,” *North American Review* 98 (1864): 232.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Renan, *Studies of Religious History and Criticism*, authorized translation from the original French by Octavius Brooks Frothingham (New York: Carleton, 1864), 185.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Renan, *Histoire des origines du christianisme* (History of the origins of Christianity), vol. 1 (Berlin: J. Springer, 1863), 159. The *Vie de Jésus* was the first volume of a projected series on the “origines du christianisme.”

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (London: Trübner & Co., 1863; London: Watts & Co., 1904), 47, 23. On the reception of Renan’s *Life of Jesus* in New England, see Elisabeth Hurth, “The ‘Uses’ of the ‘Literary’ Jesus: Ernest Renan’s *Life of Jesus* in New England,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 38 (1992): 315–337.

ians, Strauss's mythical approach reduced the substrate of faith in the Gospels to a bare minimum and fell prey to an atheism that struck directly at the root of faith in Christianity by letting the actual history of Jesus fade into a mythical web of history. Renan, by contrast, returned to the real historical human being who Jesus undoubtedly was according to the biblical narratives. The real Jesus of Nazareth, Renan assumed, could be found by means of a literary approach promising to narrate the past as it actually was.

## I

In Renan's life of Jesus, the traditional supernatural view of the Scriptures had no place. Renan's rationalistic and pragmatic conception reduced the miracles of Jesus to pious inventions or thaumaturgical acts misinterpreted by his disciples in their religious enthusiasm. For Renan, the miracles were in most cases frauds staged by Jesus himself. Renan's Jesus portrait traced the fall of an idealistic moralist who claimed the title of the "Son of God" for his mission and corrupted his pristine character in a futile effort to validate his divine mission in front of unbelieving crowds. In Jerusalem, Jesus entrapped and lost himself, Renan supposed: Jesus became a victim of the fabrications of his own fanaticism. The simple teacher was entrapped by a mechanism which projected a messianic mission into his divine nature, a mechanism which finally forced Jesus into the role of a God who sacrifices himself.<sup>6</sup>

Renan's assertions stood in direct antagonism to supernaturalist studies in the older tradition of harmonies and devotional lives of Jesus—studies like Carpenter's *Apostolical Harmony of the Gospels*, which offered American audiences a remarkably popular attempt to rehabilitate evidentialist premises by means of narrative realism. Carpenter's introductory dissertations on the Palestinian background of Jesus' time sought to "afford a distinct and vivid conception of scenery in which the heart must ever feel a holy interest."<sup>7</sup> As in the case of Renan, a distinctly literary sensibility translated the life of Jesus into the terms of the discussion about the evidences for or against factual claims, yielding an ally

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<sup>6</sup> See Renan, *Histoire des origines*, 269.

<sup>7</sup> Lant Carpenter, *An Apostolical Harmony of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1838), V.

against disintegrating historical skepticism in the manner of Strauss. But in contrast to Renan, Carpenter led his readers out on the side of orthodoxy with express appeals to miracles.

Carpenter's position found no adequate literary and critical representation in Renan. Judged against supernaturalist premises, Renan's life of Jesus appeared insufficient and unacceptable. It was, reviewers charged, "a prime and fatal flaw in the very corner-stone of a theory of the life of Jesus, to begin with eliminating the supernatural element." "[T]o bring back to this age the living Christ" required to bring into play "historical" and "supernatural element[s]."<sup>8</sup> In this alignment of the two elements, the supernatural rationalist stance with its skepticism about the possibility of penetrating the psychology of Jesus acutely resurfaced. Unitarian reviewers firmly believed "in a peculiar influence exercised by God over his Son from the first miraculous inception of his being" and therefore did not "know ... how to form from the development of other minds any theory of spiritual growth applicable."<sup>9</sup> This reassertion of supernaturalism precluded a biographical, developmental approach to the life of Jesus. All attempts to subject this pristine figure to "aesthetic" or "poetic" refinements in the manner of Renan were therefore judged to be utterly deficient.

Unitarian audiences, then, preferred works which aligned the "character" of Jesus with "a practical and pious" "motive" and did not, "like Renan, invade or depreciate the moral character of Jesus" or merely produce "a free, imaginative construction."<sup>10</sup> These intentions, the *Christian Examiner* judged, emerged in studies in which "loyalty to the sacred record" went hand in hand with authentic observations in "philology" and "archeology." Robert Turnbull's *Christ in History* (1830), Harriet Martineau's *Traditions of Palestine* (1830) and, above all Horatio B. Hackett's *Illustrations of Scripture; suggested by a tour through the Holy Land* (1855) were applauded as "invaluable" because they used "actual observation" and "original" illustrations to reconstruct Jesus' "character."<sup>11</sup> While Renan's descriptive sketches dismissed out of hand the orthodox Christ, Hackett confirmed the factual truth of the biblical record and bolstered the evidence supplied by miracle and prophecy.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks, "Renan's Life of Jesus," 203, 233.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Morison, "Review of *The Life of Jesus Christ ...*, by August Neander," *Christian Examiner* 46 (1849): 76.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Henry Allen, "Review of Current Literature," *Christian Examiner* 82 (1867): 105, 107; "Review of Current Literature," *Christian Examiner* 78 (1865): 444.

<sup>11</sup> Peabody, "Strauss and the Mythic Theory," 148.



Those reviewers of Renan who were committed to the Transcendentalists' insistence on the divinity of man and the naturalness of miracles had other preferences. It was not Renan's emphasis on the gradual corruption of Jesus' character that this camp singled out, but rather the view of him as a great and inspired man. Renan's historical romance of Palestine framed religious history in terms of the romantic theory of genius as determined by individual personalities. This application of the fictional convention of the "hero" to the life of Jesus assigned to him a place among the great men of history in a manner reminiscent of Emerson's notion of the "representative man." Thus Emerson stressed after his encounter with the *Vie de Jésus* that "when [he] wrote 'Representative Men,' ...[he] felt that Jesus was the 'Rep[resentative] Man' whom [he] ought to sketch; but the task required great gifts,—stadiest insight & perfect temper; else, the consciousness of want of sympathy in the audience would make one petulant or sore, in spite of himself" (*JMN*, 15:224). Emerson, then, found in Renan a conception of Jesus as a poetic symbol validating the "new school's" premise that not Jesus alone but every spirit in human form was a divine. Renan in this way seemed to concur with the intentions of a movement whose "mission" was "to spiritualize the too hard and literal Christianity that is common and make the religion of Jesus a true and more sanctifying principle to many souls."<sup>12</sup>

For Emerson, Christ was the poet whose task was to be "sayer" and "namer." Like Christ, the poet is "representative" and "stands among partial men for the complete man." The "office" of both is "to show ... that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake." Otherwise, "the true Christianity,—a faith like Christ's in the infinitude of man,—is lost" (*CW*, 3:5, 4; 1:89). In this position, the poetic rendering of the person of Jesus went hand in hand with a denial of the historic faith of Unitarianism. On the ground of biblical fiction, however, the fictional adaptation of the historical Jesus was tied to the task of reassurance. Neither the Transcendentalist nor the Unitarian reviewers of Renan were ready to accept a denial of the historicity of the Christ-event. All came together in the belief that with a questioning of the "history of

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<sup>12</sup> Cyrus Augustus Bartol, "Review of *Theodore; or, The Skeptic's Conversion*, by De Wette, tr. James F. Clarke, vol. 10 of *Specimens of Foreign Literature*," *Christian Examiner* 31 (1842): 372.

Christ, there could [be] no proper Christianity.”<sup>13</sup> Renan thus did not trigger a substantial change in theological discourse. Critical statements on Renan’s work were still very much consistent with evidentialism and revealed again a common ground between the Transcendentalist gospel and Unitarian Christianity centering around the historicity of the life of Jesus.

When it came to the “literary” approach of Renan’s historical romance, critics like Charles Timothy Brooks were therefore prepared to “acknowledge and admire” “M. Renan’s devotion to his ‘hero’” and the “charm of the narrative in which M. Renan has reproduced the events of Christ’s marvellous passage across the scene of human life.”<sup>14</sup> Renan’s reproduction was unanimously held to be far superior to Strauss’s. Renan seemed to Brooks, “equally with Strauss, to build up a Christ of his own out of the wreck of the actual history.” But while Strauss substituted “for the historical Jesus an abstraction, ... Renan [supplied] one who [was] intensely flesh and blood and soul and spirit.”<sup>15</sup> What gave the Unitarian and Transcendentalist responses to Renan coherence at this juncture was a remarkable optimism about the knowability of the historical Jesus. At a time when New England audiences were increasingly alert to recurrent assertions by *Leben-Jesu* researchers about the nonhistoricity of the Jesus figure, Renan provided a “charming” Jesus portrait which seemed to affirm that historical knowledge and faith correlated perfectly. In contrast to Strauss’s blank “atheism,” Renan’s reference to Jesus as a “real person” seemed to validate the traditional historical “evidences” of Christianity which the Unitarian tradition championed. While Strauss left only “threads of historical truth,” Renan admitted “the four canonical Gospel as authentic,” tracing them “almost wholly [to] the work of the authors to whom they are attributed.”<sup>16</sup> Renan’s reassurances about the Gospel sources thus appeared to serve above all else the cause of precritical evidentialism, contributing to a new awareness of the potential of fiction to address problems generated by historical and biblical criticism. The historical Jesus emerged as more “real” when seen against the literary portrayal of the Galilean setting. To summon the historical Jesus

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<sup>13</sup> Greenwood, “Historical Christianity,” 166.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, “Renan’s Life of Jesus,” 206, 212.

<sup>15</sup> Brooks, “Renan’s Life of Jesus,” 214.

<sup>16</sup> William Henry Furness, *Remarks on Renan’s Life of Jesus* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1865): 21; Brooks, “Renan’s Life of Jesus,” 211.

into the world of fiction was in this respect to safeguard his historicity and to retrieve him from the skepticism and uncertainty triggered by Strauss's myth criticism.

## II

Men like George R. Noyes, who was appointed Dexter Professor of Biblical Literature at the Harvard Divinity School in 1839, were convinced that an American refutation of Strauss was urgently needed.<sup>17</sup> But hesitant to follow the historico-critical procedures that prevailed in German life of Jesus research after Strauss, Noyes's American colleagues relied on translations from German orthodox confessionals like Ernst W. Hengstenberg, whose near fundamentalist view of Scripture eschewed entirely the historico-critical method; from mediating theologians like August Neander, who accepted the events of the life of Jesus as both supernatural and historical; and finally from neopietist theologians like August Tholuck, who came close to confessed supernaturalism. In particular Neander's life of Jesus account appeared as an effective response to Strauss's "mytho-mania."<sup>18</sup> In a time of speculative myth criticism, another source of reassurance was provided by works which joined biblical criticism with a devout edification that had no use for Strauss's mythical approach. Thus H.V. Cheney's *Sketches from the Life of Christ* (1844) and Edward Robinson's *A Harmony of the Four Gospels* (1845) offered harmonistic and devotional accounts in which "the character of the Saviour himself [was] everywhere allowed to stand out in its original, simple truth, majesty and loveliness."<sup>19</sup> Traditional harmonist presuppositions here emerged as a devotional aid functioning as a resilient bulwark against Strauss's inroads.

But by 1855, the traditional harmonies and devotional works no longer seemed sufficient. "How many so-called 'harmonies' of the Gospels there are, and no two alike!" Octavius Brooks Frothingham exclaimed in 1854. "In fact, one harmonist only sets aside another, and none leads us to a satisfactory conclusion."<sup>20</sup> Four years later Edward

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<sup>17</sup> See George R. Noyes, "Causes of the Decline of Interest in Critical Theology," *Christian Examiner* 63 (1847): 343.

<sup>18</sup> Neander, *The Life of Jesus*, XV.

<sup>19</sup> Alvan Lamson, "Notices of Recent Publications," *Christian Examiner* 36 (1844): 123.

<sup>20</sup> Octavius Brooks Frothingham, "Scientific Criticism of the New Testament," *Christian Examiner* 57 (1854): 114, 115.

E. Hale deplored that “the great body of the critical harmonists have attached themselves [too] resolutely to the letter, and have ignored ... the spirit of their narrative.”<sup>21</sup> And while in 1849 John H. Morison had categorically rejected any attempt “to explain the gradual development of the consciousness of Jesus” by arguing that “any theory of spiritual growth [was not] applicable to [Jesus],” Hale now heavily criticized “the quiet coolness ... with which ... critics pass by the changes in the course of the Saviour’s life, without any attempt to suggest cause and effect, motive or plan.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, in 1864 Hale branded the “worthlessness” and the “fatuity of the attempt to construct ‘Harmonies’ of the Gospels” and judged that “all the wise dovetailing of the harmonists on [the details of Christ’s life] makes them and their work ridiculous.”<sup>23</sup>

In Hale’s rejection of the traditional harmonies, the humanity of Jesus gradually moved into the foreground. The American interest in the life of Jesus thus took on a new form and set in motion the quest for the historical Jesus as opposed to the dogmatic Christ. The stimulus came from outside. From the 1850s onward, the pages of the *Christian Examiner* were filled with reviews of German liberal lives of Jesus which set their non-miraculous, humanitarian Jesus portraits against Strauss’s speculative Christ idea. The translations of Karl Hase’s *Life of Jesus* by James Freeman Clarke, Daniel Schenkel’s *The Character of Jesus Portrayed* by William Henry Furness, and Gerhard Uhlhorn’s *The Modern Representations of the Life of Jesus* by Charles H. Grinnell, the reviews of Theodor Keim’s *History of Jesus* by Samuel Osgood, and Schenkel’s *Characterbild* by John W. Chadwick were only the most outstanding in a flurry of Jesus portraits that flooded the American market. These portraits unanimously presented a Jesus figure who was held to be amenable to the epistemic apparatus of an ordinary historic individual within the limiting categories of a normal birth to death lifespan. The concrete, the empirical, the rational now were the watchwords of the life of Jesus theologians who portrayed Jesus, as American reviewers acutely noticed, “from a purely humanitarian point of view.”<sup>24</sup>

This emphasis on a “humanitarian point of view” was taken up in Furness’s extensive life of Jesus research. In the miracles controversy,

<sup>21</sup> Edward E. Hale, “The Logical Order of the Gospel Narratives,” *Christian Examiner* 65 (1858): 210.

<sup>22</sup> Morison, “Review of *The Life of Jesus Christ*,” 76; Hale, “The Logical Order,” 208.

<sup>23</sup> Edward E. Hale, “The System and Order of Christ’s Ministry,” *Christian Examiner* 76 (1864): 81.

<sup>24</sup> Anon, “Review of Current Literature,” *Christian Examiner* 78 (1865): 444.

Unitarians like Hurlbut had condemned Furness for his impious “naturalism.” But confronted with Strauss’s personality destroying “mythomania,” both “old” and “new school” advocates came to appreciate Furness’s turn to the concrete historical lineaments of the person of Jesus. Furness modeled his own life of Jesus research after the example of German liberal lives of Jesus. Schweitzer judged that the liberal lives of Jesus after Strauss were a lost case because of their naive confidence in the scriptural accounts as “positive” history. But in its time, the equation of the biblical sources with historical authenticity met an important theological need in furnishing an answer to Strauss’s dissolution of the historical Jesus. Against Strauss’s mythical Christ, liberal theologians like Schenkel and Keim turned to the historical “personality” of Jesus. Strauss had accepted it as axiomatic that the “ideal” Christ, and not the concrete historical figure was the true basis of religious faith. The possibility of recovering “Jesus as he really was” and the literary relationship of the synoptic sources—these issues Strauss put aside. Strauss, his critics charged, thus failed to discover in the personality of Jesus the originating cause for the rise of the community of his disciples and their faith in him as the Messiah.

On this score, Furness was prepared to follow the German quest of the “original” historical Jesus. Like the German questers who climbed on the historico-critical band-wagon after Strauss, Furness evaluated anew the historical significance of the Gospels and assumed that a secure material basis for the historical Jesus was furnished by the official accounts of the life of Jesus. Furness’s concept of the historical Jesus also followed the German questers’ anti-dogmatic ring that showed in diverse attempts to set the original Jesus against the dogmatic Christ. Furness sought to make contact with the “humanity” of Jesus in historical rather than metaphysical categories. While the Christ of dogma and ecclesiastical language seemed abstract and lifeless, Furness set out to fix Jesus in time and place so that “the personal character of Jesus emerges in its natural beauty from the clouds of superstition in which it has been hid.”<sup>25</sup>

This view of the “character of Jesus” affirmed the premise that all assertions about Christ’s person and work flowed from his historical

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<sup>25</sup> Furness, *Thoughts on the Life and Character of Jesus* (Boston: Philipps, Sampson, 1859), 47. On Furness’s debt to German lives of Jesus, see Elisabeth Hurth, “That ‘Grand Model of Humanity’: William Henry Furness and the Problem of the Historical Jesus,” *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1995, 101–126.

life. The express intention of Furness's life of Jesus research was therefore to force a way through all christology and to reformulate the Chalcedonian formula of the two natures of Christ. Furness was convinced that beneath the edifice of christological dogma there stood the historical Jesus, a human person whose "nature" was not to be distorted by the intrusion of ontological attributes. In the latter allegiance, Furness judged, "Jesus has become a nondescript being. He is ... out of the reach of all genial human appreciation." Moreover, "through the dogma of his Supreme Divinity, in the confounding idea of his Double Nature," "the personal character of Jesus has been lost to sight."<sup>26</sup> Furness, by contrast, sought to present a figure "of flesh and blood" moved by the "impulse of humanity."<sup>27</sup>

Like the German life of Jesus researchers, Furness thus arrived at a christology from below. For Furness, Jesus accordingly was "a 'wondrous Jewish youth,' ... his proper title" being "the Man of Nazareth," "the Son of Man" "rather ... than the Son of God."<sup>28</sup> The Chalcedonian Christ, Furness judged, represented a figment of "overbearing dogmatism" and pious "imagination" which "dreams, ... magnifies [and] creates" "wonders of its own."<sup>29</sup> These "rumors of marvels," of "ignorance" and "superstition" corroborated Furness's view that the dogmatic Christ of faith was to be distinguished from the actual historical personage and that there was a gulf fixed between "the religion of the churches" and "the religion of Jesus."<sup>30</sup>

Following the German life of Jesus researchers' attempt to ground all doctrines concerning the nature of Christ in his humanly historical existence, Furness set out to discover a Jesus of history who would be other than the Christ of faith. Jesus, Furness was convinced, "never taught ... dogmas. Not a word of his gives them the slightest color of his authority.... [Jesus] never expected people to forego the use of their understandings in deference to any authority.... He constantly referred them back to their own sense of things."<sup>31</sup> Furness thus came close to the antidogmatic "new Teacher" that Emerson's "Divinity School

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<sup>26</sup> Furness, *Thoughts on the Life and Character of Jesus*, 27, 46, 47.

<sup>27</sup> Furness, *Thoughts on the Life and Character of Jesus*, 27; Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 99.

<sup>28</sup> Cyrus A. Bartol, "Dr. Furness and Dr. Bushnell: A Question of Words and Names," *Christian Examiner* 66 (1859): 113.

<sup>29</sup> Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 30, 194.

<sup>30</sup> Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 194, 30, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 5, 7.

Address” set against the forms and creeds of historical Christianity (*CW*, 1:93). In keeping with the gospel of Emerson’s “new Teacher,” Furness prophesied a Jesus-figure who “lived always from within, spontaneously ... [and not] from without, or ... an authority external to himself.”<sup>32</sup> But, unlike Emerson, Furness subjected the life and history of his “new Teacher” to rationalistic criteria and naturalistic verification of no concern to Emerson’s intuitionist position. In his *Remarks on the Four Gospels* of 1836, Furness had evaded the scientific and historical problems inherent in the miracles narratives by aligning them with natural causes unknown to man. By 1850, Furness was prepared to adopt Paulus’s rationalistic stance and ready to advance pathological interpretations of Jesus’ miracles by explaining the temptation in the wilderness and the transfiguration as hallucinations: “The angels that ministered to Jesus after the temptation were ‘his own thoughts’.... The sublime scene of the Transfiguration was a dream of Peter, broken at a critical moment by a peal of thunder. Of the angels of the resurrection, the appearance of the ‘young man in a long white garment’ was that of Jesus himself, still wrapped in his grave-clothes, and not yet wishing to be recognized.”<sup>33</sup>

Furness’s rationalistic exegesis presupposed a historical ellipsis, arguing that in the case of the miracles of healing the Evangelists had omitted mentioning the natural remedies Jesus employed, while Jesus’ walking on the water had been effected by the use of a piece of floating timber and the feeding of the five-thousand by secret supplies of bread.<sup>34</sup> In positing historical ellipses, Furness managed to come up with “interpretations” that were “in thorough accordance with Truth and nature” and at the same time affirmed the Gospels as “writings historically true.”<sup>35</sup> But with Furness, the affirmation of the historical character of the Gospels and of the factual nature of the Christ-event increasingly took on a new turn. In the 1860s, after his repeated encounters with Strauss’s German critics, Furness no longer equated the “genuine-

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<sup>32</sup> William Henry Furness, *The Unconscious Truth of the Four Gospels* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1868) 114–115; see also William Henry Furness, *Discourses* (Philadelphia: G. Collins, 1855), 67.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew P. Peabody, “Review of *A History of Jesus*, by W.H. Furness,” *North American Review* 71 (1850): 467.

<sup>34</sup> See Peabody, “Review of *A History of Jesus*,” 466–469. See also William Henry Furness, *The Story of the Resurrection of Christ Told Once More* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1885).

<sup>35</sup> William Henry Furness, *A History of Jesus* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1850), 158; *Jesus* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1871), 113;

ness” of the Gospels with historical factuality but sought for “new marks of probability and truth,” namely aesthetic categories of the Gospels’ truthfulness that consisted in “their naturalness and consistency.”<sup>36</sup> In this aesthetic framework, the “genuineness” of the Gospel narratives was aligned with the “simplicity,” “directness,” and “spontaneity of the life of Jesus” “which are of so natural a character” that they “produce” “a most vivid and satisfactory sense of reality.”<sup>37</sup>

Furness set his aesthetic christology against Strauss’s myth criticism. Like Norton, Furness judged that for Strauss Christianity was fabricated. Furness was therefore anxious to affirm that the Gospels did not belong to the realm of “fabrication.”<sup>38</sup> Rather, the Gospels’ apparent “contradiction of known facts” “indicate[d]” “hidden methods of nature.”<sup>39</sup> With these “signs of reality” Furness made a subtle shift towards “the intrinsic truth of the history of Christ himself” and steered away from an exclusive reliance on historical evidences.<sup>40</sup> Furness infused the Gospels with literary criteria carrying “the irresistible force of truth and nature.”<sup>41</sup> Furness thus uncovered the Gospels’ “moral consistency,” the “natural accordance between the facts and the probable historians” and “threads ... extremely ... truth-like” “in perfect accord with ... probability.”<sup>42</sup> These “signs” and “threads,” however,—and here Furness eventually was to leave the historico-critical camp of the *Leben-Jesu*-researchers completely behind—were to be grasped by “divination,” and not by critical methods of exegesis. “Without this natural gift of divination” Furness averred, “all the facts of the world are of no avail. With it, when it exists in extraordinary measure, as sometimes by the grace of God it does, a single fact, and that the slightest, be it the falling of an apple or a whiff of vapor from a vessel of boiling water, is enough to throw open whole passages of knowledge and wisdom.”<sup>43</sup>

In shifting the theological ground to an “intrinsic truth,” Furness sought to render the “personal greatness” of Jesus himself “credible.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Furness, *The Unconscious Truth*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 96; Furness, *The Unconscious Truth*, 135, 114.

<sup>38</sup> See Furness, *The Story of the Resurrection*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 46.

<sup>40</sup> Furness, *Thoughts on the Life and Character of Jesus*, 111; Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 260.

<sup>41</sup> Furness, *Jesus*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 267; Furness, *Thoughts on the Life and Character of Jesus*, 212; Furness, *The Unconscious Truth*, 58; Furness, *Jesus*, 115.

<sup>43</sup> Furness, *Remarks on Renan’s Life of Jesus*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Furness, *The Unconscious Truth*, 134.



But with regard to the uses of Jesus as a great man, a well-known problem came up again—the question of the credibility of the scriptural portrait of Jesus. Given the pervasiveness of the mythical approach, Furness reverted to the premise that the Gospels were authentic documents of the original historical Jesus—a premise that even made Furness turn to the Renan’s psychological reconstruction of the historical Jesus in terms of character development. Although Furness emphatically rejected Renan’s portrait of Jesus as an amiable and yet morally deficient Galilean preacher, he very much approved the fact that the *Vie de Jésus* confirmed “the geographical truth” and “credibility” of the Jesus “history.”<sup>45</sup> This affirmation of historical “credibility” again put Furness in line with Unitarian exegetes of the life of Jesus. Both Furness’s and Norton’s critical reconstructions did not invalidate the historical veracity of the Jesus figure. Furness was convinced that what was to “be settled before anything else can be settled [was] the historical truth concerning Jesus.”<sup>46</sup> And here Furness’ position had remained constant since the 1830s, continually bypassing the premises of Strauss and his followers: “Out of [the] artlessly constructed ... documents, with all their historical discrepancies and legendary aspects, emerges the central idea of a person,” and not a “myth.”<sup>47</sup>

Furness was acutely aware that “[n]ot a few, among the thoughtful and learned, perceiving that the origin of other religious is hidden in the mists of fable, have long since come to the conclusion, that Christianity is no exception to this fact, and that scarcely anything can now be satisfactorily settled about Jesus beyond the actual existence of the person so named, and hardly even that.”<sup>48</sup> Unable to settle for this uncertain and tenuous position, Furness resorted to strained interpretations in defense of the historicity of the Jesus narratives. Confronted with Strauss’s assertion that history was reflected in the biblical narratives as “myths,” Furness continued to expend considerable energy on the refutation of the “mythical” approach almost as though the validity of Christianity hinged entirely on the issue. Furness thus repeatedly tried “to make visible the historical features [of the Gospels]” and asserted “the full warrant of reason, nature and probability” against

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<sup>45</sup> Furness, *The Veil Partly Lifted*, 264, 265

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Schenkel, *The Character of Jesus Portrayed*, trans. William Henry Furness, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1866), 2:359.

<sup>47</sup> Furness, “Origin of the Gospels,” 67.

<sup>48</sup> Furness, *Jesus*, 9.

those who “under the lead of Strauss, have come to look upon the whole story of Jesus, contained in the Four Gospels, as a collection of myths.”<sup>49</sup> Furness conceded that the Gospels were “imperfect” in mingling “fables” with “facts.” Yet Furness did not at all “despair of being able” to discern “the positive historical truth” of the Gospels.<sup>50</sup>

For this finding, however, Furness developed no adequate exegetical apparatus. Instead of providing exegetical and source critical data, Furness just sought “to make evident the handiwork of Truth in the ... history of the public life of Jesus.” Time and again Furness’s life of Jesus research set out “to indicate the marks of truth” in the life of Jesus accounts and “to show that, whatever appearance of a fabulous legendary, or mythical character these records [presented], there [was] running through them ... a pure piece of biography, a history, which ... gives us the idea of a person of most original and yet natural greatness.”<sup>51</sup> But precisely with regard to this validation of the Jesus history, Furness was in effect on common ground with Strauss in that his position focused, no less than Strauss’s, on the events recorded in the Gospels rather than on the texts of Gospels themselves. Furness ultimately chose to evade source-critical issues in favor of an aesthetic christology and was “content ... with adducing the one grand fact of the consistent idea of Jesus himself.”<sup>52</sup> Furness’s key supposition was and remained that biblical narratives carried an intrinsic truth that counteracted all attempts to put them aside as mere compilations of “fables.”<sup>53</sup> The main charge against Strauss thus did not change. The concrete life of Jesus, Furness reiterated, was based on and mediated by the historically real; to make it an index of “fables,” as Strauss did, was to come close to the brink of atheism.

### III

In an earlier age of “folly,” the *Dial* observed in 1843, “the work of ... Dr. Strauss ... [was] needed; ... Christians would not believe a necessary and everlasting truth, unless it were accompanied and vouched

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<sup>49</sup> Furness, *Jesus*, 164.

<sup>50</sup> Furness, *Jesus*, 10, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Furness, *Jesus*, 187, 178.

<sup>52</sup> Furness, “Origin of the Gospels,” 67.

<sup>53</sup> Furness, “Origin of the Gospels,” 65.

for by a contingent and empirical event which they presumed to call a miracle!"<sup>54</sup> Two decades after this remark, Strauss's work was again "needed" again among Transcendentalists who, as members of the Broad Church group, became theological conservatives with "a reverent regard for ecclesiastical tradition."<sup>55</sup> James Freeman Clarke and Frederic Henry Hedge, outstanding representatives of this group, adhered to an intuitionist position that discarded biblicism and religious tradition in favor of the notion of an indwelling God but still tried to combine Transcendentalist intuition with a respect for the historical continuity represented by the church. This reassertion of ecclesiastical elements of historical Christianity's supernaturalism strikingly contradicted the Transcendentalist premise that, as religious institutions do not endure, there is no necessity for the historic church.

"Some thirty years ago," Hedge observed of the Transcendentalist movement in 1867, "a club was formed of young men, mostly preachers of the Unitarian connection, ... all fired with the hope of a new era in philosophy and religion, which seemed to them about to dawn upon the world. There was something in the air,—a boding of some great revolution."<sup>56</sup> By the 1860s no such revolution had occurred; on the contrary, segments of the movement had shifted backwards. Thus Hedge's "historic conscience ... [had] balanced [his] neology, and kept [him] ecclesiastically conservative," always aligning the free functioning of divine intuition with a strong commitment to ecclesiastical continuity.<sup>57</sup> This reassertion of the historical matrix of Christianity was, however, ultimately at odds with an intuitionist Transcendentalist position. In keeping with the Broad Church's insistence on the centrality of the historical Jesus, Emerson thus was not regarded as a Christian "in the usual and distinctive sense of the term," since he reduced Christ to a teacher of moral and religious truths.<sup>58</sup> On this point the Broad Church thinkers' "radical idealism" clashed with their "deep awareness of the

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<sup>54</sup> Theodore Parker, "Hennell on the Origin of Christianity," *Dial* 4 (1843–1844): 161.

<sup>55</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, ed., *Recent Inquiries in Theology; by Eminent English Churchmen, Being "Essays and Reviews"* (Boston: Walker, Wise, 1860), XI.

<sup>56</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, "Destinies of Ecclesiastical Religion," *Christian Examiner* 82 (1867): 12

<sup>57</sup> Hedge, "Destinies of Ecclesiastical Religion," 13.

<sup>58</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, "Writings of R.W. Emerson," *Christian Examiner* 38 (1845): 94–95.

historical dimension of Christian experience” and their adherence to Christ’s supernatural status.<sup>59</sup>

This difference also showed in the interpretation of miracles. Hedge was at one with Parker and Ripley in opposing supernaturalists who used miracles as proofs of divine authority. Yet Hedge was prepared to accept the possibility of miracles because he was convinced “that spiritual powers are superior to physical, and ... that the soul is stronger than material nature, and may command it when it truly commands itself; and because ... the person of Jesus [is] a greater miracle than any of the works recorded of him.”<sup>60</sup> Hedge acknowledged “that historic truth is not the only truth; that a fact ... which is not historically true may yet be true on a higher plane than that of history.”<sup>61</sup> On this basis, an appreciation of the apologetic function of Strauss’s myth criticism became possible. Traditionally, Hedge explained in his essay on “The Mythical Element in the New Testament,” in Strauss “[t]he truth of Christianity was supposed to be assailed; the belief in Christianity as divine revelation was felt to be imperilled” (316). But Hedge found “that no such harm was intended” (316). With Strauss, “the inner kernel of Christian faith” was in effect “entirely independent of all such criticism.” By renouncing the historical body, the mythical interpretation set out to rescue and preserve the “idea.” Therefore, “Christ’s supernatural birth, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths, however their reality as facts of history may be called in question” (316–317).

This approach, Hedge realized, liberated Christianity from its reliance on “the strict historic verity of all the narratives of the New Testament” (317). Hedge was convinced that “not the historic sense, but the spiritual import[,] not the facts, but the ideas of the Gospel, [were] the genuine topics of faith” (318). The “truth of Christianity,” then, was not “identical and conterminus with the literal truth of its record” (317). Against this premise, evidentialism in the supernatural rationalist tradition could no longer be maintained. The biblical “record” as “veritable history” presented “a literary relic of inestimable value ... only as it [drew] its inspiration from and [led one’s] aspiration to the ideal Christ” (335, 340, 341). At this juncture, Strauss’s approach was in

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<sup>59</sup> Hutchison, *Transcendentalist Ministers*, 189.

<sup>60</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, *Reason in Religion* (Boston: Walker, Fuller, 1865), 278–279.

<sup>61</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, “Incarnation and Transubstantiation,” in “*Ways of the Spirit*,” 349.

full accord with Hedge's cause. Strauss, according to Hedge, guided his audience to aspire to the "ideal Christ," purging the biblical accounts of "falsifications," "corruptions," and "spurious additaments, interpolations, and misinterpretations."<sup>62</sup> Through this "purgation" "the ideal Christ"—not the historical Jesus—could be reached, and here the "real question [was] not whether Jesus said or did precisely this or that in each particular instance, but whether Christianity [was] true and divine, the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation."<sup>63</sup>

In this interpretation the apologetic thrust of Strauss's life of Jesus, which the generation of biblical critics around Norton had overlooked by equating the mythical approach with atheism or destructive deism, was fully appreciated. Hedge clearly perceived the significance of myth as an instrument that restored historical truth and still retained a core of spiritual truth. Yet this appreciation distorted Strauss's intentions, welcoming his argument only as a means of softening the rigidity of historicist tenets. Virtually ignored was the fact that Strauss also shifted the ground of life of Jesus research to the religious imagery and faith portraits of a religious community. What prevailed in the ecclesiastical Christianity of the Broad Church group was the triumph of the "ideal Christ" of faith over the uncertainties and intricacies of historical criticism.

This point, a peculiarity of the American theological scene, brought in its wake a series of liabilities: an unwavering stress on the essential veracity of the Gospels, a pronounced confidence in the knowability of Jesus, and a deep-seated bias against an idealist speculative christology. Consequently, American reviewers of Strauss did not develop a sustained interest in the mythical approach and, preoccupied with the task of correcting and discussing Strauss's historical skepticism, produced no consistent body of source and form criticism. In this context, the different parties of New England divinity achieved considerable unanimity in defending the primacy of Jesus against an approach that displaced him in favor of the consciousness of the early Christian community. Eliminate "the history of Christ," American reviewers remained convinced, and the "moral idea is gone."<sup>64</sup> "The life of Christ, so unlike any other

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<sup>62</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, "Antisupernaturalism in the Pulpit," *Christian Examiner*, 77 (1864): 156.

<sup>63</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, *An Address Delivered before the Graduating Class of the Divinity School in Cambridge July 15, 1849* (Cambridge, Mass.: John Bartlett, 1849), 24.

<sup>64</sup> Furness, "The Character of Christ," 289.

life, ... so unique in itself” simply could not belong to the realms of “myth or fable.”<sup>65</sup> From the perspective of the “truth and life [that] appeared in the person of Jesus Christ,” the findings of myth criticism appeared irrelevant.<sup>66</sup> “Whether the Gospels be fictitious or historical, one thing [seemed] indisputable,—they contain a delineation of a great character” superior to “the assaults of destructive criticism.”<sup>67</sup>

This affirmation had an important consequence. It rendered the validity of the life of Jesus independent of the proofs of historical authenticity. “The life of Christ,” Samuel Osgood averred in a review of De Wette’s *Theodore*, “is in itself the best teacher and inspiration to morality.”<sup>68</sup> In this shift to the life of Jesus as a source of religious feeling, the data of historical criticism could be abandoned in favor of a unique encounter with the person of Jesus himself. “[T]here is a way,” John H. Morison observed, “of dwelling on each event in the life of our Saviour till it becomes a quickening influence in our own hearts.”<sup>69</sup> This Christ-inspired piety had no place either for Strauss’s skepticism concerning the significance of historical knowledge about Jesus or for the historico-critical investigations produced by Strauss’s German opponents. American reviewers preferred to take their stand with nonspeculative critics like Neander, who prefaced his own life of Jesus account with Herder’s disavowal of all attempts to write such an account: “I write the life of Christ—I? Never. The Evangelists have written it as it can and ought to be written. Let *us*, however, not *write* it, but *become* it” (XXI).

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<sup>65</sup> Morison, “Review of *The Life of Jesus Christ*,” 82.

<sup>66</sup> Anon., “Review of Current Literature,” 443.

<sup>67</sup> James T. Bixby “The Jesus of the Evangelists,” *Christian Examiner* 87 (1869): 21; James Freeman Clarke, “Open Questions in Theology,” *Christian Examiner* 80 (1866): 87.

<sup>68</sup> Osgood, “De Wette’s Views of Theology,” 22.

<sup>69</sup> Morison, “Review of *The Life of Jesus Christ*,” 86–87.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MAN AS GOD-MAKER: FEUERBACHIAN ATHEISM IN NEW ENGLAND

In the May 1850 issue of the *Christian Examiner*, Samuel Osgood charted the trends of German theology after Strauss's *Leben Jesu*. According to Osgood, the very latest period in modern ecclesiastical history had been determined by a disintegration of the Hegelian school into "right" and "left" wings. On the far left of the spectrum, Osgood located a position that led entirely out of the Christian faith into "utter atheism," namely the "folly" of Ludwig Feuerbach, who "mark[ed] a pitch of absurdity in the godless speculations of German theorists." For Osgood, Feuerbach was, once unmasked, a champion of impiety who discredited Christian beliefs. His "theological bearings," Osgood charged, "disparaged sentiment as an element of religion" and stripped religious faith of its significance by calling it delusion.<sup>1</sup>

In the September 1850 issue of the *Christian Examiner*, the rising concern over this "utter atheism" came to the fore in Hasbrouck Davis's detailed review of the third German edition of Feuerbach's celebrated *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (The Essence of Christianity), which had appeared in Germany in June 1841 and enjoyed a remarkable success, passing quickly through three editions. The author was, as Davis discerned in the preface of *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, "at a heaven-wide difference ... from those philosophers who tear their eyes out of their heads that they may think better." He had studied theology at Heidelberg and Berlin and then, in 1825, under the influence of Hegel transferred to the faculty of philosophy. An early publication severely critical of Christianity lost him his teaching position at Erlangen and ended his academic career. Feuerbach struck Davis not as a thoroughgoing philosopher with dry, systematic theories but rather as a liberating prophet and an oracular critic who offered "startling" premises "with a view to men in general."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Osgood, "Modern Ecclesiastical History," 429.

<sup>2</sup> Hasbrouck Davis, "Feuerbach's Essence of Christianity," *Christian Examiner* 49

Yet what lurked behind Feuerbach's populist intentions was, Davis found, nothing less than an attempt to eradicate God from spiritual life. According to Feuerbach, the objects of religious assertions are illusory, a "dream of the human soul" (230).<sup>3</sup> There is, Feuerbach alleged, no object outside of man that corresponds to the object of religious belief and, consequently, there can be no actual experience of God. The idea of God is itself a projection of the human consciousness, originating in the mind of man and without foundation in a reality "separate from man" (230; cf. *EC*, 203). God can no longer be regarded as an "object of faith"; rather, he is "man's revealed inner nature, his pronounced self" (233, 231; cf. *EC*, 31). Hence "consciousness of the Infinite" is only "man's consciousness of his own infinite being" (231, cf. *EC*, 13). The metaphysical object of faith is thus eclipsed. Man merely objectifies himself in religion. The ultimate reality of religion, Feuerbach concluded, is not some "independent" transcendent being but man himself (234; cf. *EC*, XXXVIII).

With the advent of George Eliot's translation of *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, these "startling" proposals were made available to English-speaking audiences and brought into broader forums of criticism. Beginning in January 1853, Eliot meticulously translated the second edition of the book within eighteen months, assisted by Sara Hennell, who checked the translation. In July 1854, the translation was published by John Chapman, whom Eliot helped to edit the *Westminster Review*. But the arduous work did not meet with financial success or public recognition. "Germany and England are *two* countries," Eliot wrote to Hennell in January 1854. In Germany, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* was "considered *the* book of the age," in England, however, its "lady trans-

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(1850): 226, 232, 226. Unless otherwise noted, further quotations from Davis's essay will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup> See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (1854); reprint, with a foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), XXXIX; further citations appear parenthetically as *EC*. Only two of Feuerbach's works were available in American editions in the nineteenth century: George Eliot's translation of *The Essence of Christianity*, which was published in New York in 1855, and Alexander Loos's highly abridged translation of Feuerbach's *Essence of Religion*, published in New York in 1873. Feuerbach's reception in America has received no critical attention in the standard studies of his thought. See Eugene Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); Charles A. Wilson, *Feuerbach and the Search for Otherness* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); and Larry Johnston, *Between Transcendence and Nihilism: Species-Ontology in the Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).



lator” became a target for numerous attacks, including charges that the work propounded the “new Hegelian Atheism.”<sup>4</sup> “In plain English,” the *Spectator* concluded, “this system is rank Atheism.”<sup>5</sup>

New England readers of Eliot’s translation agreed. In an 1857 review for the orthodox *Bibliotheca Sacra*, the Congregationalist minister Charles C. Tiffany castigated Feuerbach’s book for “its essential degradation of all that mankind holds most sacred.”<sup>6</sup> Unitarian reviewers pronounced the very same verdict and reprimanded the German atheist for his “nihilistic” views.<sup>7</sup> Robert Turnbull, minister of a Baptist congregation in Hartford, Connecticut, subsumed these views under the banner of a “godless humanism” that “rolls turbidly to the abyss.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar fashion, Noah Porter, writing for the Congregationalist *New Englander*, identified the movement of atheistic humanism as a “new Infidelity” that had moved completely beyond the bounds of Christian faith.<sup>9</sup>

With this phrase, Porter put a name to an intellectual threat that seemed quite different from the type of “infidelity” ascribed to Transcendentalism in the 1830s. In this earlier controversy the term “atheism” had a distinct meaning, one closely linked with the impact of the “new theology” of German “infidels” like De Wette, Schleiermacher and Strauss on the miracles question. As Norton had made clear in his polemical *Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*, this theology “allied itself with atheism” by denying the miraculous “evidences” of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> “Infidelity” in this context primarily signaled an implicit atheism issue-

<sup>4</sup> *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–1956), 2:137; James Martineau, “Contemporary Literature, Theology and Philosophy,” *Westminster Review* 6 (1854): 559.

<sup>5</sup> *Spectator* 5 (1854): 837; quoted in *The George Eliot Letters*, 2:173 n. 5. For a discussion of Feuerbach’s influence on George Eliot, see Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950), 227–236, and Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought, 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 155–165.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Tiffany, “Feuerbach’s Essence of Christianity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 14 (1857): 752. Unless otherwise noted, further quotations from Tiffany’s essay will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Henry Allen, “Review of Current Literature,” *Christian Examiner* 63 (1857): 434.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Turnbull, “The Essence and End of Infidelity,” (1855); quoted in Charles D. Cashdollar, *The Transformation of Theology, 1830–1890: Positivism and Protestant Thought in Britain and America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 123.

<sup>9</sup> Noah Porter, “The New Infidelity,” *New Englander* 11 (1853): 294.

<sup>10</sup> Norton, *Discourse*, 10.

ing from the rejection of evidences that established the truth of religion. Such a rejection, Norton was convinced, “must involve the denial of the existence of God.” Take the miracles that demonstrate God’s presence away, Norton reasoned, and “[n]othing is left that can be called Christianity. Its essence is gone.”<sup>11</sup> In Feuerbach’s approach to the “essence” of Christianity, even more was at stake. The issue of the evidences of Christian faith no longer featured significantly in an “infidelity” that appeared hostile to the foundation of religion itself. “Infidelity” had shifted substantially in the direction of an explicit, “utter atheism” that positively denied God’s existence.

What remains striking about the New England responses to *The Essence of Christianity* is that, from the outset, Feuerbach was assigned a special place in the spectrum of atheist positions. Feuerbach was primarily identified with “vulgar atheism,” and not with a “religious atheism” consisting either in an attack on “historical Christianity” or in “political antagonism to priests and churches.”<sup>12</sup> Feuerbach’s atheism took the assault on Christianity a step further—out of historical criticism into religious naturalism and out of Christianity into anthropology. Feuerbach read Christian belief as a projection of human needs and emotions, in effect resolving the “essence” of Christianity into the “essence” of man. This position constituted an internal strike against religion, an attack with much more far-reaching consequences than the charge of “infidelity” Norton leveled against the “new school.” Focusing on the psychological basis of religion in general, Feuerbach asserted that religion reveals more about the inner life of man than about his presumed object of adoration. Feuerbach thus invalidated not only the historicity of the Gospels but also the objective correlatives of religious statements themselves, including the concept of God.

The rise of this “new Infidelity” was lamented well into the 1850s, and its influence on the mainstream of New England theology was acutely noticed in the review columns of the *Bibliotheca Sacra* and the *Christian Examiner*.<sup>13</sup> Yet this theological current was not as “new” as reviewers like Porter and Osgood supposed; it was already latent in Transcendentalist thought long before Feuerbachian atheism became

<sup>11</sup> Norton, *Discourse*, 30, 11, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography: Memories and Experiences*, 2 vols. (New York: Cassell and Company, 1904) 2:365.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Edwards A. Park trans., “Theological Encyclopaedia and Methodology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 1 (1844): 213 n. 1 and Allen, “Review of Current Literature,” 434–437.

known to larger audiences. It is at this juncture that the story of Feuerbach in New England becomes a lens through which to examine the “atheistical” tendencies associated with the emergence of the Transcendentalist platform.<sup>14</sup> The controversy about Emerson’s “new views” here serves as a case in point. A constant refrain of the charges against Emerson was his alleged “ego-theism” or “self-worship.”<sup>15</sup> In conceiving revelation as the disclosure of the soul, Emerson seemed vulnerable to an approach in which the object of faith was “swallowed up,” submerged into a mode of human consciousness.<sup>16</sup> Conservative Transcendentalists like Frederic Henry Hedge and Orestes Brownson did not hesitate to label this aspect of Emersonian idealism as “atheism.”<sup>17</sup> As Brownson made clear, the atheism underlying Emerson’s “transcendental egotism” did not pertain to the denial of the evidences of historical Christianity, as Norton charged in his diatribes against the “new school,” but rather to the denial of an independent object of worship.<sup>18</sup>

Contemporary critics traced this form of atheism back to the ego-theism of an “extreme idealism,” charging that Emerson deified man at the expense of God and continued a strand of “exaggerated” idealism that had begun with Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s elevation of the ego. In concert with Fichte, Brownson observed, Emerson dallied with the idea that man “makes” God.<sup>19</sup> “God and the external world,” Brownson argued, are only manifestations of the “soul projecting itself.”<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> For a description of the “atheistical” tendencies that were supposed to mark the Transcendentalist heresy, see Theodore Parker, *Experience as a Minister*, ed. Rufus Leighton, in the Centenary Edition of *The Works of Theodore Parker*, 13:324–325.

<sup>15</sup> William Henry Channing, *The Gospel of Today: A Discourse Delivered at the Ordination of T.W. Higginson* (Boston 1847), 9; quoted in William Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Minister*, 70; Orestes A. Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” reprinted in *Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47.

<sup>16</sup> Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” 46.

<sup>17</sup> Joel Myerson, *The New England Transcendentalists and “The Dial”: A History of the Magazine and Its Contributors* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), 199. See also Joel Myerson, “Frederic Henry Hedge and the Failure of Transcendentalism,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 23 (1975): 403–404.

<sup>18</sup> Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” 44, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” 44; Orestes A. Brownson, “Charles Elwood Reviewed,” *Boston Quarterly Review* (1842), in *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, ed. Henry F. Brownson, 20 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 4:355. On the forms of “exaggerated” and “extreme idealism,” see Davis, “Feuerbach’s Essence of Christianity,” 229 and Tiffany, “Feuerbach’s Essence of Christianity,” 738.

<sup>20</sup> Orestes Brownson, “The Giobertian Philosophy,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* (1864), in *Works*, 2:250.

godless tendencies of this “egoistic” philosophy were made explicit when Feuerbach came on the scene; at that point the interpretative model that located the roots of such atheism in the egoism of “extreme idealism” was resurrected and became a thematic constant in both “old” and “new school” assessments of Feuerbachian atheism.

As regards the impact of this form of “utter atheism” on New England soil, the Feuerbachian heresy has a number of other contributions to make. It sheds light on the intellectual forces working toward a sustained disbelief in God as an object of faith—a conclusion eventually drawn in explicit terms by Cyrus Bartol. The detailed discussions of Feuerbach by Theodore Parker and the later Transcendentalist Octavius B. Frothingham also reveal the rising tide of atheist issues among New England divines and show that disbelief in God was by no means a “freakish” or “exotic” matter.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, these responses reveal a characteristic difference between Feuerbach’s German reviewers and American audiences that provides fresh data for reconstructing the theological landscape in Transcendentalist New England. In contrast to the German reviewers of Feuerbach, American critics focused less on questions of epistemology and religious philosophy in general. From the start, the controversy about Feuerbach’s atheism became allied with pastoral concerns and devotional issues that subordinated conceptual tools to religious needs. Unlike their contemporaries in the German opposition against Feuerbach, New England reviewers did not metaphysicalize Feuerbach. When they dealt with Feuerbachian atheism, their keynote was religious practice and the concern to defend a spiritual vision of Christianity’s essential truth against all efforts to unmask it as “illusion.”<sup>22</sup> In this context, there was no schism between “old” and “new school” advocates.

The story of Feuerbach in New England yields yet another consensus that bypassed theological oppositions between “old” and “new school” members. When it came to the controversy that raged in New England from 1836 onward—the quarrel over the nature and function of miracles—both camps were inclined to respond along the factional

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<sup>21</sup> James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 102. On Frothingham as a “later Transcendentalist,” see J. Wade Caruthers, *Octavius Brooks Frothingham: Gentle Radical* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 65, 78–79; and Stow Persons, *Free Religion: An American Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 22–23, 56–57.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, “Feuerbach’s Essence of Christianity,” 237.

lines commonly set up by the demands of historical Christianity.<sup>23</sup> But on the more fundamental question of the objective core of religious statements, all members of New England divinity came together with remarkable unanimity to condemn Feuerbach's projection theory of religion. On this issue, even disciples of newness and later Transcendentalists like Frothingham remained convinced that religious belief expressed something true about the nature of reality, and were therefore less radical than they are often construed to be.

## I

Prior to Eliot's translation of *The Essence of Christianity*, the Transcendentalist men of letters, above all Emerson and Alcott, derived their knowledge of Feuerbach only from intermediate sources. This indirect contact came through the work of a group of Ohioans known as "Hegel's first American followers," namely John Bernhard Stallo, Peter Kaufmann, and August Willich.<sup>24</sup> Together with Moncure Conway, a Virginian who later emerged as an enthusiast for the Free Religious movement, the Ohio group filtered not only Hegel's but also Feuerbach's views into the mainstream of American thought. From here several points of contact with the New England Transcendentalists emerged. The first centered around Conway, who went to Harvard Divinity School in the early 1850s and subsequently absorbed Feuerbach's ideas after delving into Strauss's myth criticism. Conway had close intellectual contact with Parker and Emerson, who were acutely aware that Conway was subjected to the all-too-familiar charge of infidelity when preaching doctrines that orthodox clergymen castigated as "German-influenced ... atheism."<sup>25</sup> As permanent minister of the

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<sup>23</sup> In distinguished studies the issue of "historical Christianity" serves as a criterion to set up theological divisions between the "old" and "new school" of New England divinity. See, for example, Evelyn Barish, *Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Donald L. Gelpi, *Endless Seeker: The Religious Quest of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991); and Peter S. Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> See Loyd D. Easton, *Hegel's First American Followers: The Ohio Hegelians* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 150, 155–156; William H. Goetzmann, ed. *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 204.

<sup>25</sup> Goetzmann, ed., *The American Hegelians*, 204.

liberal-minded Ethical Society of South Place Chapel in London, Conway finally moved toward a “religion of Humanity” informed by Feuerbach’s critique of religion.<sup>26</sup>

The second and more influential point of contact was Stallo, whose *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature: With an Outline of Some of its Recent Developments among the Germans* (1848) included a section on Feuerbach.<sup>27</sup> James Elliot Cabot eulogized the book in the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* as “the best thing on its subject that has yet appeared.”<sup>28</sup> Beginning in November 1849, Emerson made long extracts from Stallo’s work in his journals, including the section on Feuerbach.<sup>29</sup> According to Henry August Pochmann, Stallo’s *General Principles* was “the most persistent influence to keep Emerson’s mind occupied with German thought.”<sup>30</sup> It not only contributed to Emerson’s general and continuing interest in German philosophy, in particular the dialectical structure of German idealistic thought, but also attracted him specifically to Feuerbach’s view of nature as a unified realm of phenomena or, in Stallo’s terms, “configurations” to be experienced by both sensuous and introspective observation (*JMN*, 11:200).<sup>31</sup>

Stallo’s reference to Feuerbach was included in a detailed exposition of the “systematization of nature” by Lorenz Oken, a German speculative scientist who, as Stallo observed, realized the “fruits of the philosophy of Schelling.” According to Stallo, Oken’s analogizing speculative natural science described man as a “complex of all things in nature,—of the elements, minerals, plants, and animals.” “In nature,” Stallo concluded from Oken’s “physiophilosophy,” “we have ... a microscopic view of man.” Oken thus established man’s unique position in nature as the “crown of creation.” In Stallo’s view, Feuerbach accorded a

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<sup>26</sup> See Easton, *Hegel’s First American Followers*, 150, 155. See also Conway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences*, 2:346–347.

<sup>27</sup> See John Bernhard Stallo, *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature, with an Outline of Some of its Recent Developments among the Germans, Embracing the Philosophical Systems of Schelling and Hegel, and Oken’s System of Nature* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1848), 322–323.

<sup>28</sup> James Elliot Cabot, “J.B. Stallo’s *General Principles*,” *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* 1 (1848): 265; quoted in Easton, *Hegel’s First American Followers*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Emerson owned the following translation of Feuerbach’s work: *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. from the 2nd German ed. by Marian Evans (New York: C. Blanchard, 1855). See Walter Harding, *Emerson’s Library* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), 105.

<sup>30</sup> Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 199.

<sup>31</sup> See Easton, *Hegel’s First American Followers*, 46, 37. The appendix to Easton’s study includes key sections from Stallo’s *General Principles*, 229–278.

similar function to nature, asserting that everything in nature, including the animal kingdom, revealed man to himself and reflected his divine essence.<sup>32</sup> In this way Feuerbach's naturalism became applicable to anthropology.

Stallo's influence was complemented by the "forty-eighters," disillusioned German liberals who carried their political and social aspirations to the American West, in particular to Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. The "forty-eighters" included social activists like August Willich, Wilhelm Weitling, and Joseph Weydemeyer, who had sympathized with the Communist league and acknowledged Feuerbach as a champion of political liberalism in the revolutionary year of 1848. The anti-religious sentiment and political radicalism of these immigrants alarmed traditional clergymen who feared that now the religion of Feuerbach and Hegel would "[diffuse] its poison among all classes of society."<sup>33</sup> On New England soil, however, this "diffusion" came with a difference. Stallo did not follow the left-wing Hegelianism championed by Weitling and Weydemeyer, nor did he endorse the political extremism of Willich, who advocated immediate revolution. Instead, Stallo adapted Feuerbachian themes to Oken's "physiophilosophy." Feuerbach mediated through Stallo thus became for his Transcendentalist audiences primarily a naturalist and a religious philosopher rather than an author of political activism. This trend of influence was augmented by Emmanuel V. Scherb, a German patriot and exile who arrived in Concord in 1849 and soon emerged as an influential ally for Stallo. Insofar as Feuerbach figured in Scherb's lectures and conversations, it was again as the religious philosopher associated with Hegelianism and not as the political radical celebrated as a hero by many of the revolutionaries.<sup>34</sup>

On listening to Scherb, Emerson stopped well short of sympathy for what he perceived to be just another version of an overly structural "abstract philosophy" (*JMN*, 11:187). For Emerson, it was dif-

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<sup>32</sup> Stallo, *General Principles*, 227, 236, 228, 323. Alfred Tulk, member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, translated Lorenz Oken's main study, *The Elements of Physiophilosophy*, into English in 1847. See René Wellek, *Confrontations: Studies in the Intellectual and Literary Relations between Germany, England and the United States during the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 167.

<sup>33</sup> John Ulrich, "Signs of the Times," *Evangelical Review* 7 (1856): 353; quoted in Mark Y. Hanley, *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 112-113.

<sup>34</sup> See Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 199.

difficult to “find [his] way into [it]” because of the dialectical intricacies (*L*, 4:530–531).<sup>35</sup> Ripley responded similarly. Reviewing the *General Principles* for *The Harbinger* in 1848, he found that the “thought processes” and “intellectual analyses” in Stallo’s work were merely “intellectual gymnastics”—“airy nothings.”<sup>36</sup> In a letter to Parker in 1852, Ripley explicitly applied this criticism to Feuerbach, disparaging his atheistic thinking as a specialty of the “confirmed system-lover.”<sup>37</sup> In Ripley’s judgment, systematicians like Stallo and Feuerbach offered “no point of contact with the American mind.”<sup>38</sup> Yet at first sight, “new school” advocates, in particular those following the Emersonian brand of Transcendentalism, seemed in fact to have more common ground with Feuerbach than with their Congregationalist and Unitarian brethren. In the Emersonian “ecstatical” vision, internalized perception was manifested as a theological reorientation that based religion in the self-reliant man speaking “*from within*” (*CW*, 1:131; 2:170). For proponents of such self-reliant assertions several aspects of Feuerbach’s religious humanism were quite attractive. The elevation of man, the elimination of the supernatural and the supremacy of religious feelings and desires—these propositions all struck rich soil in “new school” prophets who sought to go to their “own heart[s] at first” (*JMN*, 4:45). Moreover, Feuerbach’s concept of religion was also congenial to the Transcendentalists’ fight against rigid doctrinal positions. Feuerbach traced the origin and function of religion back to human “wishes of the heart” and insisted that religion is located in “feeling” rather than in thought (*EC*, 140). Religion thus became in Feuerbach’s system what Transcendentalists argued it should be, namely an inward, emotional affair, a matter of “internal evidences” (*JMN*, 3:214).

This anti-formalistic view of religion also lent itself to the Transcendentalists’ separation of theology and religion. Feuerbach set theology, which posits a transcendent God, against the true religion of the heart demanding a “human” God (*EC*, 13)—an opposition in which theology appeared as a misguided attempt to externalize in metaphysical guise

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<sup>35</sup> On Feuerbach’s and Stallo’s influence on Emerson, see Elisabeth Hurth, “When ‘Man Makes God’: Feuerbachian Atheism in New England,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 42 (1996): 255–289.

<sup>36</sup> George Ripley, “General Principles . . . by J.B. Stallo,” *The Harbinger* 6 (1848): 110; quoted in Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 619 n. 614.

<sup>37</sup> Ripley’s letter to Parker is quoted in Frothingham, *Ripley*, 229.

<sup>38</sup> Ripley, “General Principles . . . by J.B. Stallo,” 110; quoted in Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 619 n. 614.



what is in effect human essence. This rejection of the metaphysical God of theology coincided with the “new school’s” anti-theological thrust. Thus Parker argued that if the church only affirmed the traditional conception of God—“popular theology”—then “atheism” was a legitimate reaction; “atheists,” he was convinced, are often made such by “odious doctrines”: “[F]ollies [put forward] in the name of God” have made men turn to atheism (2:158, 4:354). “Follies” committed for the sake of religion seemed worse than “[a]ll the attacks made on religion itself by men of science, from Celsus to Feuerbach.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Emerson acknowledged that atheism could have a purifying effect: “Every influx of atheism ... is thus made useful as a mercury pill assailing & removing a diseased religion & making way for truth” (*JMN*, 3:239).

In the “new school” criticism of the churches’ “formalist” theology, then, Feuerbachian atheism could be of use (*CW*, 1:85). Yet this intersection did not signal a substantive agreement. Between the Transcendentalist “revision of theology” and Feuerbach’s dismissal of “metaphysical” theology a gulf was fixed.<sup>40</sup> While the Transcendentalist vision of the unity of reality confirmed a divine authority, Feuerbach dismissed all faith in a transcendent reality as illusory. Man, according to Feuerbach, does not participate in a divine truth—a stance incompatible with the aspiration of men who believed in an order of truth beyond the “outward, material, sensible world.”<sup>41</sup> In affirming this new order of truth, those at the more extreme end of the Transcendentalist spectrum, above all Emerson and Alcott, posited the superiority of mind over matter and located reality “in the world of spirit” (*CW*, 1:22). The “essence” of religion, then, was to be found in an indwelling spiritual principle that enabled man to “partake ... of the eternity of God.”<sup>42</sup>

This partaking of transcendent realities built on a spiritual religion that was completely at odds with Feuerbach’s anti-spiritualist anthropology. Despite the various schisms within the “new school,” one overriding proposition was common to all Transcendentalist assertions: The supreme arbiter in matters of religious belief is not empirical epistemology but rather inward revelation. This trans-empirical path to truth, the disciples of the “new views” were convinced, leads to an inner certainty

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<sup>39</sup> Theodore Parker, quoted in Octavius B. Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History*, 1876; reprint (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1965), 316.

<sup>40</sup> Ripley, “Martineau’s Rationale”, 130.

<sup>41</sup> Orestes A. Brownson, “Emerson’s Essays”, in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Amos Bronson Alcott, *Orphic Sayings*, in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 304. See also [Samuel] O[sgood], “Nature,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 17.

of its existence. Although there are no coherent principles for delineating a divine realm, man knows by intuition *that* this realm *is*. Religion, then, is not a “dream of the human soul” but a “gift from heaven,” to be experienced by what Emerson termed a “divine wisdom” outside the domain of the “naturalists” (*CW*, 1:130, 44).<sup>43</sup>

## II

From the start, however, the intuitional basis of this “divine wisdom” became one of the most controversial topics within the “new school.” And it was precisely at this point that Transcendentalism, particularly in the “ecstatical” and ultra-individualist version represented by the Concord seer, appeared to be vulnerable to Feuerbachian conclusions (*CW*, 1:130). If revelation is, as Emerson asserted, the disclosure of the soul and if self-reliance is God-reliance, then it is only a small step to the subjective proposition that religious truth coincides with man’s spiritual needs and desires. For numerous reviewers from both “old” and “new school” camps, such a reduction of God to a mode of human consciousness was untenable. In his review of the “Divinity School Address,” Theophilus Parsons thus objected that Emerson “preache[d] a doctrine which leads man to worship his own nature and himself.”<sup>44</sup> In a similar fashion, Brownson, commenting on the “Address” in the *Boston Quarterly Review* in 1838, raised serious objections to Emerson’s “transcendental egotism.” “[W]hat and where is God now?” Brownson asked. In “Emerson’s account of the matter,” Brownson deplored, “the soul does not worship God, a being above man and independent on him, but it worships itself.” But “if there be no God out of the soul, out of the *me*,” Brownson concluded, “there is no God.”<sup>45</sup>

The reviewers launched their attacks against a “self-worship” that was characteristically similar to the position for which Feuerbach was to be castigated. The unmistakable parallelism inhered in Emerson’s subjective idealism, which attempted to “make the individual soul everything, the centre of the universe,” and expanded to assert man’s partic-

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<sup>43</sup> Frothingham, *Ripley*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> “S.X.” [Theophilus Parsons], “The New School and Its Opponents,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” 46, 45.

ipation in the divine life.<sup>46</sup> “Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute nature of ... truth, and we learn,” Emerson insisted, “that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator” (*CW*, 1:38). In this Transcendentalist discernment of the self, the individual exists “directly from ... God” in such a way that consciousness of self coincides with consciousness of God (*JMN*, 2:192). In thus “likening [God] to man,” contemporary critics observed, Emerson did nothing but “sink God ... in man.”<sup>47</sup> The human soul does not merely partake in the voice of God, it is “coequal or identical” with God.<sup>48</sup> It is in this belief in the godhood of the self, which no longer maintains self and God as separate centers of consciousness, that Feuerbach’s credo is already anticipated. “The consciousness in each man,” Emerson insisted, “identifies him now with the First Cause” (*CW*, 3:42)—an identification bordering on Feuerbach’s primary postulate: “Consciousness of God is self-consciousness” (*EC*, 12).

In the “ecstatic” moment of identity another Feuerbachian premise is also already half-explicit. For Emerson, the self as subject is not merely the center of things but also the source from which the world proceeds. The “Transcendentalist” “takes his departure from his consciousness, and reckons the world as an appearance.... His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself” (*CW*, 1:203). It was from this very attempt to link the Transcendentalist ideal man with the ultimate source of creation that the charge of “probable Atheism” issued.<sup>49</sup> Emerson seemed to fall prey to “a very prevalent mistake in certain systems of modern philosophy”: a “self-worship” in which all things are “the mere subjective laws of [man’s] own being.”<sup>50</sup> If the world radiates from the self, if “all things ... have ... a subjective or relative existence” and “[a]ll that you call the world is the shadow of that substance which you are,” then there appears to be nothing that hinders man from rendering God himself dependent on the human mind for all significance. God, too, “is only in the apocalypse of the mind” (*CW*, 1:203, 204, 29). He is merely “ex-

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<sup>46</sup> Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” 47.

<sup>47</sup> Cyrus A. Bartol, *Radical Problems* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1872), 92, 83.

<sup>48</sup> “Review of *Essays*,” *Athenaeum* (1841), in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 103.

<sup>49</sup> James Freeman Clarke, “R.W. Emerson and the New School,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 52.

<sup>50</sup> “Review of *Essays*,” 101; [Orestes A. Brownson], “Review of *Nature*,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 3.

ternized” from the “laws of [man’s] mind” and does not “enjoy a substantial existence” (*CW*, 1:42, 29).

Curiously, reviewers from both “old” and “new school” camps marked what they saw as latent godless tendencies in Emerson’s idealism. Hedge went so far as to identify the Transcendentalist as a covert atheist. To pull man into God as the “apocalypse of the mind” was in effect, Henry Ware Jr. similarly charged, to “take away the Father of the Universe” and condemn man to life “in an orphan asylum.”<sup>51</sup> Of the Transcendentalist group, it was Brownson in particular who explicitly spelled out the premises of this “atheism” in a critique of Emerson that was to resurface in the responses to Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*. According to Brownson, the atheism implicit in Emersonian self-worship did not stem from a rejection of the evidences of historical Christianity, as Norton asserted in his *Discourse on the Latest Form of the Infidelity*. Rather, Emerson’s atheism touched on the objective reference of religion itself, signaling a new anthropocentricity that relocated the divine within man. “The religious sentiment,” Brownson was convinced, “is always a craving of the soul to . . . fasten itself on an object above itself,” a God “independent” of man. “Take away the idea of such a God, declare the soul sufficient for itself, . . . and religion is out of the question.”<sup>52</sup> Emerson’s self-worship, then, became much more than an attack on supernatural rationalism with its evidentiary appeals. It was in substance, for Brownson, a rejection of religious faith as such.

### III

Significantly, Emerson’s more conservative intellectual peers often discussed the charge of atheism in the process of paralleling Emerson with Fichte. Against the background of an “extreme,” “subjective idealism,” Emerson’s ego-theism was thus read as the “logical outcome of Fichte’s teaching.”<sup>53</sup> Commenting on “Coleridge’s literary character” in 1833, Hedge judged that Fichte’s idealism latently harbored skepti-

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<sup>51</sup> Myerson, “Frederic Henry Hedge and the Failure of Transcendentalism,” 403; Henry Ware Jr., “The Personality of the Deity”; quoted in David Lyttle, *Studies in Religion in Early American Literature: Edwards, Poe, Channing, Emerson, Some Minor Transcendentalists, Hawthorne, and Thoreau* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 105.

<sup>52</sup> Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” 45, 46.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Cook, *Transcendentalism, with Preludes on Current Events*; quoted in Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 243.

cism because it went too far in “seeking the last result of the subjective path.” In his edition of *Prose Writers of Germany* (1847), Hedge rejected Fichte for the same reason. Following the “altogether too subjective” premise that “I am all,” Fichte’s egoism reduced the external world and all knowledge of the absolute to a projection of the insatiable striving of the transcendental “Ich.”<sup>54</sup> For Brownson, Emerson’s self-worship represented the consummation of an anthropotheistic viewpoint issuing from this very deification of the ego. In keeping with Fichte’s “egoism,” Emerson held that what was experienced in nature was what had been “projected” from the self.<sup>55</sup> That this “projective” view could be inverted into atheism was explicitly suggested in James Murdock’s popular *Sketches of Modern Philosophy, Especially among the Germans* (1842). Fichte, Murdock observed, “annihilate[s], by his idealism, the evidence of the objectivity of any sensible world, leaving us only a system of empty images.”<sup>56</sup> In Fichte’s system, Stallo concluded similarly, “the external world ... wane[s] into a world of shadows, projected from the intelligent subject, from the ‘I.’”<sup>57</sup> In like terms, Brownson generated atheism out of Fichte’s subjectivism. Fichte, Brownson judged, “asserted the power of the *me* to be his own object, and sought the proof of it in the fact of volition. Hence [Fichte] fell into the absurdity of representing all ideas as the products of the *me*, and even went so far as to tell his disciples how it is that man makes God.”<sup>58</sup> To Brownson, Emerson’s affinity with Fichte in this context seemed clear. His self-worship turned God into a projection of the soul and lifted man up to a position in which he could “make” his own God. God thus became an index of pure subjectivism.

Insofar as this atheistic ego-theism was read as an outcome of extreme idealism, the Emerson case was a harbinger of things to come. It constituted an overture to the controversy about that form of atheism Feuerbach was to make explicit. Thus the argument that had already been played out against Emerson in the 1830s returned with

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<sup>54</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, “Coleridge’s Literary Character,” *Christian Examiner* 14 (1833): 116, 124; *Prose Writers of Germany*, ed. Frederic Henry Hedge (1847; reprint, New York: Francis, 1856), 57.

<sup>55</sup> Brownson, “Review of *Nature*,” 4. See also Brownson, “Eclectic Philosophy,” *Boston Quarterly Review*, (1839), in *Works*, 2:536–538.

<sup>56</sup> James Murdock, *Sketches of Modern Philosophy, Especially among the Germans* (Hartford: John C. Wells, 1842), 100.

<sup>57</sup> Stallo, *General Principles*, 211.

<sup>58</sup> Brownson, “Charles Elwood Reviewed,” *Boston Quarterly Review*, (1842), in *Works*, 4:355. On Brownson’s criticism of Fichte, see also Wellek, *Confrontations*, 179–180.

renewed vigor in the reviews of *The Essence of Christianity*. For Hasbrouck Davis, Feuerbach's theology descended like Emerson's from the exaggerated idealism of Fichte, who "practically annihilated" the "objective world" (229). In similar terms, Tiffany's review of the English translation of *The Essence of Christianity* in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* castigated the "subjective" nature of Feuerbach's "self-worship" and "egoism" (733, 742, 737). For Hegel, Tiffany observed, the "Absolute" still had "objective reality" (733). Feuerbach proceeded differently, and here, Tiffany charged, lay his principal failing: God for him was "nothing more than man viewing himself as the Absolute" (734). Repeating Davis's familiar charge, Tiffany judged that this "logic" identified God and man. Man as "subject" was absorbed into divinity. For Tiffany, Feuerbach's anthropotheistic intentions were the inevitable result of an extreme idealism set in motion by Fichte's deification of the ego and culminating in Feuerbach's dissolution of everything in religion into "egoism" (735, 738, 737). Like Fichte, Tiffany claimed, Feuerbach grounded the activity that produces the world in subjectivity—in consciousness itself. Fichte gave up the Kantian "Ding an Sich" and derived reality from the self-affirming activity of the transcendental "Ich," which evokes and sets for itself a "non-me" and thereby posits a range for its activity (738). But if the activity of consciousness is thus the ground of all reality, Tiffany concluded, the outcome is "complete subjectivism" to the point that "there is nothing enduring ... [and] [p]ictures are all that exist" (738, 739). It is Fichte's illusion of the autocracy of the self that Tiffany also locates in Feuerbach's "subjectivism." As an "advocate of subjectivism," Feuerbach denied that there was "a spiritual existence without [man], of which [he] may be conscious also" (738, 739).

Tracking Feuerbach's atheism back to an extreme idealism was a dominant note of the period in the responses to *The Essence of Christianity*, but much of this criticism was misplaced. Feuerbach himself sought to make perfectly clear in the preface to *The Essence of Christianity* that his "new philosophy" was the "direct opposite of speculation," as it celebrated "not the *ego* of ... Fichte ..., but a *real* being, the true *Ens realissimum*—man" (*EC*, XXXV). New England divines from the conservative front, however, acutely perceived Feuerbachian atheism as proceeding from Fichtean idealism precisely because of the way it absorbed the divine into the human. The seeds of Feuerbachian atheism were already planted in an exaggerated idealism that exalted and divinized man.

To make Emerson a part of this narrative and argue that his transcendental egotism already contained the germs of Feuerbachian atheism is to foreground what *Nature* explicitly identifies as the instability and underlying skepticism that unsettle the idealist vision of the Transcendentalist. This is clearest in *Nature* when Emerson expresses his “noble doubt” about the existence of material, sensible objects and suggests that the recognition of the world does not lead to a “correspondence” with outlying objects (*CW* 1:29, 19). The world appears as a mere posit. This projective view, however, only pertains to the phenomenal status of sensible objects; it does not, as Brownson and others would have had it, extend to the “absolute” status of God himself but leaves his existence as a separate, independent being intact.<sup>59</sup> “Mr. Emerson,” Elizabeth Palmer Peabody correctly observed in her review of *Nature*, “has sufficiently guarded his idealism by rigorous and careful expression.... [H]e gives no ground” to “professed ... atheists.”<sup>60</sup> In the “noble doubt” passage Emerson avoids this threat by establishing a realm outside the self. The world is a “projection of God in the unconscious” (*CW*, 1:38). According to Emerson, a “remoter and interior incarnation” projects the divine mind to man. But in this projective context the world exists independent of the self. There is a disjuncture “between us and our house” (*CW*, 1:38, 39). God can only be apprehended as an “apparition,” a being essentially “alien” and other (*CW*, 1:37, 39). The self is related to the “great apparition” in such a way that the “noble doubt” concerning the reality of sense phenomena is ultimately of little consequence. The self finds certification as a “creator in the finite.” This is the “golden key” that “animates [man] to create [his] own world” (*CW*, 1:38). In the act of creation the sensible world is exalted and suffused with the higher realm of spirit.

The “golden key” established man’s consanguinity with a transcendent mooring that set Emerson’s soul-worship distinctly apart from Feuerbach’s worship of man as God. In his sermons, Emerson acknowledges the anthropomorphic nature of man’s “idea” of God. “In every nation,” he observes in Sermon XXXII, “the degree of civilization

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<sup>59</sup> Brownson, “Review of *Nature*,” 4. On the problem of illusionism in *Nature*, see also John Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 37–39.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, “Nature—A Prose Poem,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 22.

affects the character of its worship; the accidents of climate, of language, of manners, of national descent, all contribute their influence to mould and colour the Idea that is entertained of the Father of the Universe" (*S*, 1:255). But the fact that "[e]very mind worships God after its own predominant humour" does not, Emerson assures his parishioners, cast doubt on the "existence of God" (*S*, 1:256, 255). From the constructive nature of man's "idea of God" it does not follow, as Feuerbach argued, that the "Being of God" is illusory (*S*, 1:145, 196). Emerson granted that the attributes of God could be human constructs, but he did not conclude from this that the subject of these predicates was thereby a projection. At this juncture, Emerson's theological position, godless thought it seemed to his critics, harbored a conservative stance that joined in the "universal consent to the existence of God" (*S*, 1:255).

The distinction between the "idea of God" and the "existence of God," between the "thought of God" and the "Being of God," also provides the background for those high-transcendental expressions of soul-worship that at first sight seem to anticipate Feuerbach's projection theory of religion. Thus Emerson's assertion in Sermon LXXXVI that "our thought of God ... is our own soul stripped of all inferiority and carried out to perfection" does not imply that man projects his ideals into an illusive object apart from humanity (*S*, 2:243). While for Emerson the "thought of God" was an expression of man's hopes for immortality and perfection, he was not prepared to follow "those who doubt the Being of God" (*S*, 1:196). Even the most ecstatic expressions of soul-worship in "The Over-Soul," where Emerson says, "I the imperfect, adore my own Perfect," leave the "Being of God" intact (*CW*, 2:175). Religion here does not become wish-fulfillment, a fantasy-gratification of man's wish to be perfect. For Emerson, God is not, as Feuerbach asserted, "made" in man's image; on the contrary, "we are made in his moral image" (*S*, 1:146). The immediate context of Emerson's soul-worship is not a projectionist religion but a religion validated from within the individual. This religion is not self-derived or a delusion of self-objectification; rather, it serves as a striking "proof" of God's existence. It is "not from abstruse reasonings that the best argument for the Divine being ... is obtained. It is because God is within us" (*S*, 1:195, 206). The "evidence" from "within" testifies to the independent existence of God and thus emerges as "[o]ne of the best cures for Atheism" (*S*, 1:206, 205). In *Nature* Emerson applies this "proof" again and affirms that God exists "out of me" (*CW*, 1:37). The divinization of the



soul that undergirds the “golden key” thus has a foundation outside the self. Self-consciousness is God-consciousness not only because God is “in me” but also because he is “out of me.”

Contrary to cries of godlessness, the “golden key” placed Emerson firmly in the party of belief and guarded his idealism against the anthropologism of the new atheism. In the early 1840s, when Emerson moved from a “subjective” toward an “objective idealism,” the apparent “shift away from egoism” did not involve a complete dismissal of the “golden key”; rather, it remained a recurrent element that still suffused the “newly empirical Emerson” and set up defenses against skepticism.<sup>61</sup> For the “ecstatic” or “visionary” Emerson it offered a means of securing the reference to a spiritual realm that was “stable,” not illusory and endowed the “Not Me” with a divine “ministry,” namely to “serve” as the symbol of “spirit” (*CW*, 1:31, 8, 37). Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*, by contrast, expressly denied this reference, declaring that the world has no transcendent significance or divine purpose. Purpose, meaning, and transcendence are located “within” man and grounded in a material, sensuous world (*EC*, 12). From here it was only a small step to the frightening clutches of materialism which Emerson, like Ripley and his conservative intellectual peers, perceived as a threat to religious belief in general. By “tak[ing] his departure from the external world” and rendering “man as one product of that,” the “materialist” destroyed all “spiritual life” (*CW*, 1:203, 206).

On this point there was a consensus among all “new school” advocates, conservative and radical alike. The systematic attempt to eradicate all divine purpose and meaning made Feuerbach, as Ripley observed, look “crabbed and dogmatic in his atheism.”<sup>62</sup> He seemed completely out of touch with what was primary for the disciples of newness—namely, a religious practice inspired by spiritual signatures. Feuerbach, Ripley lamented, proposed an intellectualized humanism that undermined the “power of spiritual ideas.”<sup>63</sup> In like manner Alcott castigated Feuerbach as a materialist who played havoc with spiritual religion. Alcott did have close personal contact with members of the St. Louis Philosophical Society, which counted Feuerbach and James

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<sup>61</sup> Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1953; reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 141, 111.

<sup>62</sup> Frothingham, *Ripley*, 229.

<sup>63</sup> Frothingham, *Ripley*, 275.

H. Stirling as “auxiliary” or “out of town members.”<sup>64</sup> In 1879, Alcott became the nominal head of the Concord School of Philosophy, where for years Hegelians like William Torrey Harris drew on Feuerbach and other left-wing theologians to contribute to the “progress in Speculative philosophy in Mass[achusetts]” (*L*, 6:104). Yet Alcott made only partial concessions to Harris and his “German Atheists” (*L*, 5:514). He expected “[n]othing profound or absolute” “from minds ... if not hostile, at least indifferent to and incapable of idealism: naturalists rather than metaphysicians.”<sup>65</sup> Alcott thus sealed Feuerbach’s reputation as a “godless,” “speculative” intellectual. Feuerbach remained, as the century advanced, the Feuerbach of the 1840s: the author of the celebrated *Essence of Christianity*, the man who replaced religious faith with materialism and atheistic humanism.

#### IV

Feuerbach’s reputation in Germany as the “brook of fire,” the “purgatory” of his time did not go unshaken for long. By the late 1850s, his star was already waning. His sensory realism was supplanted by the mechanism of materialists like Ludwig Büchner, while his anthropological approach was increasingly opposed by Karl Marx’s social interpretation of human nature. On New England ground, opposing voices were also growing stronger. Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity gave way to Ernest Renan’s anti-supernaturalism, and his “philosophic atheism” was superseded by the “scientific atheism” of Auguste Comte. To New England audiences, Feuerbach’s “philosophic atheism” primarily signaled the “speculative denial of a supermundane conscious intelligence”<sup>66</sup> With Comte’s “scientific atheism” emphases changed, moving questions of knowledge into the foreground. This atheism did not deny the existence of God per se but rather denied that the “causes” of “phenomena” are knowable. There can be “positive” knowledge about a supernatural, transcendent God and positing the existence of such a

<sup>64</sup> Easton, *Hegel’s First American Followers*, 45.

<sup>65</sup> Amos Bronson Alcott, *Concord Days* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1872), 145. See also Henry August Pochmann, *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism: Phases in the History of American Idealism* (Philadelphia: Schurz, 1948), 34–53.

<sup>66</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, *Atheism in Philosophy and Other Essays* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884), 3. On “scientific atheism,” see also Rufus Ellis, “Buchanan and Hitchcock on Religion and Science,” *Christian Examiner* 62 (1857): 447–451.

God is simply ungrounded speculation that subordinates observation to imagination.<sup>67</sup>

The publication, in 1853, of Harriet Martineau's condensed English translation of Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* made this critique of the supernatural God easily accessible to American readers. Reviewing the translation for the *North American Review* in 1854, Francis Bowen charged that Martineau had undertaken an impious endeavor that moved her "beyond all religious faith."<sup>68</sup> Joseph Henry Allen, however, grandson of the elder Henry Ware, found positivism quite consistent with the platform of moderate Unitarianism. Commenting on "Comte's positive philosophy" in the *Christian Examiner* of 1851, Allen observed that "[i]ts design [was] nothing less than the recasting of the whole modern system of modern thought and knowledge, on the basis given in the method of the natural sciences." This "recasting," Allen insisted, was not to be "confounded in the charge of vulgar atheism."<sup>69</sup> To argue that only phenomena could be known and that positive knowledge about God was impossible was not to deny the existence of God. "The Deity [positivism] dethrones," Allen judged, "is simply an idol."<sup>70</sup> Comte replaced this "idol" with another deity—collective humanity. Comte's positivism thus still allowed for forms of piety, retaining a chief object of worship—not a personal, transcendent God, but idealized human collectivity. With this pious humanism, Allen asserted, Comte offered an attractive alternative to Feuerbach. While Comte's system engendered a humanism without explicit "vulgar atheism," Feuerbach "assail[ed] Christianity with the ribaldry of old-school infidelity" in an attack that "mark[ed] the easy transition ... from All-God to No-God."<sup>71</sup> Comparing Comte's "religion of Humanity" with Feuerbach's "godless humanism," Robert Turnbull observed in a similar fashion that Comte was "vastly superior as a thinker ... to

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel Harris, "The Demands of Infidelity Satisfied by Christianity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 13 (1856): 277; Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, "The Being of God," *Christian Examiner* 65 (1858): 239.

<sup>68</sup> Francis Bowen, "Martineau's Translation of Comte's Philosophy," *North American Review* 79 (1854): 217. See also Thomas Hill, "Miss Martineau's Compend of Comte's Positive Philosophy," *Christian Examiner* 56 (1854): 364–372.

<sup>69</sup> Joseph Henry Allen, "Comte's Positive Philosophy," *Christian Examiner* 50 (1851): 183, 195. On Allen's reception of Comte, see also Cashdollar, *The Transformation of Theology*, 104–110.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Henry Allen, "Comte's Religion of Humanity," *Christian Examiner* 63 (1857): 31.

<sup>71</sup> Allen, "Review of Current Literature," 437, 434.

... Feuerbach.” Comte still granted a legitimate place to religion and thus “distinguish[ed] himself from the grosser ‘atheistic crew.’”<sup>72</sup>

Comte made clear that if there is a God he has to be a knowable God, one who must be grasped phenomenally rather than speculatively. In opposition to the speculative claims put forward by metaphysics, the existence of God thus became a matter of verification and observable facts. Feuerbach’s approach, Allen observed, started from similar premises. He “shows the passionate reaction against all metaphysics. He admits only the two spheres of concrete existence,—physical phenomena, and acts or states of the human mind.” But with Feuerbach, God turned into a mere figment compounded of qualities man found in himself and projected as divine other. While Comte admitted a knowable, humanized object of worship, Feuerbach did not grant any “objective reality at all” to the “Absolute.” From here issued the most serious defect of Feuerbach’s antimetaphysical system. “Metaphysics,” Allen lamented, “takes the sudden plunge from Conservative Orthodoxy to Atheistic Nihilism.”<sup>73</sup>

Feuerbach’s “Atheistic Nihilism” not only carried the signature of infidelity but also struck Allen as reductive and abstract when compared with the thought of Comte, which rejected orthodox supernaturalism but did not present a threat to morality. Comte’s new deity was neither transcendent nor absolute but rather relative in nature and therefore still subject to growth. This growth was dependent on man’s social feelings and his willingness to act on behalf of others. Comte’s “religion of Humanity” was thus ethically concrete, fostering personal altruism and solidarity. It was precisely on this point that Feuerbach lost out to Comte. Feuerbach, Allen charged, abstracted the “conception of race” from historical reality, transferring it to “ideal contemplation” rather than concrete social and sensuous activity. The abstract vagueness of this “conception of race” did not seem applicable to concrete man in his everyday life and appeared to Allen merely the disillusioning outcome of a “theologist’s” negative criticism.<sup>74</sup> But it was actually neither the penchant for destruction nor “nihilism” that determined the design of *The Essence of Christianity*. What American reviewers perceived as a nihilistic critique aimed at the dismantling of a transcendent Absolute, Feuerbach saw as a positive critique aimed at social and moral

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<sup>72</sup> Turnbull, “The Essence and End of Infidelity,” 123.

<sup>73</sup> Allen, “Review of Current Literature,” 437, 434.

<sup>74</sup> Allen, “Review of Current Literature,” 437.

change, above all the liberation from an oppressive, perverted religious consciousness.

Feuerbach developed his social and moral vision in the context of the central theme of alienation, a theme virtually ignored by New England reviewers of *The Essence of Christianity*. According to Feuerbach, religion “alienates” man from himself. Man “denies” himself in order to affirm God. His best qualities are incorporated into God, while “man [is] the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations” (*EC*, 27, 33). But such a religion, Feuerbach argued, is dehumanizing—it sacrifices man to God—and it is also unproductive, for it leaves man passively expecting a future supernatural reward and thus makes God a “substitute” for the “real world” (*EC*, 196, 73). In worshipping this wish-fulfilling “substitute,” man surrenders his aspirations in exchange for a transformation of concrete existence. Liberation from this self-alienation, Feuerbach insisted, can only be brought about by a new religion that demystifies faith and is situated in earthly life. This new religion provides the foundation for a naturalistic-humanistic ethic that engenders devotion to the natural and social whole. Based on man’s “species”-nature, this ethic is an ego-transcending force, for according to Feuerbach, “[t]he ego ... attains to consciousness of the world through consciousness of the *thou*. Thus man is the God of man.... [H]e can achieve nothing without his fellow man” (*EC*, 83).

Feuerbach’s concern with human “species-nature” was at this juncture expressly this-worldly and carried the signatures of an ethical stance calling for equality, solidarity, and the fellowship of community. Yet to New England reviewers, this position was unacceptable on numerous counts. For Transcendentalist reviewers like Parker, Feuerbach’s atheism did not become a “principle of practical ethics” that could be applied to human behavior. “If a man starts with the idea that there is a body and no soul, an earth without a heaven, and a world without a God, that idea needs must become a principle of practice, and as such, it will,” Parker was convinced “have a quite powerful effect on man’s active character” (2:87). But in Feuerbach Parker saw no such effect. Feuerbach did not “carry ... real speculative atheism [out] into life” (2:90). For the Congregationalist divine Samuel Harris, on the other hand, Feuerbach did develop a practical ethics but one completely severed from faith. In Harris’s view, “all virtue ... not springing from faith, [is] abnormal and therefore essentially and radically wrong.” And this precisely was the distinguishing characteristic of the “German infidel,” who reduced Christianity to a moral message

advocating “human sufficiency and virtue.” Practical ethics and belief thus stood apart. Virtue had been substituted for faith.<sup>75</sup> To make matters worse, Feuerbach not only rendered spiritual religion superfluous for human progress and development, he also established human self-sufficiency by grounding ethics in the reality of the “species.” What New England readers like Allen wanted and did not find in Feuerbach but rather in Comte was an ethics rooted in the concrete situation of individual man, an ethics applicable to human behavior. Feuerbach, a common front of reviewers from Harris to Allen deplored, did not concretize man; with his concept of human “essence” he simply omitted the reality of the individual.

## V

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed a growing profusion of opposition to Feuerbach’s concept of abstract man. In 1859, the later Transcendentalist Frothingham, who was to become the first president of the Free Religious Association in 1867, contributed to the *Christian Examiner* a review article that referenced one source for this trend of criticism: Max Stirner’s anarchist classic *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (*The Ego and His Own*, 1844).<sup>76</sup> Stirner proposed a radical individualism in which man was asserted to be unique and a law unto himself. The only reality, Stirner contended, is the independent ego. Hence all approaches based on such abstractions as “species” or “essence” are irrational, deceptive illusions. Der “Einzige” thus asserts an egoism that acknowledges only the claims of the self: “My concern is neither the divine nor the human ... but solely what is *mine*.... Nothing is more to me than myself!”<sup>77</sup> This extreme expression of individualism was the starting point for Stirner’s onslaught on *The Essence of Christianity*, which reiterated the charge that Feuerbach dissolved man into an unreal abstraction. In

<sup>75</sup> Harris, “The Demands of Infidelity Satisfied by Christianity,” 284, 285.

<sup>76</sup> Octavius B. Frothingham, “Imagination in Theology,” *Christian Examiner* 66 (1859) 47–78; quotations from this essay appear parenthetically. Frothingham reviews Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Ueber das Wesen des Christenthums in Beziehung auf den Einzigen und sein Eigentum* (1845). This work was Feuerbach’s public response to Max Stirner. In 1846, it appeared in the first volume of Feuerbach’s own edition of his *Sämtliche Werke*. On publication history, see Lawrence S. Stepelevich, “Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978): 459; and Johnston, *Between Transcendence and Nihilism*, 143.

<sup>77</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (Sun City: Western Word Press, 1982), 5.

viewing man as universalized essence, Stirner contended, he created an idol just as unreal and abstract as God, and in this respect, his atheism was actually a concealed religion. The object of faith merely changed from a transcendent God to a transcendent “species.”<sup>78</sup>

Taking up Stirner’s rejection of universal abstractions, Frothingham judged that Feuerbach’s conception of the species as real being was purely contemplative. Feuerbach abstracted human essence from the reality of individual life, situating it in “imagination” rather than “reason.” In Frothingham’s reading, Feuerbach presented imagination as an organ of religion. Religion comes from the rule of the imagination, from an urgent imaginative need in man to posit some perfect being. Moreover, imagination is the tool of consciousness that “addresses sense and feeling” and “transforms” feeling into the form of “symbols” and “emblems,” that is, concrete sensory representations (48). By this means man forms objects of consciousness and objectifies his “species”-nature. Religious imagination, however, is prone to misguided objectification because man does not realize that the objectifications he has projected as divine other are in fact his “own perfections.” Herein lies the tragedy of religious imagination. It ignores that “God is only a reflected image of man” and separates God from man (50).

Frothingham could not agree. For Feuerbach, God was a function of the imagination, an illusory being. For Frothingham, by contrast, it was “not imagination that conjures up the phantom of Living Deity”; rather, “the belief in a personal God comes to [man] honestly through the ... reason” (51). In contending that “the consciousness of God is the mind’s consciousness of its own perfections,” Feuerbach simply “confound[ed] the function of reason with that of the imagination” (50). For Feuerbach, “imagination,” as the instrument that “conjures up” God, was not bound by either reality or truth, but for Frothingham, God, “though peculiarly outlined to every soul,” had a “real existence apart from the mind of man” (51, 50). As a Free Religionist, Frothingham would boldly place himself beyond the “boundary of Scripture and even of Christianity.”<sup>79</sup> Yet on the crucial question of whether God has “objective existence” or is merely “an illusive show of being as the creation of our fancy,” the professed radical chose to cling to traditional answers and remained committed to the “real and rational” (51, 49). Like Parker, he withdrew from the intuitionist road to inductive argu-

<sup>78</sup> Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> Frothingham, *Boston Unitarianism*, 267.

ments and sought to confirm and verify those “facts of consciousness, which constrain us to believe in the actual existence of an eternal world ... and a real God” (51).

The contrast between Frothingham and Feuerbach was even more glaring on another front. For Feuerbach, Frothingham observed, the worship of God in the religious imagination equaled the worship of “the human intelligence [as] the sole *ens realissimum*,” thus reducing God to man’s outspoken selfhood, “man’s intelligence personified.” (50). This very reduction, Frothingham charged, made *The Essence of Christianity* a “cruel and demolishing book” (48). But there was a further point. With Feuerbach, the imagination provided the stimulus to conscious fabrication, to “fiction” and intentional deceit “created by man’s selfish wishes” (55). And here again, Frothingham noted, the *Essence* taught a purely “demolishing” lesson, missing the point of the “artistic” dimension of Christianity (59). Frothingham found forceful corroboration for this point when he translated Ernest Renan’s *Studies of Religious History and Criticism* (1864). In his chapter on “M. Feuerbach and the New Hegelian School,” Renan observed that Feuerbach’s “error lies almost always in his aesthetic judgements.” His literal approach, “pronounced on ... with a determination to find everything Christian ugly, atrocious, or ridiculous,” distorted “Christian aesthetics.”<sup>80</sup> For both Frothingham and Renan, it was precisely the aesthetic appreciation of the “essence” of Christianity that provided a way “back to the hearth of holy life.” Thus there emerged a new line of defense against Feuerbach’s atheism, one that also took into account the aesthetic faculty and asked man to “cultivate the worship of beauty and truth.”<sup>81</sup>

This shift from religious philosophy to “aesthetic judgements” signaled a subtle transposition of values that cleared the way for Feuerbach’s projection theory. Reviewing Renan’s essay on Feuerbach in the *Christian Examiner* of 1864, the Unitarian Charles Henry Brigham could not help but notice “in this piece a painful undertone of doubt, a half-sympathy with the German atheist, which seems restrained by something else than faith.”<sup>82</sup> “Something else” did indeed lurk here. The belief in God’s existence was no longer a matter of objective knowledge to be attained via speculative theology and philosophy but of emotional

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<sup>80</sup> Renan, *Studies of Religious History and Criticism*, 333, 332.

<sup>81</sup> Renan, *Studies of Religious History and Criticism*, 340.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Henry Brigham, “Renan’s Critical Essays,” *Christian Examiner* 77 (1864):



and aesthetic responses, and thus it gradually became an index of the “human view.” By 1880, this displacement of theology and philosophy had become an established fact. “The object of our adoration,” “the thought of a divine existence ... remains,” Joseph Henry Allen observed, “but only to give lift to imagination ..., its value is less speculative than emotional.”<sup>83</sup> In this relocation of “divine existence” into human imagination, God was conceived in the mode of Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*, as an idealized image of man.

Renan’s essay on Feuerbach bore the imprint of the new atheism in yet another respect. As Brigham noticed, Renan’s aesthetic defense of religious belief did succeed in finding a “use for God,” but in the process virtually abandoned a principal tenet of Unitarian Christianity. That Renan had “use for God” only as “the category of the ideal” signaled to Brigham an irretrievable “loss of personality.”<sup>84</sup> In the debate over the “religion of Humanity” among those radicals who emerged as Free Religionists and humanists within the left-wing Unitarian-Transcendentalist tradition, this loss was played out with special poignancy. By the 1870s, many of the later Transcendentalists had let go of Frothingham’s commitment to the “belief in a personal God.” “[T]he worship of personages,” Samuel Johnson thus wrote in 1868, “must give way to the worship of principles—the centrality of an Individual to the centrality of Ideas.”<sup>85</sup> This form of worship came with a characteristic shift away from the “object of adoration.” “God is not an object,” Johnson reiterated, “but an experience.”<sup>86</sup> But once God was no longer described as an “object” but rather as a “name for [man’s] most exalted feelings,” it was only a small step to abandon God as the “object of adoration” altogether and turn him into an “image ... in the soul of man.”<sup>87</sup> In this humanizing context, Cyrus Bartol, another professed radical of the later Transcendentalists, was prepared to conceive religion as a projection. “Here is the real,” Bartol claimed in *Radical Prob-*

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<sup>83</sup> Joseph Henry Allen, “The Religion of Humanity,” *Unitarian Review* 14 (1880): 57. See also Charles D. Cashdollar, “European Positivism and the American Unitarians,” *Church History* 45 (1976): 506.

<sup>84</sup> Brigham, “Renan’s Critical Essays”, 95.

<sup>85</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Worship of Jesus* (Boston: Spencer, 1868), 73; quoted in Lyttle, *Studies in Religion in Early American Literature*, 107.

<sup>86</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lectures, Essays, and Sermons, with a Memoir by Samuel Longfellow* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin 1883), 373; quoted in Lyttle, *Studies in Religion in Early American Literature*, 107.

<sup>87</sup> Octavius B. Frothingham, *Recollections and Impressions* (New York: G. Putnam, 1891), 296; Bartol, *Radical Problems*, 112.

*lems* (1872), “in your mind. You worship no outward object, but your thought. [God] is the thought of your thought.”<sup>88</sup> Emerson’s God “out of me,” still preserved in *Nature*, was thus submerged into a manifestation of the thought process of man. Feuerbachian atheism had become a ready option for religious radicals.

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<sup>88</sup> Bartol, *Radical Problems*, 55. See also William R. Hutchison, “To Heaven in a Swing: The Transcendentalism of Cyrus Bartol,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 283–284.

## CHAPTER SIX

### FROM IDEALISM TO ATHEISM: THEODORE PARKER AND THE PROJECTION THEORY OF RELIGION

When George Eliot published her translation of Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, she was "entirely without hope.... The press," she expected, "will do nothing but abuse or ridicule it"<sup>1</sup> There was indeed little promising reaction to Feuerbach's book. From the outset, both liberal and orthodox camps castigated the book as yet another outcome of blank atheism.<sup>2</sup> Yet on the whole, the furor Feuerbach caused on his native ground was not met with comparable publicity in England. There, the "lady translator" did not receive any financial reward or public recognition for her skilled work and was supposed to be just as impious as the German "infidel." Eliot herself, however, did not think of Feuerbach as an atheist. On the contrary, she was impressed by his humanitarian morality and confessed to Sara Hennell: "With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree."<sup>3</sup> New England readers of Eliot's translation did not. When Emerson encountered Feuerbach in Stallo's *General Principles*, he placed him unequivocally in the "modern" era, an era distinguished by the "impossibility of Christianity" (*JMN*, 11:201). In this context the "spiritual skepticism" Ripley marked in Feuerbach's atheistic thought embodied a shift away from Christianity that repelled all members of the New England divinity, from Congregationalist Tiffany to Transcendentalist Ripley, because of its affiliation with materialism and its categorical, "absolute denial of any and all forms of God."<sup>4</sup>

And yet, as the example of Theodore Parker shows, Feuerbach could be of use. German exiles like Emmanuel V. Scherb had already alerted Parker to the extensive influence of Feuerbachian atheism long before

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<sup>1</sup> *The George Eliot Letters*, 2:152.

<sup>2</sup> See Martineau, "Contemporary Literature, Theology and Philosophy," 559. Also see *The George Eliot Letters*, 2:137.

<sup>3</sup> *The George Eliot Letters*, 2:153

<sup>4</sup> Frothingham, *Ripley*, 229; Theodore Parker, "Of Speculative Atheism, Regarded as a Theory of the Universe," in *Works*, 2:62.

Eliot's translation made *The Essence of Christianity* available in English. In December 1852, Parker described in his journal the atheist's "dreadful scheme:—a Body without a soul, an Earth without a Heaven, a Universe without a God."<sup>5</sup> Parker's sermons on *Theism, Atheism and The Popular Theology*, first published in 1853, show that he found important challenges and resources in this "scheme." Parker used Feuerbach's anti-theological polemics as a welcome weapon to attack the anthropomorphic deity of the "popular theology" of his time. If the church preached a God set up by formal proof, then, Parker judged, atheism was in order. Atheists, Parker emphasized, are often made such by oppressive "ecclesiastical" doctrines, and "[a]ll the way from Greek Epicurus to German Feuerbach, it is the follies taught in the name of God that have driven men to atheism" (4:355, 354).

Parker also put Feuerbach's position to work for his concept of "absolute religion." Parker set this concept against theological Christianity, arguing that absolute religion is not based on external authority, whether ecclesiastical or biblical, but rather "belongs to man's nature." It is the desire to be in "harmony" with the "infinitely perfect God ... immanent in the world of matter and in the world of spirit." In this cornerstone of Parker's religious teaching a theological reorientation showed that turned God into a God "within" (13:336, 331–332, 330). This internalization of the religious consciousness cohered with several aspects of Feuerbach's religious humanism. The rejection of metaphysicalized theology and the emphasis on religious needs and aspirations were quite congenial to a "new school" prophet who sought to imbed religion in human nature. In terms similar to Feuerbach's critique of religion, Parker argued that religion sprang from natural desires, a "feeling of need, of want" (1:7). But Parker set up strong defenses against a reduction of religion to mere projection. Feuerbach's atheism, George Willis Cooke observed in his comments on *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, "interprets all religious beliefs as subjective in their nature, having no corresponding objective reality; in a word, as the expression of the desires of man" (4:469 n. 5). For Parker, this position amounted to "utter irreligion," to the "denial of the actuality of any

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore Parker, Journal O, 153–154 (1 December 1852), Andover–Harvard Theological Library. I am grateful to Dean Grodzins for bringing this journal entry to my attention. On Scherb, see Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 172, 199. On Parker's reception of Feuerbach, see Elisabeth Hurth "From Idealism to Atheism: Theodore Parker and Ludwig Feuerbach," *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* 26 (1999): 18–46.

possible idea of God” (4:354, 2:88). Against this form of atheism, Parker firmly adhered to a basis for religious truth that answered to the reality of a spiritual realm. According to Parker, the “religious consciousness implic[d] its object.” This object was not a product of man, but rather, Parker insisted, distinct from and “independent” of man (1:9).

At this juncture, Parker’s reception of Feuerbach has a valuable contribution to make. It provides a further demonstration of the commonality between the so-called “old” and “new school” camps of New England divinity. Contrary to charges of godlessness, the “new school” apostle Parker followed a marked general consensus among New England divines that precluded the interpretation of religion as illusory projection and affirmed instead the objective reference of the religious consciousness. When it came to objective religious belief, Parker, the alleged radical, was indistinguishable from his “old school” intellectual peers and at one with the strong phalanx of opposition against the projection theory of religion.

In May 1854, two months before Eliot’s translation of *The Essence of Christianity* was published, Parker wrote to the German religious dissenter Johannes Ronge, who had established a church in London: “I am glad to find that you do not follow the lead of Feuerbach or of his coadjutors.” Feuerbach was, Parker judged, the “Coryphaeus” of “atheistic men whose creed is ... ‘There is no God, Feuerbach is his prophet, a body but no soul; a here but no hereafter; a world and no God.’” (4:469 n. 5). But although Parker explicitly rejected the nihilistic underpinnings of Feuerbach’s position as destructive, his own concept of religion was suspected to border on Feuerbachian atheism. In Ripley’s view, Parker’s “absolute religion” came “dangerously close to an anthropological account of Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> Orestes Brownson went even further charging that Parker’s “theology became simply anthropology” and “reduc[ed] all religion to ... atheism.”<sup>7</sup>

This criticism was quite different from the charges of “infidelity” that Parker had to face after preaching his notorious sermon on *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*. Those who labelled Parker an “infidel” and “unbeliever” read Parker’s attack on the “transient” forms of Chris-

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Crowe, *George Ripley: Transcendentalist and Utopian Socialist* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1967) 105.

<sup>7</sup> Orestes A. Brownson, *The Convert*, in *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, 5:152, 153. Unless otherwise noted, future references to this edition will be cited parenthetically, by volume and page number.

tianity as a denial of the principle that religious truth was an index of the evidentiary appeal of facts, in particular of miraculous evidence. But for Ripley and above all for Brownson, Parker was guilty of a very different kind of “infidelity,” one which submerged the “object of worship” and thus evinced its completely “anti-religious” signature (5:153, 151). For Brownson, there was a gulf fixed between Parker’s anthropological “scheme of theology” and Christian faith (7:269). This gulf not only pertained, as R.W. Lewis indicated in *The American Adam* (1955), to the opposition between Brownson’s supernaturalism and Parker’s absolute separation of religion and history.<sup>8</sup> The gulf was much deeper and wider than that. Parker’s anthropological scheme questioned the object of faith itself and thus resulted in an atheistic interpretation of religion that Brownson diagnosed as the outcome of “pure nullism” and “psychologism” (3:40, 2:482).

In this context, Parker’s reception of Feuerbach takes on added value and sheds light on a critique of Transcendentalism that goes beyond the “new school’s” rejection of historical Christianity and focuses more on its threat to religion in general. Parker’s reception of Feuerbach also clarifies in a novel way several important aspects of the atheist argument that undergirded the rise of Transcendentalism. Feuerbach’s atheism eliminated the objective reference of religion and came to stand for a new anthropocentricity that dissolved the divine in man. This sort of atheism, however, was reached independently in Transcendentalist thought on the basis of an extreme subjective idealism that critics associated with Emerson’s ecstatic vision. That Transcendental idealism already latently harbored Feuerbach’s anthropotheism becomes also evident in the discussions about the “atheistical” tendencies underlying Parker’s concept of “absolute religion” (13:324–325). As in the case of Emerson, a recurrent theme of the charges against Parker was that idealism here became vulnerable to “soul-worship.”<sup>9</sup> Anticipating the arguments orthodox critics leveled against Feuerbach, Brownson and the Broad Church men Frederic Henry Hedge and James Freeman Clarke charged that Parker advocated a self-worship that reduced God to a function of the human mind. The Transcendental idealist thus seemed prone to an anthropotheistic viewpoint in which man became

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<sup>8</sup> See R.W. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 184, 188–189.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Maynard, *Orestes Brownson: Yankee, Radical, Catholic* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 90.

his own object of thought. In Feuerbach's atheistic humanism the necessary outcome of this anthropotheism came to be fore.

Insofar as Parker, the prophet of "absolute religion," was made a part of the anthropocentric guild, the controversy about his "atheistical" tendencies is largely consistent with the charges Feuerbach had to face. The discussion, in the 1840s and '50s, of Parker's alleged latent atheism is part of an intellectual dialogue that began much earlier and that culminated, according to the great 20th-century theologian Karl Barth, in theology becoming a kind of anthropology. For Barth, the Feuerbachian position had haunted the theological scene "ever since Protestantism itself, and especially Luther, emphatically shifted the interest from what God is in himself to what God is for man." Feuerbach's anthropocentric position, Barth maintained, demonstrated poignantly that those who defined religion through "determination[s] of human self-consciousness" were bound to be led to an "apotheosis of man." According to Barth, all schools of thought starting from this perspective suffered from one serious defect: They endorsed a concept of religion and theology based on man's subjective states. Feuerbach's "god is man" appeared to Barth as the "conclusion" of this theological process of grounding theology in an analysis of human experience—a "conclusion" which, according to Barth, continued to be "a thorn in the flesh of modern theology."<sup>10</sup>

This "conclusion" underlay the charge of "atheism" that followed Parker throughout his career as a minister, preacher and scholar, even though Parker himself utterly rejected this charge. The Feuerbachian conclusion here became a "thorn in the flesh" that troubled in particular the critics of the extreme forms of Transcendentalism. Those who stepped outside the intuitionist approach, like the converted Brownson, acutely sensed that the Transcendentalist elevation of self-reliant man was itself susceptible to the "inversion" of "heaven and earth." And just as Barth saw nineteenth-century liberal theology "run right into the arms" of atheistic humanism, so conservative Transcendentalists saw this danger ahead of them. Feuerbach's atheism, as Barth interpreted it, was the natural outcome of a theological trend whose focus on "self-sufficient humanity" marked the Achilles heel of modern theology.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, "Introductory Essay," in Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, XIX, XX, XXI, XXIV. For a critique of Barth's historical locating of Feuerbach, see John Glasse, "Barth on Feuerbach," *Harvard Theological Review* 57 (1964), 89–96.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, "Introductory Essay," XXII, XXI, XX.

Similarly, the critics of Transcendentalism sensed that the extreme idealism of the so-called Parkerites would lead the “new school” down to the path of an anthropotheism that made atheism inevitable. From idealism it was only a short step to atheism.

## I

According to Samuel Osgood, Feuerbach’s “utter atheism” marked a culmination in the atheistic speculations by German theorists.<sup>12</sup> In Feuerbach’s approach to the “essence” of Christianity, a new form of atheism showed that eclipsed the theistic object altogether. As regards the impact of this atheistic humanism on New England soil, there soon evolved a narrative line that approached Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* vis-à-vis the theological threat posed by Strauss’s notorious *Leben Jesu*. In this reading, Feuerbach was identified as a “co-laborer” of Strauss and his theory of the illusory origin of religion was paralleled with the historico-critical question raised by Strauss’s dissolution of the Gospel accounts into “myths.”<sup>13</sup>

Similar readings were legion in the literature of the nineteenth century, and not just in New England, as is indicated by the interpretations of James Martineau and Ernest Renan, who persisted in viewing Feuerbach primarily in terms of Strauss’s left-wing Hegelianism. Thus Renan insisted that the “criticism of the skies” launched by the “new Hegelian school” under Strauss against “anything transcendental” reached its most powerful expression in Feuerbach.<sup>14</sup> This interpretation, all too prevalent in the criticism of the period, also persists in modern criticism. A prominent example of this interpretative model, Mark Y. Hanley’s *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth* (1994), establishes a continuity between Strauss’s myth criticism and Feuerbach’s shift from theology to anthropology. While Strauss read the Gospel stories as “myths” created by the pious imagination of the early church, Feuerbach pushed this demythologization to the point of reducing religion to a projection of man’s fears and aspirations. According to Hanley, this “antireligious sentiment” fed into a politically-centered ethical rational-

<sup>12</sup> Osgood, “Modern Ecclesiastical History,” 429.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, “Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*,” 224.

<sup>14</sup> Renan, *Studies of Religious History and Criticism*, 339.



ism that “could draw fire from its anti-orthodox roots by claiming the mantle of American liberty as its own.”<sup>15</sup>

Parker’s reading of Feuerbach, by contrast, suggests another line of argument. Parker assigned Feuerbach a special place in the spectrum of atheist positions and associated him with “speculative” rather than politically motivated atheism.<sup>16</sup> This “speculative atheism” was perceived to be far more destructive than the supposed atheism of Strauss. Osgood, in describing modern ecclesiastical history, observed that compared to Feuerbach, Strauss appeared almost outmoded: “[T]he men on the left have gone so far as to throw Strauss quite into the shade, as a tame conservative.”<sup>17</sup> The *Life of Jesus* seemed harmless in comparison to the new atheism of *The Essence of Christianity* and the author of this new atheism was not to be mistaken for another Strauss.

Parker could not agree more. Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*, Parker observed, presented an attempt to put Christianity on a more solid basis both historically and dogmatically and thus secured the philosophical truth of Christian faith. Although Strauss set out to uncover the Gospel accounts as “spurious” and “unauthentic,” he left the “essence” of Christianity unassailed and granted that there is an objective core underlying religious statements.<sup>18</sup> But the “speculative atheist” Feuerbach, Parker judged, questioned this very objective core. By conceiving God as a function or “dream” of the human mind, Feuerbach moved beyond the historical question at issue in Strauss’s alleged atheism (2:80). Feuerbach started with the psychological basis of religion and maintained that in religious worship man had to do with himself only and not with a supernatural object of adoration. For the speculative atheist, Parker observed, “[t]here is no God, all possible ideas thereof lack actuality” (2:152). As Parker acutely realized, this atheism involved much more than a dismantling of “historical faith,” for the

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<sup>15</sup> Hanley, *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth*, 112, 113. For further examples of this trend in scholarship, see Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century* 2 vols. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1972, 1985) 1:170–183; Herbert Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America, 1800–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 59; and Irving Howe, *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 10–11.

<sup>16</sup> Theodore Parker, “Of Speculative Atheism, Regarded as a Theory of the Universe,” in *Works*, 2:62. Also see Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography*, 2:365.

<sup>17</sup> Osgood, “Modern Ecclesiastical History,” 429.

<sup>18</sup> Parker, “review of *Das Leben Jesu*,” 285, 309.

speculative atheist questioned not only the historical truth of Christian dogma but undermined religion “as a whole” (2:99).<sup>19</sup>

In his sermons on *Theism, Atheism and the Popular Theology*, Parker discusses in detail the “effects” of Feuerbach’s projection theory of religion (2:66). Parker classes Feuerbach with the positivist Auguste Comte in a special atheistic camp completely removed from spiritual religion. Parker expands this camp to include other prominent thinkers suspected of denying God’s existence—Epikur, Celsus, Pietro Pomponatius, and George Sand. What distinguished an atheist like Feuerbach was, according to Parker, his categorical “denial of ... all forms of God.” Feuerbach thus evinced himself as a representative of “real speculative atheism” that denies the “*genus* God, ... the actuality of all possible ideas of God” (2:62, 64, 65).

In Parker’s view, speculative atheism deals a blow to all previous conceptions of God. It rejects the religious concept of God as an independent being and expressly denies spiritual transcendence. On this point, Parker has “his atheist” speak directly: “I am a philosopher, ... I have been up to the sky and there is no heaven.... I have been through the universe, and there is no God. God is a whim of men” (2:74). Man, then, does not participate in a divine truth. There is no “faculty” available to man which would enable him to obtain a transcendent perspective on the world. Transcendence presents only an immanent process of human experience. For the “real speculative atheist,” Parker observes, there is nothing above and beyond man and, therefore, no “spiritual order.” “[T]here are only finite things,—each self-originated, self-sustained, self-directed,—and no more” (2:80, 65).

In the atheistic framework all authority above man was asserted to be a “fancy,” a self-conception of human nature itself. In his references to “God,” man is not dealing with a transcendent objective reality. For the atheist, Parker observes, “God is not a fact of the universe.” All belief in him is an illusion, a “dream.” “Man has a notion of God, as of a ghost, or devil; but it is a pure subjective fancy” (2:74, 62). God, then, is nothing but the product of subjective wants—“something which [man] has spun out of his brain.” God *is* only in man’s fancies, “for there is nothing in the universe to correspond thereto. Man has an idea of God, but the universe has no fact of God” (2:62).

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<sup>19</sup> Parker, “review of *Das Leben Jesu*,” 310.

Parker clearly spelled out the consequences of these ideas. The speculative atheist, he observed, torpedoes the meaning of religion itself. He denies not only the “quality of God under all names” but also postulates that religion is essentially self-referential. God is a pseudo-realization, a “mere whimsey of men” (2:62, 88). This theory of religious delusion, Parker judged, ultimately “negat[es] religion as a whole.” Religion serves “only the cold, thin atmosphere of fancy” and degenerates into “empty” circular worship (2:99, 83, 82). There cannot be a single being beyond human “essence.” Man is self-sufficient, hence all worship is self-worship and the only belief, atheism.

In his rebuttal of speculative atheism, Parker appeals to a “foundation” designed to protect religion from the charge of illusory projection. Parker presents the “foundation of religion ... [as] deep within” man. Religion in this sense is “natural to man”; it is an “instinct,” an impulse of human nature that provides evidence of the existence of God. This evidence appeals to something expressly precluded in the atheist’s system, namely an intuitive mode of perception that enables man to apprehend a larger “spiritual providence” (2:85, 86, 80). There are, Parker was convinced, “spiritual faculties” in the soul that make “man turn to God” (2:86). The “evidence of God has been ploughed into nature”; it is “deeply woven into the texture of the human soul” (2:85). Using the terms of Schleiermacher’s theology of religious experience, Parker thus established a correspondence between the “essence” of Christianity and the “religious sentiment” that was not to be resolved into a “whim.” Religion, Parker averred with Schleiermacher, is not something to be “known” or “made”; rather, it is a feeling of absolute dependence upon God. Religion thus understood yields the “true” idea of God and provides certainty.

From this perspective, the existence of God is a given, founded “on the spontaneous teachings of the religious sentiment” (2:170). The innate religious sentiment makes transcendent reality accessible to man. In his *Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, Parker did not offer stringent criteria for identifying this realm “beyond,” but he was convinced that it existed. The “substance” of religion is “permanent” in man and validated, Parker explained, by the “connection between the divine and human life” (1:IX; 4:206). Religion, then, is not a dream or human whimsy. There is a spiritual reality of religious truth grounded in “enduring” “facts” of “consciousness.” Religion “can never fail”; it “is ever the same, and its years shall have no end” (1:11, 435).

## II

In 1852, Ripley belittled Feuerbach's "atheistical theory" as a characteristic of system-lovers.<sup>20</sup> In Ripley's view, "the reign of authoritative dogmatic systems ha[d] never been firmly established over the mind of [the American] nation: every exclusive faith ... called forth a host of dissent."<sup>21</sup> What Feuerbach offered came, according to Ripley, unmistakably from the same "dogmatic" mold. The abstract systematician Feuerbach therefore seemed to Ripley completely estranged from the "American mind." He was simply too "dogmatic in his atheism."<sup>22</sup> Parker, however, was ready to enlist the chief "prophet" of atheism into his own cause. Parker sought to dispose of the supernatural foundation of religion by appealing to a "permanent" religious sentiment in man for which Feuerbach's account of the origin of religion offered a helpful springboard. Religion, Parker was convinced, emerges from "instinctive desires" and emotional needs. Therefore it "must agree with ... natural sentiments" and not with doctrinal notions (2:70, 151). Grounded in man's spiritual wants, religion is independent of all external authority, the "transient" forms and doctrines of Christianity. The "transient" forms embodied in doctrinal and ecclesiastical worship "hinder ... religious development" and are incompatible with an internalized religion that "agrees" with "spontaneous intuitions of the true, ... the holy" (13:322; 2:151).

At this juncture, Feuerbach spoke to Parker in just the antidogmatic tone that served Parker's own purposes. For Feuerbach, the predicates attributed to God are derived from man's own nature. Feuerbach in this way presents a religion *of* man and traces its origin and function back to human "wishes of the heart." Religious beliefs stem from innate human needs and care. Religion is therefore located in "feeling" rather than in thought. The truth of religious facts is constituted not by the application of dogmatic principles but by their correspondence with man's desires and "imagination" (*EC*, 140). This experiential approach to religion was particularly congenial to Parker, a disciple of "newness" who attacked Unitarian orthodoxy as emotionally cold and rejected a religion he saw as stifled with abstract creeds and forms. Religion was

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<sup>20</sup> Frothingham, *Ripley*, 229.

<sup>21</sup> George Ripley, ed., *Specimens of Foreign Literature*, 14 vols. (Boston: Hilliard, Gray 1838-1841; Boston: James Munroe, 1842), 1:29, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Ripley, "General Principles," 110; Frothingham, *Ripley*, 229.

to Feuerbach what Parker thought it had really been all along, namely a spontaneous affair of the heart. The chief subject of Feuerbach's critique of religion, theological illusion, was irreconcilable with Parker's spiritual philosophy. But what appealed to him was Feuerbach's psychogenetic interest in religion and his attempt to approach religious truth anthropologically. Religion thus emerged as a gratification of human emotions and had a distinctly involuntary and unconscious signature. On this point, Parker expressly eulogized Feuerbach for "confess[ing] to the natural religious emotions" and for "giv[ing] them sure place in all human affairs" (14:181).

Feuerbach's experiential view of religion also lent itself to Parker's battle against the so-called "popular theology" of Christendom and its distortion of the religion of the heart. Prior to Feuerbach, Parker's reviews of German studies had distinguished two overriding approaches in the theological domain: the "historico-critical" and the "speculative."<sup>23</sup> Feuerbach's work, however, could not be classed with either approach, for it translated theology into a secular discipline—anthropology. If religion proved to be nothing but wish-fulfillment, then theology was properly concerned only with concrete embodied human consciousness. The study of man thus replaced the study of God. From the perspective of anthropology, theology, the religion of the head, positing God as wholly other, was incompatible with the religion of the heart, which demanded a "human" God. In this opposition, theology appeared as an ill-fated attempt to establish God as a separate being and transform human attributes into metaphysical entities.

This rejection of the false notion of God created by theology was largely consistent with Parker's critique of the popular theology. In his polemics against this theology, Parker presents Feuerbach's atheism as a protest against the "errors" and "defects" of an oppressive ecclesiastical religion (2:135). In Parker's estimation, "[t]he atheist has abandoned religion because it is painted in such a form that it seems worse than atheism. The Church taught him his denial, and it ought to baptize him, and not blaspheme him" (2:167). For Parker, "atheism" in this context did not signal mere disbelief. It was not simply barren and destructive but rather "taught in the name of philosophy, in the name of man" (2:154). In this way, Feuerbach's atheism could come to pose a legitimate response to a "tormenting" religion that "revolts the dearest

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<sup>23</sup> See Allen, "Review of Current Literature," 437.

instincts of human nature” (2:154, 163). In a thanksgiving sermon, Parker asserted that the “follies” committed for the sake of religion far outweighed the deficiencies of “atheism”: “All the attacks made on religion itself by men of science, from Celsus to Feuerbach, have not done so much to bring religion into contempt as a single persecution for witchcraft, or a Bartholomew massacre made in the name of God.”<sup>24</sup>

In Parker’s sermons on the “Popular Theology of Christendom,” there is further evidence that he found in Feuerbach’s atheism a useful weapon in his fight against “ecclesiastical” theology. Parker here again plays atheism off against the popular theology; atheism appears as a legitimate reaction to a theology perpetuating the morbidities of Calvinism. “I think,” Parker reiterates in provocative terms, “Calvin and Edwards have driven more men from religion than all the speculative ‘atheists’ have ever done from Pomponatius to Feuerbach” (2:167). Parker directs his invectives against a repressive theological system centered around an arbitrary and essentially incomprehensible God. This God, forever hidden in a realm of incomprehensible mystery, makes man the “veriest wretch in creation.” God’s absolute sovereignty abases man to the point of fatalistic dependence. “God exploits [sic] the human race” (2:150). He is an “angry God, jealous, capricious, selfish, and revengeful,” who predestines some of his creatures to salvation and others to damnation (2:159). This “grim” God is for Parker the “worst foe to men” and uses helpless creatures to accomplish his objectives (2:163, 150). Human agency and free will are of no avail. The uncertainty and determinism of human life “makes man a worm: religion a torment to all but ten in a million” (2:188).

In the popular theology’s “scheme of the universe” God predetermines everything; he wills not only damnation but also sin itself (2:135). For Parker, this notion of divine omnipotence and providence leads to a paralyzing faith. Man is at the mercy of an “angry,” “malignant” God dealing vindictively with him in his arbitrary decrees (2:156). Faith is merely passive, witnessing what God has already done in Christ. Christ’s sacrifice—“an atoning sacrifice to appease imaginary wrath”—marks man’s remoteness from God, the infinite chasm between man, the “tormented,” and God, the “tormentor” (2:188, 154). At this point in his polemics against the popular theology, Parker calls Feuerbach back to the front line. For Parker, “[a]theism, even annihilation of the

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<sup>24</sup> Theodore Parker; quoted in Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England*, 316–317.

soul, would be a relief from such a Deity as that; from such an end” (2:154). Atheism is the lesser of two evils. “[W]hich is the worst,” Parker asks rhetorically, “to believe that there is no God who is Mind, Cause, and Providence of this universe...; or to believe there is a God who is almighty, yet omnipotently malignant, who consciously aims the forces of the universe at the wretched head of his own child?” (2:151) Atheism, Parker reiterates, is not just “irreligion.” “There is much excuse for the speculative atheist in his denial” of the existence of God (2:163). Writing to Johannes Ronge in May 1854, Parker explicitly applied this “excuse” to Feuerbach and his disciples. “There are some Germans who accept him as their Coryphaeus.... They are much to be pitied—for the superstition of the church, with despotism of the state, has forced their noble natures into this sad conclusion” (4:469 n. 5).

In his criticism of Jonathan Edwards’s “dark” Calvinism, Parker puts this “conclusion” to use again. Parker castigates Edwards as the hell-fire preacher responsible for the promulgation of a horrifying “scheme of theology” (2:143). His Calvinism, Parker charges, relentlessly justifies God’s punishment of man. Even worse, Edwards insists that man’s sinful inclination acted as a catalyst of the sinister aspects of God. Edwards’s God, Parker observes, traps man. All man wills and does stands under the signs of sin. Sin is inherent in the human condition and therefore inevitable. Man is “prone to wickedness” and so corrupted that he cannot be a correlate of God (2:142). He stands “totally depraved” before the “great jailer and hangman and tormentor of the universe.” Edwards’s system, Parker judges, thus affirms the cruel “tyrant” of Calvinist theology, the “divine exploiterer of the race” who “has the power to bless men, and prefers to curse them” (2:168, 169).

Parker’s anti-Calvinist rationale issues once more in a positive appreciation of atheism. “The atheist is right in denying the existence of an angry and jealous God” (2:164). The repulsive doctrines of depravity, vicarious atonement, and predestination are far more horrifying than the threat of atheism. For Parker, this threat is not merely negative per se. On the contrary, at the heart of atheism is a positive intent: To deny “a portion of the popular Godhead” is to be “constructively an atheist,” and in this respect the atheist “has been faithful to himself” (2:62, 152). In similar terms, Parker presents Feuerbach not as an impious heretic or a representative of “*Germanic* atheism,” as Parker’s audience may have assumed, but as a “faithful” critic of a corrupt religious system (14:180). The atheist Feuerbach, Parker emphasizes in his sermon

on “The Consequences of an Immoral Principle and False Idea of Life” (1854), is without God, but he is not without religion. Feuerbach “called himself an atheist; and then is not so, in heart, only in head; it is the blood of pious humanity which runs in his nation’s vein” (14:180). In fact, it even seemed to Parker that the speculative atheist was “much higher in [his] moral and religious growth” than the popular theologians (2:63).

When it came to the nihilistic consequences of pure speculative atheism, Parker made his opinion unmistakably clear. Speculative atheism, he judged, is “abhorrent” to man’s spiritual nature (2:91). “The speculative atheism of Feuerbach [distorts] Deity into the blind universe working from no love as motive, ... for no purpose as ultimate end” (14:180). And yet, for all that, Parker respected the man behind atheistic philosophy. He perceived Feuerbach as someone who had come not to destroy religion but to rescue it from an inhuman Deity. In this context, atheism appeared as an effective weapon against “selfish” religious despotism (2:159). And here, no matter how nihilistic and destructive sheer atheism appeared to him, Parker had good use for Feuerbach to validate his own rejection of “popular theology.” “The ‘atheism’ of ... Feuerbach,” Parker was convinced, “is higher and better than the theological idea of God, as represented by Jonathan Edwards, the great champion of New England divinity” (2:164).

### III

Parker’s complex relation to Feuerbach played into the hands of one of his sharpest critics, namely the Catholic convert Brownson, who was not prepared to accept a rapturous type of Transcendentalism marked by an atheistic eclipse of the object of faith. Anticipating the arguments directed against Feuerbach, Brownson described the underlying premises of this atheism in a review of Parker’s *Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*. “Mr. Parker,” Brownson observed, defines religion as a “sentiment natural to man, that is, springing from man’s nature” (6:12). In this “naturalism,” Brownson charged, religion is “inward” to man and “exists in the facts of man’s soul.” But if there is only a “God *in* the soul” and no God “out of man,” then, Brownson concluded, there is no God (6:13, 8, 12). “[A]ll a man has to do” is to worship himself and to conform to “his own thoughts, tendencies and impulses.” The “existence of God,” then, is simply no longer necessary (6:12, 76).



That this form of atheistic soul-worship contributed decisively to Brownson's break with the Transcendentalist movement is evident in his criticism of Parker in *The Convert* (1857). Brownson was convinced that the religious element in man had a basis from without. It was something outside of the "me" or the subject, and not the outcome of the activity of the human mind. Parker, Brownson believed, made religion "purely subjective," a principle of human nature alone. He thus advocated a religion "which implies no God" (5:153). For Brownson, this "atheism" did not signal merely a rejection of "supernatural revelation" but rather a rejection of religion "in toto" (7:269, 272).

The concept of the religious sentiment in man as the origin and ground of religion made, Brownson asserted, man the "measure" of all things and values (6:13). Religion becomes a predicate of man; it "rests for its authority ... not on the veracity of God, but on the veracity of man" (6:2). From here, Brownson charged, issued another grand "defect" of Parker's Transcendentalism, namely a "naturalism" or "natural mysticism" that "exhorts" man to "sink [his] personality" in God (7:269, 6:30, 31). Parker thus identified divine and human natures and made man "indistinguishable" from God (6:95). On this point, Brownson saw Parker as just another advocate of Emersonian mystical Transcendentalism. To be sure, there were differences—Parker was not in "command" of his arguments, he did not have the "ease and grace" of Emerson—yet in the final analysis, both "systems" came for Brownson to the same thing: the "autotheism" of transcendental mania (6:30). Parker, Brownson observed, exalts the individual to identity with the divine. He "makes the man who ... stands in the most immediate relation with absolute truth, beauty, and goodness, a sort of maniac" (6:27).

Brownson's quest for religious certitude expressly precluded such "direct communion" with God. God is "above" man, Brownson reiterated. Moreover, "God is uncreated, independent, infinite; man is created, dependent, finite" (6:49, 48). In religion, Brownson held, the relation between God and man is one between an object and a separate and distinct subject. The object of faith, then,—and this is Brownson's key maxime—must be sought outside man; it "must have ... [a] foundation ... [extrinsic] to the human mind" (6:61). For Brownson, the objective intuitionist, the denial of such an extrinsic foundation of religion made the "eclipse of faith" inevitable and cleared the way for "intellectual atheists" who incorporate human attributes into a man-made God (7:284; 2:5).

That Parker, a professed critic of utter atheism, had to be counted among this camp was for Brownson not without irony. With his ill-fated attempt to “prove” the existence of God, Parker himself paved the road to atheism (6:71). For Parker, Brownson observed, the consciousness of dependence presupposes the consciousness of a religious element in human nature. The objects are therefore known to exist because “the internal sentiments demand them” (6:14). In other words, “God exists” because man “wants an object to love, reverence, and adore.” The religious sentiment “requires” an object of faith; it implies the “idea” of God (6:12, 13). But this is for Brownson precisely the source of a central “error.” To make the “*idea* of God” depend on the “sense of dependence” is to make it a “deduction from the sense of dependence,” a “logical inference.” But a deduction, Brownson argues, does not establish God as “given” in man’s nature. The “sentiment only implies the *necessity* of an object to satisfy it, not that the object exists” (6:68, 77).

For Brownson, the argument from deduction provided a clear entry-way into a “religion without God.” Parker sought to keep religion in tune with natural sentiments but at the price of creating a God “adapted to man’s nature” and this price, Brownson judged, was too high (5:153). By reducing religion to the “sense of dependence and idea of its object” and declaring these to be essential elements of human nature, Parker made the existence of God “quite superfluous” (6:77, 76). Man is lifted up to the position of God until there is only the “godship” of man (6:105). To “account for religion,” Brownson observed, you have “no occasion to assume any existence ... but that of man himself.” Such a religion “can dispense with God altogether,” for it is merely the “production” of an analysis of human nature (6:77, 72).

What Brownson detects in this “production” is the Feuerbachian view of religion as “delusion”—man as God-maker (6:77). Man creates God in his own image and likeness. He “take[s] up ... God into [his] own being” and “augment[s] [his] own real being.” For Brownson, this “theory, so highly esteemed in Germany, is really nothing but ... atheism” (6:98). Brownson finds clear traces of it in Parker, whose God is “what conforms to man” (6:99, 50). Parker’s God is made to meet an “inherent want of man’s soul” and “flows naturally into man as man’s wants demand” (5:153; 6:47). God no longer exists “*a parte rei*,” that is, “distinct from and independent of the subject”; rather, the object of worship turns into a product of man’s “wants” (3:110; 6:13). God is thus dependent on man. He is merely “what [man’s] own nature reveals him to be” (6:41).

Against this reduction of religion to “delusion,” Brownson set forth an argument that he trusted would endow all religious beliefs with the “certainty of knowledge.” Philosophically, Brownson insisted, the point of departure can neither be the subject alone nor the object alone but only their “synthesis”: “*There is no purely subjective, or purely objective knowledge.... [W]e find both the me and the not-me in the same phenomenon, by the same light, and with equal certainty*” (4:356). In this “synthetic philosophy,” the reality of the object is given in what Brownson calls “ideal intuition” (1:XVIII). This “intuition” does not deal with an “abstraction” but rather with real, objective being—God himself (2:76).

With this objective intuitionism Brownson strove for a philosophy that bridged the gap between intuition and reason, between subjective and objective evidence. Under this heading, Brownson develops an opposition central to his “refutation of atheism,” namely the contrast between “psychologist” and “ontologist” systems.<sup>25</sup> According to Brownson, “ontologism” is concerned with the “sphere” of the “object” and asserts that “every principle of reason can be obtained by way of logical deduction from the single intuition of ... Being” (2:479). “Psychologism,” by contrast, is “restricted to the sphere of the subject” and asserts the “subject as its own object,” by assuming that the “soul can think without any real object” (2:482). For Brownson, the outcome of this psychologist road is inevitable. If the philosopher starts with the subject and assumes that the soul can “think without the concurrence of the object” he will, Brownson insists, end up in “pure nullism” (2:392).

Brownson’s rejection of Parker’s Transcendental idealism also rests upon the contrast between “ontologism” and “psychologism” and establishes an idealistic descent of “egoism” from Fichte’s extreme subjective idealism to “autotheism” and atheistic “nihilism.” Brownson’s starting point is the argument that atheism received its preparation at the hands of “egoistic Idealism,” a “pure philosophical egoism, which resolves all into the *ego* ... and its phenomena”—“mere volitions or creations of the ME itself” (3:233; 1:34). In Fichte’s “philosophical egoism” “man makes God” (4:355). According to Brownson, this pure “autotheism” continued in the “nihilism of the Hegelians” and terminates in “modern” “speculative thought” (6:20; 2:83). Here, too, the view of reli-

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<sup>25</sup> On Brownson as an objective intuitionist, see Wellek, *Confrontations*, 179.

gion as a delusion, of man as God-maker, stems from a “psychologism” in which man can be his own object. For Brownson, by contrast, the object is always “*le non-moi*,” something that stands “over against” and apart from the subject (2:256, 45). The object is therefore “presented to the soul or given it, not created or furnished by it” (2:44).

What Feuerbach offered stood in complete antithesis to this train of thought. In Feuerbach’s discussion of the subject-object relation, the notion that a subject “is nothing without an object” contains a double relation. It implies, first of all, that man as a subject is recognized on the basis of objects and, secondly, that in knowing an object man knows himself. Man encounters his own nature in his objects. He projects elements of his own nature out upon objectivity. Consequently, of “[w]hatever kind of object ... we are at any time conscious of, we are always at the same time conscious of our own nature” With this argument, the circle of Feuerbach’s thought was complete. The object of any subject is merely “this subject’s own, but objective, nature” (*EC*, 4, 6). The ultimate object of man’s experience, then, is his species-nature.

The axiom that man is to himself his own object of thought also applies to man’s religious consciousness, his knowledge of God. “In the perceptions of the senses,” Feuerbach argues, “consciousness of the object is distinguishable from consciousness of self.” But in religion this is different. With regard to religious objects, the “consciousness of object and self-consciousness coincide.” Applied to man’s knowledge of God, this axiom reads: In knowing God, the religious object, man not only knows himself as an individual man but as a “species,” an idealized conception of man. Religion, then, is actually no more than man’s relation to himself. Hence “consciousness of God” is only “self-consciousness.” But, as Feuerbach points out, religion is at first only an “indirect” “self-consciousness” of man in which this identity is not fully realized. Man is not aware that he is the object of his own worship and assumes instead that he adores a being outside and above himself. A solution of this indirectness can only come with the insight that man is the true object of religious feeling (*EC*, 12, 13). For Feuerbach’s critics, a clear implication of this was anthropologism: All being and truth were made relative to the human subject.

For Brownson, this “subjective-objectivism, so rife in Germany,” opens the door to an atheism in which God is dissolved into a “nullity” (2:257). The alternative view Brownson maintains in the “synthetic philosophy” denies the assumption of “German metaphysics” that the

object is only a mode or affection of the subject. Brownson conceives the object “as out of the subject . . . , existing really . . . [and being] intelligible, not *by* us, but *to* us” (3:94–95). The rejection of this premise, Brownson judges, leads necessarily to the “autotheism” of Fichte and the Transcendentalists, for whom “the *I* or *Ego* is all that is or exists” (1:222, 223). For Brownson, Parker here was clearly subject to the same charges as “Fichteism” (3:233). Parker’s “theoretical errors” are akin to the “root-error” of Fichte: “The absolute ICH, or ego, of Fichte is identical in all men, is the real man, . . . and this ‘one man’ is the reality, the . . . substance . . . of the whole phenomenal universe” (6:47; 3:429, 430). From here stems Parker’s primal error: He “sets himself up as supreme pontiff and god” (7:263). He sinks “the phenomenal man, the *Parkeritas*, which is . . . in reality nothing, and fall[s] back on the impersonal soul, on his real self, and he is universal nature, . . . the omnipotent God, in which sense he assists at the birth of all phenomena, not as spectator only, but as creator” (6:104). To Brownson, the “creator” Parker clearly bore the imprint of Fichte’s “autotheism.” In accordance with Fichte, his “transcendental selfishness” reduced religion to a “worship of [man’s] own internal sentiments and affections projected” (5:153).

For Brownson, it was precisely at this point again that Parker fell prey to the projective view of religion asserting man as God-maker. God “is” what is “demanded by an internal want or sentiment, and what answers to that sentiment or want.” God has no independent existence; he is “because the internal sentiments . . . are satisfied by [him]” (6:14). In Brownson’s view, the philosophical error that underlies this projective view of religion is the subject-object relation characteristic of Feuerbachian “intellectual atheism” which Brownson traces back to “Fichteism.” In the Transcendentalist vision, Brownson observes, man can be his own object. But God, Brownson reiterates, is “independent”; he is “neither the soul nor its product” (2:455). If man “were his own adequate object, . . . he would be . . . not man, but God” (3:22). This is in Brownson’s view precisely the credo of the “supreme pontiff” of Transcendentalism, Parker.

Brownson’s interpretation places Transcendental idealism and Feuerbachian atheism in parallel and here anticipates Barth’s later criticism of nineteenth century liberal theology. Brownson identifies the philosophical basis of Transcendentalism as “psychologism” and aligns it with the same “autotheism” that Feuerbach was to explicate. This parallelism was already immanent in Parker’s conception of the nature of religious experience. In identifying religion with the sense of depen-

dence, Parker opened the door to an anthropological approach in which man could be his own object and was set free in such away that his “egoistic” dominance submerged the object of faith altogether. The Transcendentalist mind, as a contemporary reviewer observed, “rejoic[es] in the despotism which it can so easily exercise over a world filled with its own creations.”<sup>26</sup> In this “despotic” reign, Feuerbach’s primary thesis seemed to come true: All affirmations about God built on claims about humanity were only the mind’s “own creations”—projected human wishes.

#### IV

Brownson’s turbulent religious pilgrimage and his intellectual wanderings often appeared to his Transcendentalist comrades as eccentric, if not “unbearable.”<sup>27</sup> Yet with regard to his critique of Parker’s “autotheism,” Brownson put forward arguments not uncommon among “new school” advocates who were also well aware of the atheistical tendencies inherent in idealistic pronouncements. Like Brownson, several “new school” apostles acutely sensed that Transcendentalist idealism was prone to a form of atheism which questioned not only the evidences of historical Christianity but also the status of the object of worship. An awareness of this type of atheism was in particular prominent among those “new school” members who believed, as James Freeman Clarke did, in both “an outward witness, coming down through history, and an inner witness of the spirit in our heart.” Very wary of the “serious charges” that could be brought against Transcendentalist idealism, Clarke was convinced that its “extreme” version would have to be reformed in order to be maintained at all.<sup>28</sup> A reliance on the “inner witness” alone would, Clarke judged, inevitably eradicate the transcendent object of faith. In similar terms, Hedge noted that atheism lurked in the background of the transcendental identity with God. From here, Hedge sensed, it was only a small step to replace the object of faith with man become God. In 1840, Hedge identified Emerson and Alcott as “atheists in disguise.” Hedge agreed with Clarke that the conclusion

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<sup>26</sup> Review of *Essays*, in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Cooke, *An Historical and Biographical Introduction to Accompany “The Dial”*, 2:73. Also see Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 108, 234.

<sup>28</sup> Clarke, “R.W. Emerson and the New School,” 52.

of atheism inhered in an “extreme idealism” that drove towards anthropotheism to the point where it was “not enough to dwell *in God*” and man rather “aspir[ed] to *be God*.”<sup>29</sup> By 1843, Hedge also counted Parker among the disciples of this egotheistic platform and was no longer willing to accord with what was ridiculed as “transcendental selfishness.” He felt alienated from those who had incurred the reputation of being fanatic visionaries and sought to avoid the “wild mania of Transcendentalism.”<sup>30</sup>

Both Clarke and Hedge launched their attacks against an “egotheism” that bore a distinct similarity to the position for which Feuerbach was to be denounced. For Clarke, Parker’s “negative Transcendentalism” related the individual directly to absolute Being. But man’s partaking in the divine nature amounted to no more but the “presumptuous” “self-confidence” of a “shallow naturalism” that left no room for a transcendent God.<sup>31</sup> The similarity of this “self-worship” to Feuerbach’s credo seemed obvious. Like Emerson’s “ego-theism,” the “egoistic” pronouncements of Parker’s subjective idealism cohered with a primary axiom of the “new” “atheism”: “Consciousness of God is self-consciousness” (*EC*, 12). Transcendental idealism, it seemed, already contained the germ of an atheism in which the object of faith “disappeared in the haze of ... doubt” and the worship of God turned into the worship of self.<sup>32</sup> In Parker’s “egotism,” the self was, in the manner of Feuerbach, declared to be autonomous in such a way that everything outside man’s mind evaporated into an expression of subjective desires.

That Parker actually rejected the Emersonian dream of self-reliance as “extravagant” and “exaggerated,” was largely obscured by the recurrent criticism of Parker as a “naturalist” and “autotheist” (8:83). To many, Parker was and remained an “egotheistic” “visionary” “indelibly associated” with an extreme individualism and idealism.<sup>33</sup> Of the charter members of the “Transcendental Club,” Ripley and his com-

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<sup>29</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, Letter to Margret Fuller, 24 March 1840, quoted in Bryan F. LeBeau, *Frederic Henry Hedge: Nineteenth Century American Transcendentalist* (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1985), 169; Clarke, “R.W. Emerson and the New School,” 53. Also see Myerson, “Frederic Henry Hedge and the Failure of Transcendentalism,” 403–404.

<sup>30</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, Letter to Convers Francis, 14 February 1843; quoted in LeBeau, *Frederic Henry Hedge*, 169.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in John White Chadwick, *Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1950), 127.

<sup>32</sup> Cyrus A. Bartol, “Representative Men,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 220.

<sup>33</sup> Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 371.

rades in the Broad Church camp sought to escape this stigma and were anxious to present a basis for religious truth that preserved God as a separate center of consciousness. "We must not," Hedge warned, "confuse the manifest God with the transcendental ground of the manifestation."<sup>34</sup> God was in essence apart from and other than man. The object of religious belief issued from a source outside man's mind. This view provided a bulwark against atheistic soul-worship. It prevented the Feuerbachian eclipse of God and also barred the way to all forms of subjectivism identifying the criteria of religious truth with man's understanding of spiritual wants.<sup>35</sup>

Warnings against the threat of projective religion were numerous in the contemporary responses to the extreme version of Transcendentalism. With remarkable unanimity, representatives from both "old" and "new school" camps rejected the latent "godless" tendencies of ego-centric Transcendentalism and saw in this unmitigated "egoism" a threat to belief in the existence of God. Like Brownson, Hedge and his conservative brethren judged that the ground for such utter atheism had been prepared by Fichte's "extreme idealism." Transcendental "ego-theism" appeared as the final stage of an anthropotheistic position descending from "Fichteism." In this manner, Hedge suspected Fichte of having followed a "subjective path" to skepticism. The self was bracketed in consciousness as an object of self-reflection. Fichte's "egoistic" system, Hedge judged, in this way reduced the external world to a mere posit of auto-productive activity—a "projection" Hedge discovered again in the "illusions" of Parker's "extreme idealism."<sup>36</sup> When Feuerbach came on the scene, the attempt to generate atheism out of Fichtean "egoism" resurfaced with renewed vigor. For Unitarian and orthodox reviewers of *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach merely elaborated what had already become an established fact in the "extreme idealism" perpetuated by Parker. In this respect, the debate about Parker's "negative Transcendentalism" constituted an overture to the prolonged controversy about Feuerbach's atheistic humanism.

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<sup>34</sup> Frederic Henry Hedge, *Martin Luther and Other Essays* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1888), 289.

<sup>35</sup> See Crowe, *Ripley*, 105.

<sup>36</sup> Hedge, "Coleridge's Literary Character," 116, 124; LeBeau, *Frederic Henry Hedge*, 19, 45, 170.



## V

For both Unitarian and Congregationalist reviewers, Feuerbach's atheism issued from a pantheistic-idealistic basis. Thus Joseph Henry Allen judged that Feuerbach's position led "from All-God to No-God." That Feuerbach did not grant any "objective reality at all" to the "Absolute" was, in Allen's view, the source of his error and not without serious consequences: "Metaphysics [lapsed into] ... Atheistic Nihilism."<sup>37</sup> In similar terms, the Congregationalist Charles C. Tiffany observed that Feuerbach exemplified the difficulties which beset an "extreme idealist" who fell prey to a "logic" that identified God and man. As an "advocate of subjectivism," Feuerbach dissolved everything into "egoism" (737, 739). On this interpretation, which established a line of development from "extreme idealism" to Feuerbach's atheism, Unitarian and Congregationalist reviewers of *The Essence of Christianity* stood as one. Both judged that Feuerbach saw the self as the ground and generator of reality and presented the divine as the product of subjective human wishes.

Brownson sensed correctly that Parker's concept of religion was vulnerable to a similar anthropologizing of theology. But although Parker did agree with Feuerbach that theistic language referred primarily to subjective experience, he never endorsed Feuerbach's thesis about theological illusion. An analytic demonstration of God's existence was for Parker in vain. God's existence, Parker was convinced, is a statement of belief, and "[t]he belief always precedes the proof" (1:12). It is a "certainty," a "fact" that is neither "self-originated" nor subject-relative (6:33, 1:5). On this point Parker was closer to the "conservatives" than they themselves were ready to admit. When it came to "dogmatic atheism," Parker was quite sure that he would "appear in the ranks of conservatives in theology."<sup>38</sup> Parker concurred with his Unitarian and Congregationalist brethren that there was an object outside of man that corresponded to the object of religious belief, an object that simply could not be an "invention" or product of subjective human aspirations (1:10). Religion, Parker was anxious to make clear, had an objective basis in man which precluded its reduction to images of man's own nature.

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<sup>37</sup> Allen, "Review of Current Literature," 434, 437.

<sup>38</sup> Theodore Parker, *Journal O*, 154 (1 December 1852), Andover-Harvard Theological Library.

Parker also differed sharply from Emerson's subjectivist concept of God. What Emerson proposed, was Parker judged, nothing but "to project God—so to say, out of ourselves."<sup>39</sup> In Parker's concept of religion, by contrast, God serves as a constant reminder of man's dependence and finitude. The God "in the soul of man" does not establish individual divinity, as Emerson asserted, but rather confirms God as "different in kind from both matter and man."<sup>40</sup> "My definition," Parker insisted, "distinguishes God from all other beings; it does not limit Him to the details of my conception" (13:332). The "object and contents" of religion are not "altogether human," as Feuerbach claimed in *The Essence of Christianity* (*EC*, 14). They also have an anchor outside the self. The God "in the soul of man" is also a God out of man who raises in him the awareness that he is "not conscious of [his] own existence except as a finite existence, that is, as a dependent existence" (6:33). While Feuerbach disparages the argument from consciousness as a delusion of self-objectification and denies that there are any a priori propositions, Parker deduces the existence of God from the nature of religious self-consciousness. For Parker, the primary fact of consciousness is the Schleiermachian a priori assurance of the existence of God, the feeling of being absolutely dependent on God (1:11). "[T]he idea of the infinite, of God on whom I depend, comes at the same time as the logical correlative of a knowledge of myself. So the existence of God is a certainty" (6:33). God is not produced by a thought-process of man; rather, he is given to consciousness as a constituent element through the feeling of utter dependence.

In this regard, Parker's position, impious though it seemed to many of his contemporaries, cohered again with the conservative front of New England divinity. Parker did not, as Brownson charged, settle for a mere awareness of intuitive facts of consciousness. Intuitive truths, Parker emphasized, were not identical with "innate" truths. Judgments a priori therefore also had to be legitimated as "facts of observation" (6:32). In bolstering intuitive "facts" of "consciousness" by induction, Parker avoided the threat of projective religion. Religious truths Parker believed, are independent of the self and in this sense accurate statements free from subjective vagaries and the delusion of self-exteriorization.

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<sup>39</sup> Theodore Parker to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, 8 January 1839; quoted in Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 116.

<sup>40</sup> Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers*, 105.

In his sermons on *Theism, Atheism and the Popular Theology*, Parker combines the argument from consciousness with a traditional defense strategy that Brownson chose to ignore in his critique of Parker. Drawing on the traditional teleological argument, Parker asserted that the existence of God is evident from the appearance of a spiritual design and purpose in the world. A “conscious power,” a “constant mode of operation” underlies all activity “in the world of man” (2:70). Just as material objects have a spiritual agent, so the religious faculty has a “cause” (2:79). What set Feuerbach apart from this framework was, Ripley judged, the “spiritual skepticism” of his “atheistical theory.”<sup>41</sup> Parker agreed. To deny, as Feuerbach did, that God has “objective actualness” was to make all human hopes and efforts pointless and leave man to the desolation of an incoherent “fortuitous” universe, “a jumble of parts with no contexture” (2:95, 74, 70).

The constant refrain of Parker’s *Theism* sermons—the atheist’s “sad thought, his world without a God; his here, but no hereafter; his body, and no soul”—is the credo of the “prophet” Feuerbach, a credo whose inevitable outcome is a “cruel” and “absurd” atheism that leaves “nought to reverence, to esteem ..., to love” (2:244, 68, 82). The “prophet” Feuerbach in this respect evinced himself for Parker as a destructive materialist. Feuerbach, Parker observed in his letter to Johannes Ronge, “does a service, but it is purely the destruction of the old and then he roots up the wheat along with the tares” (4:469 n. 5). But Parker was acutely aware of a “far more dangerous” form of atheism (2:122). This threat was not the lapse from idealism to speculative infidelity but the lapse from idealism to “practical atheism.” The most destructive form of atheism, Parker judged, did not issue from “undisguised professors” of atheism who were nevertheless “conscientious, just, human, [and] philanthropic,” but rather from “disguised practitioners” thereof with whom atheism “preponderates in their daily life” (2:90, 63, 92). For Parker, “undisguised” speculative atheism entailed a positive affirmation of the values of human life. The “atheistic Feuerbach,” Parker observed, still obeys an “objective restraint.” He bows “down before the eternal laws of matter and mind: ‘These,’ say[s] [he], ‘we must keep always come what may’” (14:180). The disguised, practical atheist, however, has no such “restraint” at all. He is a law into himself with no duties and obligations to anyone and anything. He takes his

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<sup>41</sup> Frothingham, *Ripley*, 229.

stand on his own ego and is his “own mind, cause, providence, lawgiver, and director” (2:94). The only safeguard against such practical atheism was for Parker the belief in a spiritual and immanent God operative in man himself. But for Parker’s critics, it was, ironically, in this very safeguard that Feuerbachian atheism left its mark on him—the “thorn in the flesh” of a theology that reduced all references to God to references about the human self and thus seemed to make the road to a “religion without God” inevitable.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE "CURES FOR ATHEISM": EMERSON AND JAKOB BÖHME

In 1942 Henry B. Parkes launched an aggressive attack on the allegedly "mystical" features of Emerson's thought. According to Parkes, Emerson's epiphanies and visionary moments had no biographical basis. He was only a "pseudo-mystic" who had "no true mystical experience. His mysticism was founded on those moments of exhilaration, caused by a feeling of harmony between oneself and the external world, which everyone occasionally experiences."<sup>1</sup> Emerson's contemporary critics were ready to label Emerson a "mystic," but to them "mysticism" was mostly a term of reproach and equivalent to "misty" or "occult."<sup>2</sup> In March 1850, the *Knickerbocker* characterized Emerson—in apparently "incongruous" words—as a "Yankee mystic." In this context mysticism was somewhat rescued from the low and reproachful sense in which Emerson's contemporary critics generally understood the term and came to stand for the possibility to attain union with God and experience ultimate reality directly. For the *Knickerbocker*, this type of mysticism became particularly obvious in the "transparent eye-ball" passage in *Nature* with its assertion that it was possible for the human soul to be united with the divine. This assertion resulted in what the *Knickerbocker* termed a radical "self-exaltation." The soul is deified: "I am part or particle of God. I am God"<sup>3</sup> (cf. *CW*, 1:10).

Commenting on Emerson's writings for the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* in 1850, Parker also noted the self-exaltation in Emerson's high "estimate of ecstasy." But while Brownson equated Emerson's self-exaltation with an atheistic religion without God, Parker was ready to appreciate that Emerson longed for direct and convincing experience of the identity of self and God, of the divine ground of the ego. This expe-

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<sup>1</sup> Henry B. Parkes, "Emerson," in *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), 126.

<sup>2</sup> See Francis Bowen, "Transcendentalism," in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*; 5; Brownson, "Mr. Emerson's Address," 42.

<sup>3</sup> "Review of *Essays, Essays: Second Series and Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*," in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 199.

rience was for Parker exemplified by the German lay theologian and mystic Jakob Böhme. Emerson seized eagerly upon Böhme, whose mysticism went beyond all book learning to seek an immediate knowledge of and union with the divine essence. Böhme thus supported Emerson's own thought of God as dwelling within man and he also confirmed what Parker described as Emerson's "sometimes extravagant" method, namely his procedure "by the way of intuition."<sup>4</sup>

Emerson was familiar with Durant Hotham's biography of Böhme which he read in volume one of the "Law edition."<sup>5</sup> Hotham presented Böhme as a humble shoemaker who received spontaneous illumination from God himself. Böhme was born in 1575 of poor but pious Lutheran parents at Altseidenburg, near Görlitz, Saxony. In his youth he was a peasant boy who tended the cattle. The first awakening that occurred to him took place in a thicket in which he saw a cavern and a vessel of gold. Startled by the splendor of this sight, he was inwardly awakened from a dull stupor. Soon after he was apprenticed to a shoemaker. In 1599 he became a citizen of Görlitz, where he opened a shoemaking business and married. In 1600 he experienced a seminal religious epiphany, when his eye caught the reflexion of the sun's rays in a bright pewter dish. This catapulted him into a mystical vision of the

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Parker, "The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson," in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 238, 235. Parker spells Böhme's name correctly. Böhme's English translators in the seventeenth century variously spelled his name Behm, Behme, and Behmen. This latter spelling was adopted in the "Law edition" and thus came into common use in England and America.

<sup>5</sup> Between 1644 and 1662, Böhme's works were translated by John Ellistone and John Sparrow, assisted by Durant Hotham and Humphrey Blunden, who paid for the undertaking. A four-volume edition of Böhme's works, edited by William Law's friends George Ward and Thomas Langcake, was published between 1764 and 1781 as a memorial to Law, who was an ardent admirer of Böhme. It is usually known for this reason as the "Law edition," although it is in fact a reissue of the Sparrow and Ellistone translations. In addition to Hotham's biography of Böhme in the "Law edition," Rufus Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914) 151–171; and Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth Century Philosopher and Mystic* (New York: State U of New York P, 1991) provide valuable biographical information. The following Böhme texts are cited parenthetically and abbreviated as: *Aurora*: Jakob Böhme, *Aurora*, trans. John Sparrow, ed. Charles James Barker and D.S. Hehner (1656; London: John M. Watkins, 1914); *Epistles*: Jakob Böhme, *The Epistles of Jacob Behmen*, trans. John Ellistone (London: M. Simmons, 1649); *Mysterium*: Jakob Böhme, *Mysterium Magnum*, trans. John Sparrow, ed. Charles James Barker. 2 vols. (1654; London: John M. Watkins, 1924); *Signature*: Jakob Böhme, *The Signature of All Things, With other Writings* (London: J.M. Dent, 1912); *Supersensual Life*: Jakob Böhme, *Of the Supersensual Life*. In: *The Signature of All Things, With other Writings* (London: J.M. Dent, 1912) 211–276.

Godhead as penetrating all existence. From then on, Hotham reports, Böhme was able by his faculty of instant perception to read the signature of Deity in all things. His first treatise, entitled *Aurora* (1612), went unfinished but brought him a small circle of followers. Böhme's thought drew fire from the church authorities who silenced him for five years before he continued writing in secrecy. The publication of his *Der Weg zu Christo* (The Way to Christ) in 1623 led to renewed persecutions. Banished from Görlitz, Böhme lived in Dresden for a time and on the country estates of wealthy supporters. Finally, stricken by illness in 1624, he returned home and died in the same year.

Emerson's best thought came in moments similar to the mystical vision Hotham reported of Böhme, in epiphanies, sudden illuminations producing new insight and ecstasy. "Moments of this character," however, Parker observed in his review of Emerson's work, "are few and rare even with men like ... Böhme and Swedenborg. The writings of ... these men, ... who most completely surrendered themselves to this mode of action, show how poor and insufficient it is."<sup>6</sup> Parker translated what were essentially religious concerns about intuitive consciousness into the realm of the writer. A similar transmission of religious terms into a literary currency also guided Emerson's own criticism of mysticism. Emerson did not accept the too literal and rapt approach to allegorical truth by mystics like Emanuel Swedenborg and Böhme and criticized incisively that the literary presentations of their mystical visions were narrow and their symbols schematic and rigid. They thus established a fixed formula of symbols to render human experience. It was Böhme in particular, Emerson charged, who imposed his construction of the ideal upon symbols that were essentially in flux and transitory. Böhme's symbolism in this way turned into a system of static doctrinal meanings. The manifold flow of imagination through all forms of life here marked the essential difference between Emerson's experiential symbology and the formalistic schemes of Böhme's mystical message.

"Poetry and mysticism have nothing properly in common," Charles Eliot Norton pontificated in his review of Emerson's poems.<sup>7</sup> For Emerson, by contrast, aesthetic experience did approximate mystical experience. The poet's inspiration, Emerson insisted, depended on mystical insight. Emerson thus found mysticism in creative intuition and illu-

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<sup>6</sup> Parker, "The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson," 235.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Eliot Norton, "Review of May-Day and Other Pieces," in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 311.

mination which he characterized as “trance,” “ecstasy,” and “enthusiasm” (*CW*, 1:125, 157; 2:167; 4:55). In the creative process, illumination became an interplay of receptivity and revelation. The aging Emerson, however, judged such moments of illumination to be irreconcilable with the life of understanding. This dualism, Emerson’s famous “double consciousness,” revealed his inability to attain to perpetual creative ecstasy (*CW*, 1:213). Emerson gradually outlived the mystically gained certainty asserted in *Nature*. With the tempering of his religious optimism and the waning of his creative powers, mysticism became increasingly an end beyond reach.

Yet in the moral sentiment, as he conceived it, Emerson continued to long for the direct contact with an ultimate reality that also determined Böhme’s mystical experience. Emerson’s biographers, from Ralph L. Rusk to Ronald A. Bosco, readily admit Emerson to the company of mystics and argue that he was a mystic in the sense of one who has some feeling for the working of a divine presence in his life.<sup>8</sup> Gay Wilson Allen points out that Emerson’s faith in immediate mystical enlightenment represented by the “transparent eye-ball” experience qualifies him as a religious mystic whose central epiphany was at one with the records of mystical experience in William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>9</sup> But what distinguished Emerson’s position at this juncture was his emphasis on the value of mystical experience for the guidance of practical life in the here and now. In contrast to Böhme’s theosophical mysticism, Emerson’s ethical mysticism emphasized right practical living and doing and bore on the ordinary. For Emerson, then, mystical experience did not radically depart from other, natural experiences. It was not confined to the supernatural but rather

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<sup>8</sup> See Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 282–287; Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), 175; Richardson, *Emerson*, 228–229; Ronald A. Bosco, *Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803–1882: A Brief Biography*, in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37. On Emerson as a religious mystic, see also Lionel Braham, “Emerson and Boehme: A Comparative Study in Mystical Ideas,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 20 (1959): 31–35; J. Russel Reaver, *Emerson as Mythmaker* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1954), 76–78. On Emerson as a pragmatic mystic, see Elisabeth Hurth, “The Poet and the Mystic: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jakob Böhme,” *ZAA: Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 53 (2005): 332–352.

<sup>9</sup> See Allen, *Emerson*, 175–176. See also David M. Robinson, “Emerson and Religion,” in Myerson, *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 159, 170–173; Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 163–165, 181.



led to valuable practical insights and appropriate obeisance. Emerson was thus less the religious mystic than is commonly supposed and more the "Yankee mystic" some of his contemporary critics saw in him. With his Yankee common sense Emerson mediated between mysticism and practicality and did not follow Böhme's ascetic ideal. He did not have the experience of discipline found in a long and strenuous path leading to union with God, nor did he follow Böhme's mysticism with regard to self-denial and negation. As a "Yankee mystic" Emerson was a pragmatic mystic to the core.

In the history of religious literature, Böhme figures predominantly as the mystical advocate of immediate knowledge of the divine. In this view, his work could be an answer to a humanist atheism that endangered the truth of faith itself and its speech about God. Emerson did not give in to the demolition of the objective content of faith, nor was he willing to follow the Feuerbachian negation of the truth claims of religion. Aware of the painful transition from unquestioning faith to its negation, Emerson did not let the flood tide of faith slip away. His aversion to unbelief found confirmation in the simple, devout mystic Böhme. The affirmatory nature of Böhme's writings made itself felt throughout Emerson's life and work and provided him with a reliable source of faith and optimistic persuasion.

## I

Emerson's journal references to Böhme, which extend from 1835 to 1865, show that the German mystic exercised a long-lasting fascination upon him. Emerson did not study Böhme systematically, nor did he always rely on the primary works themselves. At times he would rather take his quotations from Böhme second-hand using sources like Auguste Theodore Hilaire's *Histoire de la philosophie Allemande depuis Leibnitz jusqu'à Hegel* (1836).<sup>10</sup> Emerson received multiple exposures to Böhme's works. His contact with Amos Bronson Alcott put him in touch with one of the most active adapters and readers of Böhme in New England. Alcott was also responsible for arousing Emerson's interest in two English mystics, James Pierrepont Greaves and Charles Lane, who

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<sup>10</sup> On the sources for Emerson's knowledge of Böhme, see Elisabeth Hurth, "The Uses of a Mystic Prophet: Emerson and Böhme," *Philological Quarterly* 70 (1991): 219–225.

both owed considerable debt to Böhme. Emerson absorbed even more in an impressionistic way through the influence of Mary Moody Emerson, who was well-read in Böhme and has been called an “American Jakob Boehme” herself.<sup>11</sup>

Emerson read the *Aurora* in the “Law edition.” His library not only contains the four-volume “Law edition” but also a volume of selections from Böhme’s “Theosophic Philosophy” compiled by Edward Taylor and one volume from the edition of John Sparrow. As Elizabeth Palmer Peabody reports, Emerson also owned a copy of Böhme’s *The Way to Christ*, which she borrowed from Emerson in 1860. When Emerson gave it to her, he remarked “This is my ‘vade mecum.’”<sup>12</sup> Emerson appreciated Böhme as a mystic whose religion sprang solely from the depths of his own inner experience of God and thus prompted a rejection of all external “instruction” and church authority. Böhme, Emerson observed in his journals, “owe[s] all to the discovery that God must be sought within, not without.... [He] perceives the worthlessness of all instruction” and does “not complain of not being admitted to Church” (*JMN*, 5:5; 12:331).

Rejecting barren dogma and ceremonial formula, Böhme emphasized the pristine reality of his own mystical experience and asserted that man could find divine revelation within himself: “The Kingdom of God must be inwardly innate and born within us, else we cannot see with the eyes of eternity into the angelical world” (*Epistles*, 114). This concept of the God within was in full accord with Emerson’s rejection of historical Christianity which he charged to be a stagnation of the spiritual life. The “Divinity School Address” proposed a new spirituality that based everything on intuitive graspings and direct perceptions—a “first hand” acquaintance with Deity (*CW*, 1:90). For this appeal to intuited centres of spiritual authority Böhme could be of use. Responding in similar ways to the decay of institutional Christianity, both Emerson and Böhme interiorized religion and insisted on the literalness of the Scriptural verse, “[B]ehold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17, 21). Emerson made the confirmation of the truth of religion a purely intuitive affair. Similarly, Böhme argued that authentic being was realized by those who opened themselves to the revelation in the heart (*Signature*, 203). Both Emerson and Böhme

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<sup>11</sup> Richardson, *Emerson*, 23. See also Nancy Craig Simmons, *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993) 281, 468.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Ireland, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1882), 20–21.

agreed that religion could not be taken "second hand" from tradition or external authority (*CW*, 1:80). Both referred to an inner spiritual sense by which man could receive direct knowledge and revelation of God and perceived things hidden from the intellect and the senses.

Emerson welcomed Böhme as someone who was taught directly by God through his own intuitions, not by book learning—a mystic in the most exact sense (*CW*, 4:55). In the essay "Inspiration," Emerson quotes a longer passage from Hotham's biography in the "Law edition" in which Böhme describes a moment of intimate at-oneness with God. It was precisely this reliance on an overwhelming sense of the immediacy of the divine over and against intellectual speculation and accumulated learning that appealed to Emerson and provided him with a remarkable corroboration for his own conviction that "[w]henever ... a soul is true, is simple, & ... consents to God, & receives the Soul of the Soul into itself, then old things pass away, then means, teachers, texts, temples, fall" (*JMN*, 7:149). By advancing a mystical religion in which inner illumination was central, Böhme offered Emerson a source of confirmation for his break with institutional Christianity. With an implied reference to his own position outside the established church, Emerson thus described Böhme in "New England Reformers" as a "religious man" who is "not irritated by wanting the sanction of the church, but the church feels the accusation of his presence and belief" (*CW*, 3:164).

This "accusation" was not only in accord with Emerson's rejection of orthodoxy but also provided him with a narrative strategy through which he could sanction his attack on historical Christianity in the "Divinity School Address." According to Carol Johnston, the "Address" "is structured on what Emerson saw to be an analogous relationship between the Old Testament story of Jeremiah and the reaction of the Unitarian ministry to Transcendental thought." With the help of this implicit analogy, Emerson "could identify the 'Supreme Spirit' with God, Unitarianism with the temples of Baal, the conservative Unitarian ministry with the false prophets of Judae, and by indirection, himself with Jeremiah."<sup>13</sup> This use of the prophetic role of Jeremiah was, Johnston argues, suggested to Emerson through his reading of Böhme, whom Emerson praised in a journal entry of August 1, 1835 as "the best helper to a theory of Isaiah & Jeremiah" (*JMN*, 5:75). In

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Johnston, "The Underlying Structure of the Divinity School Address: Emerson as Jeremiah," *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1980, 42.

the *Aurora* Böhme describes the prophet as a laborious servant who has knowledge of God and preaches, in conformity with the scriptural word, to other men what he has perceived through divine inspiration (*Aurora*, 55–60). This concept of the prophet was congenial to Emerson's interests in the "Address." It served to take away the heretic nature of Emerson's rejection of historical Christianity and enabled him to attack the foundations of an "effete" Christianity without sounding unfaithful (*JMN*, 11:10).<sup>14</sup>

In his "Address," Emerson adopts the stance of a divinely inspired prophet whose aim is spiritual renewal rather than a heretic break with Christianity. He emphasizes that he does not demand a complete overthrow of the traditional system, nor does he work toward the establishment of a new religious denomination; rather, he wants to breathe "new life ... through the forms already existing" (*CW*, 1:92). The prophetic stance characteristic of Böhme's writings here provided Emerson with a valuable source of stimulus and corroboration. For Emerson, the German mystic was at this juncture not merely the quiet and pious shoemaker of popular legend; rather, Emerson keenly sensed the anticlerical strain inherent in Böhme's prophetic polemic and he therefore put him in line with religious dissenters who "do with the old nearly effete Christianity what good housewives do with the pies & bread when they are a little old—put them into the oven, & check the fermentation which is turning them sour & putrid" (*JMN*, 11:10).

## II

The experience Emerson most valued was the "exhilaration" that could arise at the intersection of the divine and human in nature: "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am" (*CW*, 1:10). The famous "transparent eye-ball" passage continues this account of revelatory or mystical experience in nature in which Emerson loses the sense of distinction between his own identity and that of the natural world: "In the woods, we return to reason and faith.... Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the

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<sup>14</sup> See Johnston, "The Underlying Structure of the Divinity School Address," 42; and Hurth, "The Uses of a Mystic Prophet," 227–230.

blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (*CW*, 1:10). The "I" opens itself into the world until it coincides with cosmic unity. It penetrates into the divine mystery of life. The mystical experience in the natural world leads to an expansive vision. The self is uplifted into infinite space. The identity as an "eye-ball" suggests an insight operating both as integration and extension, a feeling of oneness with the divine.

A similar description of mystical experience can be found in the *Aurora*, which records a remarkable instance of illumination that came to Böhme like a sudden revelation or flash: "[S]uddenly ... my spirit did break through the gates of hell, even into the innermost birth or geniture of the Deity, and there I was embraced with love.... In this light my spirit suddenly saw through all, and in and by all the creatures, even in herbs and grass it knew God, who he is and how he is, and what his will is: And suddenly in that life my will was set on by a mighty impulse to describe the being of God" (*Aurora*, 488). Böhme here attains not only to vision but also to gnosis which is, however, not the result of any intellectual effort on his part. He beholds the innermost properties of things and is given complete knowledge of the universe. But when Böhme describes the inner harmony of the powers of the soul in union with God, the true mystical experience is not primarily a knowledge-experience. It is rather, as with Emerson, an immersion into the stream of life itself, an inner appreciation of the higher meaning of life that culminates in unitive experience. This experience is unmediated experience of the unification of man's soul with ultimate reality and thus represents a supreme elevation of the human spirit.

In both Emerson's and Böhme's accounts, the crucial analogy between nature and God is predominant. Mystical experience is not only an experience of union with God; it also leads to an insight into an added significance and reality in all natural things. What Emerson and Böhme "see" is a new depth in nature. The external world is perceived as "alive," permeated by the divine presence, made radiant with life by the power of divinity. Moreover, for both Emerson and Böhme, the innate capacity by which mystical experience becomes possible resides in the access the individual has to a deeper self. The self is a "partaker" of the divine nature, a part of the great all-knowing reality. It has a share in one central, divine life.

For both Emerson and Böhme, mystical awareness is not a moment of “mean egotism” or narcissistic self-absorption but of selflessness. The self will find the highest level of mystical fulfillment in an abandonment of selfhood. For Emerson, the “I” is “nothing” in the merger with the deity. “I am nothing,” Emerson writes; only when the “I” becomes receptive to “the currents of the Universal Being” can he declare “I see all.” Similarly, Böhme writes in the *Aurora*: “In my own faculties or powers I am as blind a man as ever was, and am able to do nothing. But in the spirit of God, my innate spirit seeth through All” (*Aurora*, 595). The activities of the self have been stilled and transformed. The principle of activity is God.

Since Emerson did read the *Aurora* shortly before the publication of *Nature*, one may guardedly assume that Böhme’s work was a possible influence for his most famous passage. Emerson may also have noticed that Böhme often used the physical eye as a symbol for the communion between soul and God (*Mysterium*, 1:2). But while on the surface Böhme’s descriptions of mystical experience are largely in accord with the mysticism of the “transparent eye-ball” passage, the underlying beliefs and assumptions are quite different, and the *Aurora* is thus a source for Emerson only in the sense that it provided him with a vocabulary for his own ideas.

While Böhme stressed like Emerson the notion of an indwelling sense of God, he did not blur the boundaries that mark off the self from God, and hardly ever could he bring himself to brush away Christ as mediator and announce, as Emerson did, that he existed directly from God. The core of the “transparent eye-ball” passage is a vivid presence of ultimate reality that makes any intermediary secondary. With Böhme, by contrast, the experience of ultimate reality does not simply bypass intermediaries. Everything is brought into obedience to Christ. The mysticism of the *Aurora* is thus christological, and it is this emphasis that may have led Emerson to reject Böhme for his theological dogmatism (*JMN*, 9:107). This criticism of Böhme also pertains to the characterization of the self uncovered in the description of mystical unitive experience. While Emerson’s insistence on his “vanished” “egotism” may be paralleled by numerous passages from the *Aurora*, these assertions of the “I’s” “nothingness” lead to opposite conclusions. With Emerson, the statement “I am nothing” serves to posit a larger self, to reaffirm that self as an absolute; with Böhme, the same statement serves to emphasize the importance of God’s grace for the experience of mystical union.

Böhme's mysticism consists in the spiritual realisation of a boundless unity that humbles all self-assertion. The self here must be something quite other than universal spirit. Emerson links the revelatory experience to a merger of the self with God. The self ascends the throne, it fuses with the divine. Emerson is elevated in a mystic experience of himself to the point where the "waves of God flow into [him]" (*CW*, 2:188). The soul does not have to go the path of painful self-negation of purification and renunciation of all self-will; rather, in the mystically achieved certainty of the divinity of the soul, the self becomes one with God directly—for Emerson's critics a clear sign of a "heretical mysticism." According to the terms of this "heretical mysticism," God is essentially self and the two can be identical. In the elevation of the self, the soul of man is not merely, as Böhme's mysticism taught, a partaker of God, it *is* God. This idolatry of the self, however, came close to an implicit atheism in which God as an independent object evaporated. Emerson, it was charged, seemed to confound man and God. His self-worship turned religious faith into a worship of the "Over-Soul".<sup>15</sup>

Böhme's theocentric mysticism is distinctly set apart from a self-worship in which the self in its "ultimate consciousness" *is* God (*JMN*, 5:337). Böhme avoids Emerson's radical trust in the godhood of the self. Böhme seeks union with God but not identity. He does speak of the divinization of man but he maintains a difference between the divine and the human, although the goal is union. Human beings are created spirits and remain so even during illumination. Only by grace is the self one with God forever. Mystical union cannot be achieved by man's will out of any meritorious qualification on his part—it is gratuitous, undeserved. Thus the "I" is "nothing": "In my own faculties ... I am ... nothing." "All power is in God the Father, and he is the fountain of all powers in his deep" (*Aurora*, 595, 148). In this respect, Böhme is much closer to Emerson's Puritan forebears who stressed the self's nothingness as a prerequisite for the reception of divine grace.

The emphasis on God as the source of grace prevented Böhme from blurring the barriers between God and self and also validated the significance of Christ as mediator and Savior. Böhme thus ran counter to the very principles that Emerson associated with the "moral sentiment," the inner sentiment in the soul of man that affirmed the divinity of every individual and, consequently, dispensed with the recourse

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<sup>15</sup> See Parkes, "Emerson," 125–126. See also Whicher, *Freedom and Fate*, 21, 54.

to intermediators, enabling man instead to experience the “influx of the Divine mind” directly (*CW*, 2:166). Emerson therefore charged that Böhme, like Swedenborg, “failed by attaching [himself] to the Christian symbol, instead of to the moral sentiment, which carries innumerable christianities, humanities, divinities in its bosom” (*CW*, 4:76).

The moral sentiment, the intuitional method of knowing God, conceives divine reality as an immanent entity. In the “Over-Soul” essay, Emerson thus talks of the “eternal ONE” and decidedly abandons the idea of a personal deity (*CW*, 2:160). For Böhme, by contrast, God was not a notion, explicitly impersonal. As a precursor to existentialist thought, Böhme described the Godhead, the “abyss,” as inconceivable essence par excellence. But in Böhme’s cosmology the world was the self-revelation of God in the sensible and in this self-revelation God became alive, real, present directly (*Mysterium*, 2:676–680; *Signature*, 22). Any special authority that the theistic mystic Böhme claimed came from an immediately personal quality of “God the Father” (*Mysterium*, 2:678; *Aurora*, 147–148). God was thus the personal object of his love and no mere abstract being. For Emerson, by contrast, mystical experience did not imply worship of God as a person. Departing from Böhme’s theistic mysticism, Emerson conceived God with impersonal attributes. The power of his God lay in a “unity” beyond personhood (*JMN*, 5:177).

### III

In his classic study *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (1911), Evelyn Underhill points out that Eastern mysticism is distinguished from its Western counterpart by demanding another stage beyond union. Characteristics of this stage are, according to Underhill, total self-annihilation and a loss of individuality through merging with the infinite.<sup>16</sup> In the “Over-Soul” essay Emerson describes such an actual “swallowing” up of the self in an undifferentiated absolute, the loss of self in an impersonal “ONE” (*CW*, 2:160). The impersonal concept of God implicit in these mystical moments has led numerous scholars to align Emerson with Eastern mysticism. Thus William James compares Emerson’s mysticism to the quasi-godless creed

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<sup>16</sup> See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen 1926), 172–174.



of Buddhism. "[I]n strictness," James writes, "the Buddhistic system is atheistic. Modern transcendental idealism, Emersonianism, for instance, also seems to let God evaporate into abstract Ideality."<sup>17</sup>

This characteristic of Emersonianism is apparent in the "Over-Soul" essay with its reference to an abstract "ONE." Yet Emerson himself became increasingly aware of the dangers implicit in the mysticism of the "Over-Soul" which absorbed the individual into an overpowering reality. Emerson realized that the merger with the "Over-Soul" left no "I" of the individual soul, but only the "I" of the universal mind. A corollary of this criticism is Emerson's rejection of Eastern mysticism as quietism. For Emerson, Oriental mysticism implied complete willlessness, a passive submission to unimplorable fate (*JMN*, 9:313). The goal of Emerson's mysticism, by contrast, was neither total self-loss in God nor apathetic detachment from concrete experience; rather, Emerson wanted to make use of the world. For him, mystical union was an epistemological necessity that entailed as a necessary complement to see the world as a field of action.<sup>18</sup>

With Böhme, mysticism was not in this way allied with pragmatism. The pragmatic impulse of his mysticism was largely submerged in view of a supernatural salvation. Emerson's mysticism was completely severed from such a hope of supernatural salvation. Mystical experience, for him, had nothing to do with salvation in the next world but rather afforded insight into the guidance of practical life in this world. The mystical "moments of extraordinary experience" were an incitement to the world of practical affairs (*JMN*, 8:10). Emerson did not seek to attain a state of beatitude, as the Oriental mystics did, but rather used "extraordinary experience" actively in poetic creativity. In this context the visionary moment was not a breakthrough to a realm beyond; on the contrary, mystical union, Emerson asserted, is to be attained in this world as an experiential moment and impetus to the active conduct of life. Emerson's mysticism thus took an intensely pragmatic interest in the ordinary.

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<sup>17</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. With a New Introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Collier, 1970), 43.

<sup>18</sup> See Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 86. On Emerson's pragmatism, see Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson Handbook* (New York: Hendricks, 1953), 164-168; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 9-41.

Emerson's rejection of Eastern quietism reappears in his criticism of Böhme. In the "Over-Soul" essay he associates the opening of the religious sense with "insanity," of which he considers Böhme's *Aurora* to be a chief illustration. For Emerson, the "enthusiastic" elements in Böhme—the suddenness and overwhelming nature of religious illumination—did away with normal states of consciousness (*CW*, 2:167). There was, to be sure, an enthusiastic strain in Emerson's own view of mysticism. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, for example, Emerson described Böhme as an "enthusiast who saw ... visions of supernatural glory." These visions, Emerson observed, made Böhme "spend his life in contemplation of spiritual nature" (*EL*, 2:92). In the "Over-Soul" essay Emerson similarly welcomed enthusiasm as a religious exaltation that led to intuitive insight into moral and spiritual truth, but he was far too bound up in his own self-reliant consciousness to give way to the "excess of light" (*CW*, 2:167). Moreover, while the enthusiast, having once been brought into rapport with God, soon reached an exclusive intimate relationship with the divine that required little further improvement, Emerson emphasized the need for progress, for a continuous strive towards the perfection of the "Over-Soul." By submission to the "Supreme Mind," Emerson wrote, the individual soul will "travel a royal road to particular knowledge and powers" and move toward "infinite enlargement of the heart with a power of growth to a new infinity on every side" (*CW*, 2:164, 173). Mystical experience thus involved for Emerson the perpetual growth of the soul; it did not consist in repose but in continuous development and progress.

This insistence on a mystical self-culture points to a rational and conservative element in Emerson's view of mystical experience. With regard to Böhme's "egotism," he thus asserted in the "Method of Nature" that the German mystic's "controversial tracts" "discredit[ed] [him] with the judicious" (*CW*, 3:109). From this "judicious" and intellectual viewpoint, Emerson also advanced his criticism of the "extreme" nature of Böhme's "trances," and he used the German mystic to illustrate: "All religious history contains traces of the trances of saints.... The trances of ... Behmen ... will readily come to mind. But what as readily comes to mind is the accompaniment of disease" (*CW*, 4:55). Emerson rejected this trance-like form of mystical experience represented by Böhme, who was "blasted" away into an ecstatic state of rapture in which "sane" states of consciousness ceased altogether. The normal life heightened was the goal of Emerson's mysticism—life itself is "a work of ecstasy" (*CW*, 2:167; 1:125). In this form of mysticism, mys-

tical experience was not confined to enraptured moments of exaltation; the entire experience of life had mystical significance, and throughout the individual retained a firm grip on himself rather than being rapt away into a realm beyond the here-and-now of experience. This intellectual and pragmatic stance towards mysticism was already marked by Emerson's first biographer, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who after having discovered that Emerson did read Böhme's "controversial tracts," hastened to point out: Emerson "was an intellectual rather than an emotional mystic.... He never let go to the string of his balloon. He never threw over all his ballast of common sense so as to rise above an atmosphere in which a rational being could breathe."<sup>19</sup>

While Emerson criticized the overly enthusiastic features of Böhme's writings, he expressly praised Böhme as a "poet sage" and emphasized his preference for Böhme, the poet-mystic, in favor of Swedenborg in whom he deplored "the entire want of poetry in so transcendent a mind" (*JMN*, 9:360; *CW*, 4:80). For Emerson, there was an interrelatedness of creativity to mystical vision. This aesthetic approach to religious experience is particularly apparent in Emerson's essays "The Poet" and "Inspiration." Both essays show that Emerson found Böhme's theory of mystical inspiration suitable to his own view of the creative process. Inspiration, Emerson asserts, signifies an ecstatic moment in which the poet becomes one with the divine spirit—unchained, powerful, filled with God. The moment of divine inspiration carries all the marks of the mystical union. It transcends the subject-object polarity in a merger of the human soul with the divine spirit. For this view of inspiration Emerson turns to Böhme, who insists that the poet gets his creative power from a source beyond himself and records automatically what he receives through a divine inspiration (*Epistles*, 19).

Böhme's concept of mystical inspiration requires the poet to subordinate his will to divine promptings. Emerson could not have agreed more. Like Böhme, Emerson demands that the poet should be receptive and submissive to the larger voice that speaks to him. He resigns "himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms" and submits "to the nature of things" rather than relying on conscious effort (*CW*, 3:15). Emerson's emphasis on the poet's submissive receptivity does not, however, entail the complete loss of self. Although the poet becomes a vessel filled with divine overflowings, he does not give way to a loss

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<sup>19</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884), 396, 398.

of identity in an ecstatic state of rapture. It is precisely this intellectual stance in Emerson that accounts for the ambivalence in his criticism of Böhme as a poet-mystic. Emerson welcomes Böhme's theory of mystical inspiration, but he insists that this inspiration must not dispense with intellectual power. And in the same way that he would somewhat condescendingly remark of the "inner light" mystic Rebecca Black, "a very good woman with much light in her *heart* but no equal light in her mind," Emerson therefore criticized Böhme for his lack of sufficient "learning" and "training": "His propositions are vague, inadequate & straining" (*L*, 3:26; *JMN*, 9:106).

This criticism shows that Emerson was acutely aware of the problem of language in mystical experience, namely the gulf between the mystical vision itself and the limited possibilities of conventional language. Mystical experience seemed incommunicable, beyond human speech. And yet, Emerson did insist on the need to communicate mystical experience and give it adequate external expression. Only by communicating his experience does the mystic assert his own self. The illuminated mystic poet, the "seer," is therefore always a "sayer" who feels a "desire and need to impart to others the same knowledge and love" (*CW*, 1:84). As both "seer" and "sayer," the mystic poet, Emerson insisted, had to subject his pristine experience to a "controlled" "conversion" into precise, comprehensible form. In terms reminiscent of Neoclassical theories of poetry and thus corroborating the rational stance towards the mystic as a "sayer," Emerson declared: The power of expression "implies a mixture of will, a certain control over the spontaneous states, without which no production is possible. It is a conversion of all nature into the rhetoric of thought, under the eye of judgment, with a strenuous exercise of choice" (*CW*, 2:199). When it came to this "controlled" "conversion" of mystical experience into precise external expression, Böhme left Emerson completely dissatisfied. His works, Emerson charged, were marred by "dark riddle writing" and "mystical narrowness [and] incommunicableness" (*CW*, 4:66, 80; *JMN*, 11:179). The poet-mystic was for Emerson a "natural sayer," "sent into the world to the end of expression" (*CW*, 3:5). The trance-like, overly enthusiastic nature of Böhme's religious illumination, however, which struck Emerson as violent and morbid, rendered the German mystic unable to balance the overwhelming flood of inspiration into adequate external expression. For Emerson, Böhme was thus only a "seer," not a "sayer."

## IV

In the essay "The Poet," Emerson explicitly describes the poetic role of the "seer" and declares that his insight "expresses itself by what is called Imagination, ... a very high sort of seeing" (*CW*, 3:15). Emerson defines "imagination" as the vision that regards the "world as symbolical & pierces the emblem for the real sense, sees all external objects as types" (*JMN*, 5:76). This definition of imagination as symbolic vision presupposes what Emerson variously refers to in his writings as "analogy," "resemblance," "hieroglyph," "sign," or "correspondence"—the idea that there is a consanguinity between matter and spirit, between inner nature and outer (*CW*, 3:9). Emerson refers to Böhme as a writer who is "an analogy-loving soul" and "all imagination" (*JMN*, 13:353; 5:75). He includes Böhme among a group of philosophers who particularly concerned themselves with the "analogy of matter & spirit" (*JMN*, 9:347). In his notebooks, Emerson also marks Böhme's interest in the correspondence between natural law and spiritual law. "[N]ature," Emerson observes, "is only a vast mirror in which man is reflected and ... Behmen ... tried to decipher this hieroglyphic & explain what rock what sand what wood what [stone] fire signified in regard to man" (*TN*, 1:310).

Böhme's emphasis on the analogy of matter and spirit becomes apparent in his doctrine of signature, which he advances most clearly in the *Signata Rerum* (The Signature of All Things). In this treatise, Böhme asserts that all natural things are "signatures" or outer manifestations of the divine power: "The whole outward visible world with all its being is a signature, or figure of the inward spiritual world; whatever is internally and however its operation is, so likewise it has its character externally; like as the spirit of each creature sets forth and manifests the internal form of its birth by its body so does the Eternal Being also" (*Signature*, 91; cf. *Supersensual Life*, 268). This passage is in accord with Emerson's celebrated statement in *Nature* that "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (*CW*, 1:18). For the assertion of the analogy between natural and spiritual facts, Emerson relied in *Nature* largely on Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondence, but what he did find in Böhme, and not in Swedenborg, was the alchemist vision of nature as a rich source for the spiritualization of matter. Thus Emerson readily expresses the idea of correspondence in the imagery of Böhme's theory of signature. In his journals, Emerson had copied from Hilaire's *Histoire de la Philosophie Allemande* the sentence: "According to Boehmen

the world was nothing else than ... the print of a seal of an invisible world concealed in his own bosom" (*JMN*, 8:161). Emerson uses this sentence in the Swedenborg essay and the "American Scholar" to express the analogy between man's soul and nature: "[N]ature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print" (*CW*, 1:55).

Böhme's theory of signature did not only corroborate Emerson's emblematic vision of reality, it also provided him with a theory of "natural language" that was particularly suitable to his poetic theory. For both Emerson and Böhme, language expresses "the radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts" (*CW*, 1:19). In Böhme this correspondence between inner and outer is associated with the "language of nature" which contains the perfect knowledge of things (*Aurora*, 173–177; *Mysterium*, 1:134–135; 338–340). According to Böhme, it was understood by Adam who knew the true name of things and named things after "their essence, form and property" (*Mysterium*, 1:134). Language here achieved a penetration to the truth of things. It was pristine because the connection between name and form was perfect and complete. Böhme argues that this "language of nature" which "let you know the inward power and property by the outward sign," was lost through the fall of man (*Signature*, 6). Each existing language is therefore a distorted, conventional form of the "language of nature," and only in rare moments of divine inspiration can the illuminated mystic recover the lost power of naming things after their essence. These moments "come ... to divine vision" and yield "divine understanding and inclination" (*Epistles*, 119).

This theory of the original "language of nature" which existed before man's fall is echoed in Emerson's essay "The Poet" and in the chapter on language in *Nature*. In "The Poet," Emerson asserts that words were originally the special office of the poet. "[E]ach word was at first a stroke of genius," "a brilliant picture," in which the symbol directly embodied the spiritual fact (*CW*, 3:13). With Böhme, Emerson declares that this "language of nature" was lost by fallen humanity. "The discovery we have made, that we exist ... is called the Fall of Man" and the "corruption of man," Emerson states in *Nature*, was "followed by the corruption of language" (*CW*, 3:43; 1:20). Language deteriorated into "fossil poetry" (*CW*, 3:13). Words were separated from their original sites.

But like Böhme, Emerson insists that the original language can be regained and words be "fasten[ed] ... again to visible things" (*CW*,

1:20). The task of the genius, of the true poet, is to save language from dead forms by constantly making it new. He is a "Namer," a sayer, not a doer. As the natural sayer he makes language correspond immediately to experience. The poet becomes the "Language-maker, naming things ... after their essence, and giving to every one its own name" (*CW*, 3:13). As a "Namer" the poet joins the company of illuminati like Böhme, who know the "language of nature" and discover the "original relation to the universe" (*CW*, 1:7). The poet thus makes use of a form of speech with a special power, a direct relationship with the reality that it signifies. "[W]ords become one with things" (*JMN*, 3:271).

According to Robert Kern, Emerson was encouraged by Guillaume Oegger, French Catholic priest and Swedenborgian philosopher, to assume that the original "language of nature" could be recovered. Oegger's major work, *Le vrai Messie, ou L'Ancien et le Nouveau Testaments, examinés d'après les principes de la langue de la nature* (1829), was translated in part by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and published in 1842 as *The True Messiah; or, the Old and New Testaments Examined According to the Principles of the Language of Nature*, which Emerson saw in manuscript as early as 1835. Oegger's work set out to offer not only a correct reading of the Bible but also to recover the "language of nature" in which, he argued, it was written.<sup>20</sup> In addition to Oegger, Emerson also drew on Böhme for his concept of the "language of nature." In analogy to Böhme's description of Adam's natural language, Emerson characterizes the poet as a "language-maker" who reattaches language to nature, words to things. Böhme thus again turned out to be a useful "helper." Like Oegger, Böhme offered Emerson an alternative to the language of rational discourse and suggested that words had more significance than was readily apparent.

While Emerson initially praised Böhme as an "imaginative [and] analogy-loving soul" and appropriated from his writings support for the assertion of the "radical correspondence" between "natural fact" and "spiritual fact," he increasingly developed a growing dissatisfaction with the theory of correspondence and its advocate Swedenborg (*JMN*, 13:353; *CW*, 1:18). In *Representative Men*, Emerson recants his earlier admiration of the Swedish mystic and ridicules the formalistic nature of his system of correspondences. Emerson further accuses Swedenborg

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<sup>20</sup> See Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism and the American Poem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 49.

of exploiting the theory of correspondence for a dogmatic theological interpretation. His “theological bias,” Emerson argues, “fatally narrowed his interpretation of nature.” “In nature, each individual symbol plays innumerable parts.... Nature avenges herself speedily on the hard pedantry that would chain her waves. She is no literalist.” Swedenborg’s literalism, however, asserted that the meaning of natural objects could be fixed. “His perception of nature is not human and universal,” Emerson charges, “it is mystical and Hebraic. He fastens each natural object to a theologic notion.” And through its “Hebrew symbolism” with its “exclusively theologic direction” his system entirely lacks “individualism” (*CW*, 4:68, 75).

In the essay “The Poet,” Emerson develops the same criticism of “mystical” and “Hebraic” symbolism in connection with Böhme: “Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one. The morning-redness happens to be the favorite meteor to the eyes of Jacob Behmen, and comes to stand to him for truth and faith; and, he believes should stand for the same realities to every reader” (*CW*, 3:20). This criticism of mysticism is largely derived from Emerson’s reading of Coleridge, who defined a “mystic” as “a person [who] mistakes the anomalous misgrowths of his own individuality for ideas, or truths of universal reason.”<sup>21</sup> From Coleridge, Emerson also borrows the application of this definition to Böhme—an application that supported Emerson’s view of Böhme as an extreme enthusiast, bewildered by revelations that did not seem to be sane. Coleridge thus charged that Böhme “mistake[s] the dreams of his own over-excited [n]erves, the phantoms and witcheries from the cauldron of his own seething Fancy, for parts or symbols of a universal Process.”<sup>22</sup>

In keeping with Coleridge’s criticism of Böhme, Emerson argues that the perpetual movement and ceaseless change at the heart of all things defies static symbols which mechanically connect a sign with its spiritual counterpart. Symbols are for Emerson polysemous and reflect the fluidity of the universe. Each individual symbol “plays innumerable parts” and is suggestive of a multiplicity of meanings (*CW*, 4:68).

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<sup>21</sup> Samuel T. Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, 16 vols. to date (London–New York: Routledge, Princeton University Press, 1969–), 10:165.

<sup>22</sup> Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, 12:558. On Coleridge’s debt to Boehme, see Thomas A. McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 325–327.



The poet's task is to see the "accidency and fugacity of the symbol"; he cannot rest in fixed meanings of symbols but always "sees the flowing or metamorphosis" (*CW*, 3:12). And here, Emerson insists, "is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false." The mystic makes use of constricting symbols, the poet creates and works with liberating ones. The latter are "vehicular and transitive" and do not confine because they are based on an understanding of nature as something neither static nor fixed (*CW*, 3:20).

Emerson's criticism of Böhme in "The Poet" is not only aimed at the rigid intransigence of Böhme's mystical symbolism and spiritual formalism; it is, more specifically, also directed against the underlying theological and "Hebraic" principles (*JMN*, 9:107). In the same way that he would criticize Swedenborg for "fasten[ing] each natural object to a theologic notion," Emerson rejects the "theological bias" in Böhme's mystical symbolism in which the morning-redness comes to represent "truth and faith" (*CW*, 4:68; 3:20). Emerson extends this criticism of Böhme's theologically biased symbolism to religion in general: "The history of hierarchies seems to show, that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and at last, nothing but an excess of the organ of language" (*CW*, 3:20). In his journals, Emerson broadens this criticism even further: "Each religion, each philosophy, each civilization, perhaps, is only the immense sequel of one exaggerated symbol: each, that is, is a mysticism" (*JMN*, 9:353).

This rejection of mysticism is, framed into the language of poetic criticism, essentially a restatement of the arguments the "Divinity School Address" advanced against historical Christianity: Spiritual truth cannot be made to conform to dogmatic, formalistic fixations. "Faith" and "truth" cannot be encompassed by one particular symbol such as Böhme's morning redness; rather, truth is something to be discovered and experienced in the flux of life and reveals itself to man in a multiplicity of forms and symbols. What mysticism offers is only a "quite arbitrary and accidental picture of the truth"—in the case of Böhme a "truth ... Behmenized" (*CW*, 4:74; *JMN*, 8:380). In this respect the poet, and not the mystic, assumes the prophetic function that Emerson advocated in the "Address," namely to defy all formalistic and dogmatic approaches to truth. Poets are thus "liberating gods" (*CW*, 3:17).

What emerges from Emerson's criticism of Böhme is an alternative concept of mysticism that is destitute of any "theologic determination,"

a mysticism stripped of its trance-like qualities and brought down to the level of experience. (*CW*, 4:75). It is, moreover, a concept of mysticism that has lost its exclusiveness and is no longer confined to the “trances of saints”: “The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics” (*CW*, 4:55; 3:10). It is this synthesis of the poet and the mystic that Emerson longed for and that seems to have attracted him to Böhme despite the “mystical incommunicableness” and “Hebrew symbolism” of his writings. In a journal entry for 1846, Emerson thus writes in a somewhat nostalgic manner: “In Germany there still seems some hidden dreamer from whom this strange genial poetic comprehensive philosophy comes, & from which the English & French get mere rumours & fragments, which are yet the best philosophy we know. One while we thought that this fontal German was Schelling, then Fichte, Novalis, then Oken, then it hovered about Schleiermacher, & settled for a time on Hegel. But on producing authenticated books from each these masters, we find them clever men, but nothing like so great & deep a poet sage as we looked for. And now we are still to seek for the lurking Behmen of modern Germany” (*JMN*, 9:359–360).

## V

In “The Poet” Emerson laments the absence of a poet sage in America: “We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials” (*CW*, 3:21). The young Emerson saw himself as such a genius elevated in a mystic experience of divine inspiration. In *Nature* a mystical Emerson was a “transparent eyeball,” in “Experience,” however, he is shut in “a prison of glass which [he] cannot see” (*CW*, 3:31). The poet, the mature Emerson sensed, cannot force the visionary moment. It no longer comes spontaneously, effortlessly. As Emerson’s experience of mystical creativity declined, he came to feel that intense moments of mystical vision were unreliable. The experience of uninterrupted creative ecstasy could not be maintained. “We wish,” Emerson wrote in his journals, “to exchange this flash-of-lightning faith for continuous day-light, this fever glow for a benign climate” (*JMN*, 8:99). But there was no such continuity, mystical experience was “only momentary,” confined to “brief moments” (*JMN*, 2:89; *CW*, 2:159).

The belief in divine inspiration seemed even more elusive. Experience taught Emerson that the mystical moments of vision were unsta-

ble and immediate access to infinite creativity increasingly rare. There was not only the scarcity of those moments but also the haunting fear that they might not be real. The mind seemed to fall prey to its own projections, created beauty appeared illusory. Mystical experience gave way to the influx of skepticism. Böhme's mysticism appeared to Emerson to leave no room for such doubt and skepticism. Emerson acutely sensed the simple sincerity and piety of Böhme and was sure that with this "sentiment of piety" Böhme experienced ultimate reality as undubitably present (*JMN*, 11:193). Böhme was aware of this reality with a vividness and vitality that the aging Emerson could only long for.

To Emerson, Böhme was a mystic whose direct inward illumination remained a life-long source for his creative power. Emerson's own faith in immediate mystical insight represented by the "transparent eye-ball" experience, however, waned and with the souring of mystical experience, a gap opened for Emerson between mystical ecstasy and despairing skepticism, between ecstatic certainty and the poverty of actual existence. Emerson called the widening gap the "double consciousness" (*CW*, 1:213). There was the mystically gained assurance of union on the one hand and the aimlessness in a world of alienation on the other. Mystical vision, Emerson sensed, could not suspend the toil of being-in-the-world. There is a "chasm," Emerson wrote in "Montaigne; or the Skeptic," "between the largest promise of ideal power and the shabby experience" (*CW*, 4:104). There was thus for Emerson a rift between mystical vision and its fulfillment that separated the vision from ordinary life. The visionary moment, it seemed, could no longer be transformed into the world of practical affairs.

With the waning of his religious optimism, Emerson abandoned almost all claims to mystical experience. His religious desire to attain to mystical vision began to become unglued. He became more concerned with the elevation of the self than with mystical union and finally turned from the ecstatic certainty of divine destiny to the poverty of actual existence in time and space.<sup>23</sup> A sobered Emerson introduced the concept of "bias" to face his limitations (*CW*, 4:68). In *Representative Men*, Swedenborg appeared as the representative of the mystical bias with the confinements of personal genius. Emerson here conceded the finitude of mystical insight and creative energy available to each individual and acknowledged that genius was often experienced as

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<sup>23</sup> See Gelpi, *Endless Seeker*, 149–151.

mere limitation and bias. The individual no longer had access to a self-evident mystical insight into divine essence.

In the mystical experience recorded in *Nature*, Emerson proclaimed the self as “eye-ball”; the self was irradiated and converted into a seer who resembled the illuminated mystic Emerson recognized in Böhme. When Christopher Cranch caricatured Emerson as a monstrous eye-ball on two spindly legs, he wanted to ridicule the outlandishness in Emerson’s famous metaphor. The aging Emerson also perceived the strangeness in his original conception and realized, moreover, that the visionary stance was not to be had without a deep undercurrent of skepticism and disillusionment. In Böhme Emerson sensed the presence of a longlasting fulfillment issuing from a unique personal vision. But when Emerson portrayed the mystical bias in *Representative Men*, the promise of such a fulfillment had evaporated for him. The limitations that personal bias imposed upon the mystic now predominated. But even a sobered Emerson was still seeking for a “lurking Behmen,” for visionary moments that established a promising perspective and conviction: the possibility that people are all poets *and* mystics. In this vision, the doubts about the truth of religious convictions were laid to rest. Both the poet and the mystic, Emerson believed, had access to the God within. Immediate “knowledge of God,” intuitive apprehension of the divine, still turned out to be “[o]ne of the best cures for Atheism” (*S*, 1:205).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### “A WORLD WITHOUT GOD”: EMERSON AND ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

In May 1873, Charles Eliot Norton met the seventy-year-old Emerson on board the steamer *Olympus*, which was sailing from Liverpool to Boston. Norton encountered a vigorous Emerson who seemed quite recovered from the shock of the burning of his house in 1872. Norton noticed clear signs of Emerson's waning powers, yet he was impressed by his “youthful capacity of enjoyment” and the “youthful ardour of his faith in the goodness of things.” What struck Norton most in the aging man was his “inveterate and persistent optimism.” Emerson's “optimistic philosophy,” Norton judged, “has hardened into a creed.” To Emerson, “this is the best of all possible worlds, and the best of all possible times.”<sup>1</sup>

In the essay “Resources,” published by James Elliot Cabot from Emerson's manuscripts in the volume *Letters and Social Aims* in 1876, one finds Emerson confronting the very opposite of the optimistic philosophy Norton ascribed to him. For Arthur Schopenhauer, Emerson wrote in the essay, “this is the worst of all possible worlds” (*W*, 8:138). The world is essentially—and not just accidentally—wrong and full of frustration, pain, and misery. For Schopenhauer's contemporary critics, this extreme pessimism belonged to a cynical, bitter misanthrope who became a pessimist chiefly because the philosophic world of his time ignored his masterpiece *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The world as will and representation). Schopenhauer was convinced that the significance of this work would immediately be recognized. But when it was published in 1818, it went almost unnoticed for many years and was a virtual failure during most of his lifetime.

Schopenhauer's work broke with the philosophy of his idealistic predecessors and contemporaries. Schopenhauer was the first major German philosopher who called attention to and was profoundly influ-

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*, ed. Sara Norton and M.A. DeWolfe Howe, 2 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1913), 1:512, 506, 503. See also 424. Further citations appear parenthetically as *LN*.

enced by Hindu and Buddhist thought. Assimilating Eastern ways of thinking, Schopenhauer started philosophy “from the body,” in contrast to the idealistic philosophies of thinkers from Kant to Fichte, who departed from consciousness. While Fichte and Schelling emphasized the truth of the absolute and related it to the divine idea, Schopenhauer asserted unitary and unfathomable will as the innermost nature of reality and demolished the traditional ideas of divine purpose and human dignity. And while Hegel conceived the ultimate reality as generating out of itself the world of nature and spirit by a dialectical process, Schopenhauer put forward the “wild,” “impetuous” “impulses” of the will and insisted on the essentially irrational character of the universe.<sup>2</sup> With this insistence on the primacy of “blindly urging” will, Schopenhauer occupied a place apart in the history of German philosophy (*WW*, 1:117). Schopenhauer was necessitarian and deterministic, where traditional idealists adhered to the activity of ideal freedom; he was unrelievedly pessimistic, where they seemed enthusiastically optimistic.

When it came to his career as a philosopher, Schopenhauer was clearly not of his age. Born in Danzig in 1788 of a rich, anglophile, and cosmopolitan family, Schopenhauer was schooled in Germany, France, and England. After studying medicine at the University of Göttingen and philosophy at the University of Berlin, he received his doctorate from the University of Jena in 1813. Yet Schopenhauer, for most of his life, worked outside the mainstream of academic thought and deliberately advertised his opposition to the university philosophy of Hegel, whom he despised as a sophist and charlatan. Schopenhauer’s one brief involvement with academic philosophy met with humiliating failure. The publication of *The World as Will and Representation* had gained him in 1820 an assistant’s position at the University of Berlin. There he chose to give his lectures at the same time as Hegel’s, convinced that the students would soon stop attending lectures of the “intellectual Caliban,” as Schopenhauer used to call the career academic (*WW*, 1:XXI). But Schopenhauer failed to dislodge Hegel, who was then at the height of his reputation and popularity. Left with only a few students, Schopenhauer ceased lecturing and abandoned academic philosophy for good. With the help of a modest inheritance, Schopenhauer

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. Eric F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966–1969), 2:213. Further citations appear parenthetically as *WW*.

pursued his philosophical life outside the university. He settled in Frankfurt am Main in 1833 and remained there, withdrawn and solitary, until his death in 1860.

In all his publications from the 1830s onward, Schopenhauer set out to confirm and amplify the system proposed in *The World as Will and Representation*. These included *On the Will in Nature* (1836), *On the Freedom of the Human Will* (1839), *On the Basis of Morality* (1841), and a second enlarged edition of *The World as Will and Representation* published in two volumes with added essays (1844). But the second edition also received scant attention. It was only with the 1851 publication of *Parerga und Paralipomena*, a collection of philosophical essays, polemical pieces, and popular aphorisms, that Schopenhauer's philosophy won wider recognition. Curiously, however, the decisive contribution to Schopenhauer's fame came from England. In April 1853, the *Westminster Review* published a survey of Schopenhauer's works under the title of “Iconoclasm in German Philosophy.” A milestone in nineteenth-century intellectual history, this review article turned out to be the foundation of Schopenhauer's fame in Britain and America. The author John Oxenford, a dramatic critic for the *Times*, playwright, and distinguished translator, used Schopenhauer as a weapon to attack the Hegelians. In Oxenford's judgment, Schopenhauer distinguished himself as an “ingenious,” “eccentric” and “audacious” author who “subvert[ed] [the] whole system of German philosophy which ha[d] been raised by the university professors.” The most subversive element in Schopenhauer's philosophy, according to Oxenford, was also the most pervasive and consistent—namely, his “ultra-pessimism.”<sup>3</sup> This pessimism, Oxenford judged, set Schopenhauer radically apart from the optimistic and genteel philosophical mainstream.

Within a month, Oxenford's article was translated into German and published in the *Vossische Zeitung*.<sup>4</sup> The translation broke the dam. It was more widely read by German audiences than it had been in England and catapulted Schopenhauer into fame. His ideas were discussed in German periodicals, and his philosophy was made the subject of lectures in a number of universities where audiences were eager to listen to a system developed by someone who was not a professor but

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<sup>3</sup> John Oxenford, “Iconoclasm in German Philosophy,” *Westminster Review* 59 (1853): 389, 407, 388, 407.

<sup>4</sup> Oxenford's essay has been reprinted in both its English and German versions in the *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch* 12 (1923–1925): 115–165.

rather a new type of literary figure, the freelance gentleman philosopher. Accordingly, it was notably non-academic people who provided Schopenhauer with a public—musicians like Richard Wagner, creative writers like Thomas Mann, and lawyers like Johann August Becker and Wilhelm Gwinner. Schopenhauer's first "apostles" and "evangelists," as he used to call them, were primarily self-taught philosophers like Julius Frauenstädt and David Asher. Frauenstädt, Schopenhauer's "arch-evangelist" and ardent admirer, presented the misanthropic pessimist as a passive victim of academic ignorance. Yet finally, Schopenhauer rose to become one of the dominant voices in academic philosophy. His first influential epigone was Eduard von Hartmann, whose work *Die Philosophie des Unbewussten* (The philosophy of the unconscious) (1869) supplemented Schopenhauer's ideas with Hegelian and Schellingian condiments. The young Nietzsche also came under Schopenhauer's spell and read his philosophy as a symptom of the nihilistic trend of modernity. By the end of the nineteenth century, the misanthropic "sage of Frankfurt" had become a classic of philosophy and enjoyed a reputation comparable to Hegel's.

New England audiences received their first exposure to Schopenhauer through Oxenford's article. The article had a comparatively large readership since the *Westminster Review* was widely circulated in the United States and also appeared in an American edition.<sup>5</sup> For the Transcendentalist men of letters, the April issue of the *Review* was available in Boston at the Athenaeum. Of the Transcendentalist camp, George Ripley and Frederic Henry Hedge owned and read Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in the original German. Both also studied Hartmann's exposition of Schopenhauer's ideas in *Die Philosophie des Unbewussten*.<sup>6</sup> An American edition of the English translation of Schopenhauer's masterpiece appeared in Boston in 1887. Prior to that, only an edition of selected essays was brought out by a Milwaukee firm in 1881 for its German-American trade.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 2:129–130. Emerson's remark in *Letters and Social Aims* that Schopenhauer designated this world as "the worst of all possible worlds" (*WW*, 2:583) is probably a quotation from Oxenford's article.

<sup>6</sup> See Frothingham, *Ripley*, 46, 286; Frederic Henry Hedge, "Arthur Schopenhauer," *Christian Examiner* 76 (1864): 46. Further quotations from this article will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>7</sup> By 1911 all of Schopenhauer's major books had been translated into English, with the exception of *Parerga und Paralipomena*, which was not completely translated until 1974 by Eric F.J. Payne. See also Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 685 n. 96.



According to Henry August Pochmann, American publishers “apparently subscribed to the common opinion that Schopenhauer, while consonant with the decadent European temper of the time, had no relevance for the optimistic progressivism of America.”<sup>8</sup> But when it came to New England audiences, Schopenhauer turned out to be of considerable interest. In January 1864, Hedge became the first New Englander to make the American public acquainted with Schopenhauer in a substantial essay in the *Christian Examiner*. Hedge, also known as “Germanicus” Hedge, delved deeply into the intricacies of Schopenhauer’s philosophy. William T. Harris noted approvingly that “in contrast to the many crude statements [made] in regard to German Philosophy,” Hedge presented an impressive analysis.<sup>9</sup> Emerson, however, was not impressed. “A journalist in London or in New York,” Emerson wrote in his journals in 1864, “acquires a facility & élan which throws the slow elaborators for the Edinburgh & the North American into the shade.” Thus when Emerson came across a newspaper article titled “Buddhism in Europe: Schopenhauer” in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* of 13 May 1864, he judged that this “lively” contribution was far superior to Hedge’s “learned” article (*JMN*, 15:55–56). Going back to Oxenford’s article, the contribution in the *Commercial Advertiser* described Schopenhauer’s pessimistic metaphysics of the will. In his journals, Emerson quoted and paraphrased parts of the *Commercial Advertiser* article. What particularly struck Emerson in the article was Schopenhauer’s interest in Buddhism and his immediate reaction against Hegelian idealism.

Schopenhauer also offered Emerson the point of departure for a new psychological anthropology. Writing for the *Christian Examiner* in March 1866, the Unitarian Charles C. Everett emphasized Schopenhauer’s “splendid contributions to psychology.”<sup>10</sup> As Everett observed, neither the divine nor the material, neither consciousness nor thought was Schopenhauer’s starting point—but instead the human being governed by a blind and deep-lying process of striving and desiring. This criticism of the psychological substructure of Schopenhauer’s pessimism was echoed by the St. Louis Hegelians who formed around William

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<sup>8</sup> Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 685 n. 96. The American reception of Schopenhauer is discussed in Elisabeth Hurth, “‘The High Priest of Pessimism’: Emerson and Schopenhauer,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 47 (2001): 212–240.

<sup>9</sup> William T. Harris, “Notes and Discussions: Frederic H. Hedge,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 11 (1877): 107.

<sup>10</sup> Charles C. Everett, “The Secret of Hegel,” *Christian Examiner* 80 (1866): 201.

T. Harris and his *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Emerson, who owned the first three volumes of the *Journal*, found here another channel for interest in Schopenhauer. In the pages of the *Journal* Schopenhauer emerged as the antirationalist and pessimistic opponent of Hegelian idealism, concerned with unconscious drives and convinced of the hopeless predicament of the individual subject.<sup>11</sup>

## I

By the 1870s, Schopenhauer's name had become more closely associated with pessimism than any other writer's. But there was also another line of criticism that subsumed Schopenhauer's philosophy under the banner of atheism. Thus for Emerson, Schopenhauer's pessimism was the work of "a low, hopeless spirit" with no "gratitude to the Cause of Causes" (*W*, 8:138). Similarly, Hedge's article in the *Christian Examiner* described Schopenhauer's bleak vision of the world as a "pessimism [that] legitimately follows atheism" (77). In January 1865, Herman J. Warner, also writing for the *Christian Examiner*, called attention to the atheistic implications of Schopenhauer's Buddhism. The Buddhist Schopenhauer, Warner observed, contended that all of life was suffering—"Leben ist Leiden"—which only an end to desire could permanently extinguish. For Warner, this Buddhist view was neither mysticism nor religion but rather "spirituality without a soul" and "a world without God." In July 1873, Ernst Gryzanovski commented in similar terms on Schopenhauer's Buddhist philosophy of resignation. The fact that Schopenhauer extolled "self-annihilation" as the ultimate goal of the good life was to Gryzanovski a clear sign of an ethical atheism demolishing all supernatural elements. Studying the phenomenon of "atheism in philosophy," Hedge identified Schopenhauer in 1884 as the advocate of a "philosophic atheism" that denied a "supermundane, conscious intelligence." Schopenhauer's system, Hedge judged, "ruthlessly sets aside" "all worthy beliefs, all high ideals, ... all cherished hopes" and "leaves us nothing but a blind and pitiless force, an unreasoning, unreasonable fate."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See William R. Morse, "Schopenhauer and Von Hartmann," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 11 (1877): 152–156.

<sup>12</sup> Herman J. Warner, "The Last Phase of Atheism," *Christian Examiner* 78 (1865): 79, 86. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically; Ernst Gryzanovski, "Arthur

This gloomy position notwithstanding, Schopenhauer had a considerable personal appeal to New England audiences. His writings presented a complete departure from the “abstractionism” and “hair-splitting abstruseness” that New Englanders had come to associate with the post-Kantians from Fichte to Hegel. The “life-warm realism” of Schopenhauer’s doctrines—the directness and seriousness with which he confronted philosophical issues of life like suffering and frustration—struck a chord in Transcendentalists like Hedge, Ripley, and Emerson, who did not find their way into the intellectual gymnastics of Hegel’s “word-juggling” “metaphysic.”<sup>13</sup> Ripley even went so far as to assert that Schopenhauer’s readable “doctrine of the will ... shed light on some of the divine mysteries.”<sup>14</sup>

By turning away from conceptual thinking to the powers of intuition and the irrational, Schopenhauer also attracted in particular individuals outside philosophy—creative writers like Herman Melville and essayists like Edmund Clarence Stedman. Overall, the American reception of Schopenhauer’s philosophy was marked by a significant shift of interest already latent in Hedge’s substantial article in the *Christian Examiner*. As Hedge readily admitted, he had “chosen” in his article “rather to present the man than the system” (71). Subsequent responses to Schopenhauer’s doctrines transferred the focus even more from the philosophical system to the man who produced it. Emerson, too, knew much more about Schopenhauer than he knew about his philosophy. Virtually all American contributions to the study of Schopenhauer were filled with anecdotes about the private life of this hostile exile from the academic establishment, extending from stories about his eccentric misanthropism to rumors about his self-chosen isolation. Thus Francis Bowen set out in his history of modern philosophy to present Schopenhauer as “eminently a bad man,” a “hater of this world,” full of “impudence and recklessness.” This personal turn in the Schopenhauer reception, the intellectual entertainment Schopenhauer offered with both his eccentric private life and his notorious pessimism worked to increase his popularity. In 1892, Josiah Royce, whose tenacious voluntarism was indebted to Schopenhauer, could assert before an audi-

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Schopenhauer and His Pessimistic Philosophy,” *North American Review* 117 (1873): 71. Hedge, *Atheism in Philosophy*, 3, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Hedge, *Atheism in Philosophy*, 67, 69, 116.

<sup>14</sup> George Ripley, “Notes on Philosophy,” 1877–1880, Massachusetts Historical Society; quoted in Crowe, *Ripley*, 259.

ence at Harvard that in America Schopenhauer was better known than “any other modern continental metaphysician, except Kant.”<sup>15</sup>

The impact of Schopenhauer’s pessimism on New England writers and philosophers was notably registered in Edgar Evertson Saltus’s widely circulated and extremely popular *Philosophy of Disenchantment* (1885). This pocket exposition of the doctrines of Schopenhauer and Hartmann described Schopenhauer’s departure from the strain of optimism. According to Saltus, Schopenhauer offered a bleak picture of mankind as doomed to fate and a deterministic cycle of misery. Throughout his study, Saltus highlighted the Emersonian character of Schopenhauer’s philosophy and concluded that Schopenhauer, the “high priest of pessimism,” presented “Emerson in black.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, critics in Emerson’s day discovered in his late essays an essential blackness that went beyond the quiet disillusionment and acquiescence modern scholars have attributed to the elder Emerson.

The dark side of Emerson’s genius does have some points of kinship with Arthur Schopenhauer. This affinity sheds light on largely overlooked aspects of the aged Emerson whose darkness was of a different quality than the resigned acceptance of fated limitations that critics have described for the Emerson of the 1850s. According to John Michael, Emerson’s “engagement with skepticism” was “far more severe ... than has been admitted.”<sup>17</sup> In this context the comparison between Emerson and Schopenhauer takes on added value because it challenges the standard portrayal of Emerson’s skeptic vision. The acquiescence and skepticism of the Emerson who expressed himself in “Fate” is not identical with the resignation that distinguished the older Emerson of the 1860s and 1870s. Confronted with Schopenhauer’s philosophy, the aged Emerson made clear that for him skepticism was “slow suicide” (*W*, 8:138) and never wavered in his commitment to “affirmation”—the “sign of a truly healthy and vigorous soul” (*LN*, 1:425). In the shifting patterns of light and darkness in Emerson’s late work one may discover similarities to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, but ultimately the gulf between Schopenhauer and the aged Emerson is

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<sup>15</sup> Francis Bowen, *Modern Philosophy, from Descartes to Schopenhauer and Hartmann* (1877; 5th ed.; New York: Scribner, 1887), 389, 390; Josiah Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1892), 228. See also Christopher Janaway, *Self and World in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Edgar Evertson Saltus, *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* (1885; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1970), 36, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism*, XI.

undeniable. The one preaches pessimism, the other optimistic amelioration; the one denial and renunciation, the other affirmation and strength.

Following Stephen E. Whicher, several critics detect a “progressive loss of hope” in Emerson’s writings.<sup>18</sup> With the waning of his own religious enthusiasm, the elder Emerson seemed to lapse into a sobered view of life and a resigned submission to fate. According to Michael Lopez, Emerson’s fatalism and resignation may be most accurately situated in the context of “that modern tradition of continental thought . . . that, in the course of its development, placed ever-increasing emphasis on ‘power’ and ‘will.’”<sup>19</sup> Given this emphasis, long before encountering Schopenhauer Emerson was predisposed to be receptive to the idea that the will should play a dominant role in philosophy. In addition, a related concern with the psychological underpinnings of the will was already latent in Emerson’s thought. Thus both Emerson’s and Schopenhauer’s concepts of the will recognized the importance of unconscious elements. When it came to Schopenhauer’s turning away from the spirit, however, Emerson was not prepared to follow the German pessimist. As a denier of the soul Schopenhauer deprived the will of all spiritual ends and teleological sense. For Emerson, by contrast, the realms of the spiritual remained sovereign throughout his life. The soul, Emerson was convinced, is the “master” of the will (*CW*, 2:161).

According to Lopez, Emerson’s fatalism stemmed from a “steadfast vision of existential struggle between mind and nature, freedom and fate.”<sup>20</sup> In confronting this existential tension, the aging Emerson showed a remarkable sensitivity to the same themes that dominated Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Particularly congenial to Emerson were Schopenhauer’s opinions on free will versus determinism and his emphasis on the illusive perceptions of reality. In the discussion of these concepts both Emerson and Schopenhauer strayed from the Western tradition and incorporated Eastern thought. At this juncture there was about the aging Emerson an unmistakably Schopenhauer-

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<sup>18</sup> David Robinson, “Emerson and the Challenge of the Future: The Paradox of the Unachieved in ‘Circles,’” *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978): 245.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Lopez, “*The Conduct of Life*: Emerson’s Anatomy of Power,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 259–260. On Emerson’s shift from optimism to gestures of acquiescence, see Whicher, *Freedom and Fate*; and Barbara L. Packer, *Emerson’s Fall. A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> Lopez, “*The Conduct of Life*,” 260.

rian air of resignation and pessimism. Basic notions in Emerson's notebook "Orientalist" and the late essays with their dark thoughts on fate are all Schopenhauerian. Yet Emerson cannot be regarded as a pessimist or atheist in the Schopenhauerian sense. Emerson's thought did not resolve into a full-blown philosophical pessimism but rather stayed within affirmative resignation; fatalism and pessimism, that is, were never absolute for him. Unlike Schopenhauer, he was always skeptical of the Buddhist tendency to submit to a disposing fate—adhering instead to an optimistic form of fatalism that never fell into the cold embrace of Schopenhauer's despair. To Schopenhauer's motto "*Leben ist Leiden*" Emerson answered that "affirmatives" remained and comforted through all suffering. With a philosophy like Schopenhauer's "which sees only the worst," Emerson was convinced, "the sky shuts down before us" (*W*, 8:138).

## II

Commenting on Schopenhauer's "invectives against Hegel," Oxenford stressed that Schopenhauer philosophized outside and in hostile independence of the academic philosophy of his day. Oxenford noted in particular that Schopenhauer, unlike the Hegelian "metaphysicians" with their "strangely reasoned" and highly technical philosophies, put forward a down-to-earth and "comprehensible system" with "perfectly intelligible arguments." Similarly, as the first American reviewer, Hedge argued that Schopenhauer's appeal stemmed largely from his stature as a highly literary writer outside the academic world. Hegel, by contrast, only seemed to offer an "unintelligible" speculative discourse that "rejoiced" in "abstractions" and "mystified" the audience. Building abstraction upon abstraction, Hegel arrived at "airy nothings" and lost sight of the "facts" and the common-sense experience with which Schopenhauer set out to work.<sup>21</sup>

This rejection of Hegel's methodological unfolding of dialectical reason repeated Schopenhauer's own devastating critique of Hegel's philosophy in *The World as Will and Representation*. For Schopenhauer, Hegel was a pompous and obscurantist career academic whose philosophy

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<sup>21</sup> Oxenford, "Iconoclasm in German Philosophy," 392, 393; Hedge, *Atheism in Philosophy*, 67, 114.

constituted a science of pure concepts. Hegel produced what were in Schopenhauer's view wholly misconceived and abstractionist thoughts about the world. With his idea of an eternal dialectical process Hegel was, Schopenhauer charged, not really interested in truth at all but only concerned to mystify and bemuse his audience. Hegel thus evinced himself as a dishonest “charlatan” masquerading as a philosopher, who in reality only sought to achieve mere effect (*WW*, 2:70).

What Schopenhauer aimed at was a philosophy concerned more with the world of everyday objects and less with the world of airy abstractions. Emerson could not have agreed more. His earthly idealism had no use for purely conceptual systems. Emerson arrived at Hegel via Stallo's *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature* and James Hutchison Stirling's *Secret of Hegel* (1865). What he found there was a metaphysics congenial to his concept of nature, yet he felt alienated by an “abstract philosophy” that seemed to him overly intellectualized and merely “structural” (*JMN*, 11:187). But after Stallo began to launch Hegel's ideas into the mainstream of American thought, Emerson increasingly found himself surrounded by friends who pressed Hegel on him. Thus in the 1850s Emerson read more and more in secondary sources, largely at the urging of his friends Hedge and Cabot. Amos Bronson Alcott also repeatedly induced Emerson to delve into the Hegelian system. But Emerson remained unsympathetic toward Hegel on several counts. Although he expressed his thanks to Cabot, in 1855, for having lent him some volumes of Hegel, he had to confess that he did “not find [his] way into Hegel as readily as [he had] hoped” (*L*, 4:530–531). Emerson rejected the intricate reasoning of the system-maker Hegel, whose metaphysical subtlety seemed irreconcilable with his own informal method, and was content for a long time to rest his case with James Murdock, who characterized Hegel in his *Sketches of Modern Philosophy* as the “most unintelligible writer” he had ever read.<sup>22</sup>

In 1867 Harris, who established the St. Louis Philosophical Society as a chief American center of Hegelian thought, tried to stir again Emerson's interest in Hegel. But Emerson now showed even less skill or interest in Hegelian dialectics. From Concord he wrote Harris that at first sight he did not find Hegel “engaging nor at second sight satisfying” (*L*, 5:521). By the late 1860s, he exhibited a remarkably

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<sup>22</sup> Murdock, *Sketches of Modern Philosophy*, 120.

restrained acceptance of his own physical and mental decline, and as he acknowledged the cessation of his inner life, the old aversion to the technicalities of metaphysics became stronger than ever. "When I fish in Hegel," Emerson confessed, "I cannot get a bite; in addition the labor is so hard in reading him, that I get a headache." The aged Emerson intuited the significance of Hegel's position on the self-evolution of spirit, but he was no longer willing and able to plumb the technical groundwork of the system. Hegel's involved logic and dialectical intricacies were for the aged Emerson only "dry bones of thought."<sup>23</sup>

"Metaphysicians" like Stirling and Harris were, Emerson sensed acutely, the philosophers of the future. Emerson's own powers and energies declined and his voice was fading away while an ambitious and energetic Harris sought to contribute to "progress in Speculative Philosophy" (*L*, 6:104). Uneasy with such progress, Emerson may have appreciated the fact that his resistance to Hegel found considerable confirmation in Schopenhauer. Thus Emerson read with particular interest in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* that Schopenhauer denounced Hegel as an "impostor" (*JMN*, 15:56). As this article made clear, Hegel was for Schopenhauer a "hypertranscendental and mountebank-like philosopher." From Stirling came further corroboration for a rejection of Hegel. Thus Emerson learned from Stirling's *Secret of Hegel* that Schopenhauer was "the ugliest of all the missiles which ha[d] ever yet been flung at Hegel."<sup>24</sup>

For Emerson, this missile could be of use. His resistance to the dialectical technicalities of Hegelian thought was akin to Schopenhauer's rejection of Hegel as a proponent of absolute, pure thought. What the anti-Hegelian Schopenhauer offered to Emerson was less ponderous and technical in its expression and empirical rather than abstract in content. For Emerson as for Schopenhauer, the degree of abstractionism underlying Hegelian philosophy produced a self-enclosed system of thought lacking an experiential human dimension. "Bacon or Kant, or Hegel," Emerson wrote in his journals, "propound some maxim which is the key note of philosophy thenceforward; but I am more interested

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<sup>23</sup> Denton J. Snider, *A Writer of Books in His Genesis* (St. Louis: Sigma, 1910), 330; quoted in Pochmann, *New England Transcendentalism*, 55, 56.

<sup>24</sup> "Buddhism in Europe. Schopenhauer," *New York Commercial Advertiser* May 13 1864, 1. James Hutchison Stirling, *The Secret of Hegel*, 2 vols. (1865; reprint, Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), 1:75.



to know, that, when at last they hurled out their deep word, it is only some familiar experience of every man in the street” (*JMN*, 14:267–268).

But as much as the aged Emerson welcomed Schopenhauer’s rejection of Hegel, he was not prepared to follow the German philosopher’s pessimism. When it came to this pessimism, Emerson preferred to side with the “optimist” Hegel after all. Reviewing Stirling’s *Secret of Hegel*, Charles C. Everett noted that the “system of Schopenhauer” was “by its very nature pessimistic,” whereas the “system of Hegel,” “being the incarnation of thought,” was “of necessity optimistic.”<sup>25</sup> Hedge’s article on Schopenhauer in the *Christian Examiner* spelled out for Emerson what Schopenhauer’s pessimism entailed. According to Hedge, Schopenhauer insisted that one had direct access to reality through the will, a striving power without purpose and design. From here, Hedge observed, followed a “verdict on human things ... full of despair;” a vision of endless, ultimately meaningless struggle for existence full of conflict and tension (77). Emerson grasped the general significance of Schopenhauer’s “verdict” but did not delve into his metaphysics of will. Hedge’s “learned” article suggested to Emerson that Schopenhauer, too, was to be considered as a “metaphysician” whose philosophical groundwork amounted to an intellectual gymnastics that the aged Emerson could not master. “[I]n Germany,” Emerson wrote in *Letters and Social Aims*, “we have seen a metaphysical *zymosis* culminating in Kant, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and so ending” (*W*, 8:131–132). As for Hegel’s and Schopenhauer’s metaphysical systems, Emerson primarily saw in them “vast kingdoms of thought” (*CW*, 5:136), and these were “dreary” in his opinion. “I want not the metaphysics, but only the literature of them,” Emerson wrote in his journals in 1868, “the man who can humanise this fine science & give me the results” (*JMN*, 16:117). In this context Hegel and Schopenhauer appeared as “clever men, but nothing like so great [and] deep a poet sage as [Emerson] looked for” (*JMN*, 9:359–360).

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<sup>25</sup> Everett, “The Secret of Hegel,” 202.

## III

Schopenhauer claimed that his philosophy grew out of Kant's, as from its "parent stem" (*WW*, 1:501). "*Kant's greatest merit*," Schopenhauer asserted, "*is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself*" (*WW*, 1:417). According to Kant, knowledge concerns phenomena only. Man has no knowledge of transcendent entities. "Noumena," things as they are in themselves, are beyond the range of all possible human experience. What human understanding yields are, in Schopenhauer's terms, "representations" (*WW*, 1:25). "The world," thus begins the famous first sentence of Schopenhauer's masterpiece, "is my representation" (*WW*, 1:3). The world is what presents itself in a subject's experience. All objects of the perceptual world are objects only for the subject and thus have no independent existence.

But for Schopenhauer the world was more than mere "representation" and, as Hedge and other reviewers noted, he therefore proceeded to philosophize in a fashion that Kant himself had deemed inadmissible. Schopenhauer admitted that "the thing-in-itself," the noumenal reality that underlies the world of phenomenal appearances, cannot be recognized through the veil of the forms of perception, but he insisted that it "must be in some way accessible" (*WW*, 2:182). Apart from the perceptual experience of the phenomenal world, there is, according to Schopenhauer, yet another experience—that of an inner, volitional reality within one's own body. Through direct intuition in self-consciousness, man is also aware of himself "*from within*" as will or "will to live"—that is, as a striving, desiring, willing being. Thus "a way *from within* stands open to us to that real inner nature of things" (*WW*, 2:195). The inner consciousness we have of ourselves as will is Schopenhauer's key to the "thing-in-itself." "[T]he inner nature of every thing is *will*" and what we know directly and intimately as will is the "thing-in-itself" (*WW*, 2:197).

This is the "single thought" of Schopenhauer's work—the world is what is represented in experience by the subject, but the world is also an expression of a deeper reality that objectifies itself in the multiplicity of things (*WW*, 1:XII). We have access to this reality as it is in itself simply because we in our own true nature are that reality. "[W]e are not merely the *knowing subject*," Schopenhauer insists, "but ... *we ourselves* are also among those realities or entities we require to know... [*W*]e ourselves are the *thing-in-itself*" (*WW*, 2:195). Thus man can lift the ideal veil of appearances and arrive at nonrepresentational knowledge of the

transcendental world. The impenetrability of the Kantian “thing-in-itself” is overcome.

Drawing on the *Commercial Advertiser* article, Emerson described this philosophy of the will in commonsensical terms that shrank from the technical formulations of Schopenhauer’s theory of knowledge. Emerson jumped into the introductory premise of Schopenhauer’s main work: The world is man’s representation, his “idea.” Knowledge is restricted to the phenomenal world. Man knows an object not as it exists in itself. The world as “idea” or “representation” does not appear as it ultimately is. The “world which we all ... see,” Emerson noted in his journals, “is only a phenomenal world.” This world seems to have no real existence, it is only an illusion. The uncertainties of the phenomenal world constitute a veil that prevents man from grasping the “real world,” the noumenal reality. But according to Schopenhauer, Emerson observed, man does have access to this reality. “Above” the phenomenal world, “at a tremendous distance, we find the real world” (*JMN*, 15:56). In this rendition of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, the insistence on the illusory nature of the phenomenal world is outweighed by the confidence that the noumenal reality is not an unresolved mystery. The world as “idea” is not the only side of the world; there is also a different side “above” it, the side of its inmost nature and “this real world,” Emerson concluded with Schopenhauer, “is the will” (*JMN*, 15:56).

In his quotations and paraphrases from the *Commercial Advertiser* article, Emerson showed little interest in the specifics of Kantianism. He did not equate Kant’s “thing-in-itself” with the will, although Hedge had made the identification explicit. Schopenhauer’s conception of the will obviously impressed Emerson as a unifying principle and all-encompassing category. For Schopenhauer, he observed, “at the bottom of all things, there is only one identical force, always equal, & ever the same, which slumbers in plants, awakens in animals, but finds its consciousness only in man—the Will” (*JMN*, 15:56).

“The word *will*, as used by Schopenhauer,” the *Commercial Advertiser* article made clear, “does not mean exactly what we usually understand by the term.”<sup>26</sup> The early Emerson used the term without the volitional underpinnings characteristic of Schopenhauer’s metaphysical will. For Schopenhauer, the will was the all-governing power of the

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<sup>26</sup> “Buddhism in Europe: Schopenhauer,” 1.

world, sovereign over the self, whereas for the early Emerson the will pertained to the act of choice, the willing faculty as a power of the soul. Emerson's understanding of this power was embedded in Puritan psychology, the emphasis on the will's self-certitude of salvation. The point of reference for the early Emerson was Jonathan Edwards's notion of the primacy of the will's inclination in the experience of salvation. Here the will, which is also called the heart, is the seat of affections. "The affections," Edwards wrote, "are no other, than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul."<sup>27</sup> It is the "sense of the heart" that assures one of God's grace and offers the experience of regeneration. A change in the inclination of the will is brought about by grace. God's will is the cause of all things. His sovereign will is primary. The human will is a representation of the sovereign will of God.

Emerson repudiated the determination of the elect and reprobate by the immutable will of God. For Emerson, man is not by nature damned or helplessly dependent on grace. "God," Emerson was convinced, "has wrought man in a perfect mould, quickened him with exquisite senses." (*JMN*, 2:122) Yet the early Emerson was at one with Edwards in insisting on the sovereignty of God's will. "[T]he intimate unconditional sovereignty which God holds over this being," Emerson wrote, "implies the most unreserved submission to his will on the part of the creature" (*JMN*, 2:121). The transcendental Emerson still adhered to this traditional belief in the subordination of human will to the sovereign will of God. Thus the "Divinity School Address" announced the "sublime creed that the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will . . . and whatever opposes that will is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made so, and not otherwise" (*CW*, 1:78). This "creed" requires submission to the divine will, "the only will that can be supposed predominant a single hairbreadth beyond the lines of individual action & influence as known to experience" (*JMN*, 7:167).

For the transcendental Emerson, the submission to the divine will carries the signature of the God "within" (*CW*, 2:170). The acquiescence in the absolute confirms the immanence of divine energies. In this sense will becomes the "effluence of Reason," of the "highest faculty of the soul" (*EL*, 2:152; *L*, 1:412). The soul is "master of the intel-

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (1746; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 96.

lect and the will,” but there is also a divinely designed correspondence between soul and will through which the will becomes “a hint of the presence of the living God” (*CW*, 2:161; *JMN*, 4:300). Emerson thus raised the will to divinity and sealed the immanence of God in man. In this context, the will is no longer physical in provenance; it is rather “will spiritual” (*JMN*, 12:559; cf. 12:409).

Emerson’s belief in “the omnipotence of the will spiritual” contrasted sharply with Schopenhauer’s insistence on the self-determining power of the will (*JMN*, 12:559). Emerson’s concept of the “will spiritual” recognized “the divine *aura* which breathes through forms” (*W*, 3:26). Schopenhauer, however, located this aura in blind urges and strives. Emerson approached will in terms of spirit and subsumed it under essentially theological premises. Schopenhauer shifted from spirit to will, to will as an unreasoning impulse on which neither divine promptings nor spiritual forces bestow any theological significance. Schopenhauer’s will is acausal—it is the ground of its own existence—and it is ateleological. It has no grand design, no divine purpose, and no supreme end. Nobody knows why the will wills as it does. The will is without a trace of meaning or rational guidance. It is only a blind striving to perpetuate itself. Unanimously, American reviewers observed that this concept of the will entailed atheism. For Emerson, as for Hedge and Ripley, the will had a transcendent mooring and thus incarnated spiritual power. Schopenhauer, by contrast, Hedge judged, put “nothing behind his will, no God, no nature, no person, no substance” (73). The “prince of atheists,” as Hedge titled Schopenhauer, merely “consign[ed] the idea of God, of a spiritual world, and all kindred ideas, to the limbo of chimaeras and unrealities.”<sup>28</sup> When it came to these atheistic and nihilistic premises, there was an enormous gulf between Emerson’s and Schopenhauer’s visions. Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the will seemed irreconcilable with Emerson’s worship of the will.

Emerson did enter Schopenhauerian territory, however, in that for him the will, conceived as a power of choosing, did not follow intellectualist premises. Again, Emerson here had very little direct debt to Schopenhauer and the relationship was one of convergence rather than influence. Yet one can squarely identify a Schopenhauerian strain running through Emerson’s claim that the will is more fundamental to man

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<sup>28</sup> Hedge, *Atheism in Philosophy*, 81, 75–76.

than knowledge. The act of willing is not subject to the dictate of the understanding. Like Schopenhauer, Emerson celebrated an “elemental power” in man that is not “conscious power” but rather “instinct” (*CW*, 1:42). This “instinct” or “unconscious will,” Emerson agreed with Schopenhauer, is placed above the conscious will or understanding. At this juncture, both Emerson and Schopenhauer anticipated later theories of the unconscious parts of the mind. For Schopenhauer, the will was a stronger and deeper force than conceptualizing reason; it was a driving force deep inside the psyche, and one that did not, as traditionally believed, rest on rationality. For Emerson, too, the “deeper causes” within man were located in the unconscious (*EL*, 2:172). Unlike Schopenhauer, however, he incorporated the unconscious will in the higher “reason,” in intuited spiritual insight rising from the unconscious, thus giving it divine sanction. The spiritual impulses found deep within the self have a transcendent source. The power of the “Unconscious” is “ever the act of God himself” (*JMN*, 4:309–310). In this context the higher “reason” emerges as a disciplined and spiritualized instinct—a theory completely at odds with Schopenhauer’s strain of irrationalism and anti-spiritualist voluntarism.

Schopenhauer’s will is an undirected impelling force. Hence the principal essence of reality is accessible not by objective means but subjectively by irrational desires, needs and affections—personal feelings largely unknown in notions of the rational and self-transparent subject of knowledge. This demystification of will measures Schopenhauer’s distance from what Emerson approached as a divine power located within the self. For Emerson, the perspective from within—the way to the root of the psyche—was a matter of faith, of subordination to spiritual aspirations. With Schopenhauer, nothing could be predicated of a transcendent mooring or of its manifestation in the universe.

As a desiring, emotional being Schopenhauer’s man has immediate access to his willing and hence to the underlying thing itself—in himself. And here it is not only the bodily action that is will but the body itself: “The act of will and the action of the body are not two different states objectively known.... [T]hey are one and the same thing” (*WW*, 1:100). Hence everything manifests blind, endless will. With this emphasis on the physical side of the self, Schopenhauer, unlike Emerson, put the body ahead of the soul and thus elevated what Friedrich Nietzsche later referred to as the “mighty ruler” transcending the “I.” Behind the “I,” Nietzsche’s Zarathustra argues, there stands “a mighty ruler, an unknown sage—whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your

body.”<sup>29</sup> With Emerson, the “unknown sage” is still a transparent sign of spirit and leaves the dignity of man intact. To deemphasize spirit in favor of physical forces, as Schopenhauer did, was for Emerson therefore to “dispirit” man (*W*, 8:138).

#### IV

In his article for the *Christian Examiner* in January 1865, Herman J. Warner set out to describe “a strange phase of contemporary thought,” namely, the “*Renaissance Orientale*” (78). According to Warner, this “renaissance” showed in particular in the rising appeal of Buddhism in Europe. Warner acknowledged the moral stature of Buddha, the “sage,” yet overall he accepted the cliché that Buddhism was escapist and nihilist (83). For Warner, the negations of Buddhism were antagonistic to American optimism and religious belief. Buddhism, Warner believed, purported to be a religion, but in effect it dispensed with the concept of deity altogether. “It has not even the confused and vague notion of the universal Spirit in which ... the human soul will lose itself at last” (85). Buddhism was for Warner an atheism without God but also without matter. These realities, Warner judged, were submerged in “nothingness” (85).

Buddhism thus appeared as a philosophy of effacement and denial, teaching that man’s goal was ultimate “extinction.” For Warner, Buddhist nirvana was a blank avowal of “renunciation” and “annihilation.” The “object of life” was the “systematic suppression of all the faculties”—a “liberation” “devised by throwing off all that was personal [and] by destroying in one’s self all the attributes that distinguish one from others” (84). Warner also argued against the pessimistic and fatalistic features of Buddhism: its denial of natural desires, its “contempt of the human person, and abasement of the human will” (87). According to Buddhism, Warner observed, the phenomenal world does not exist. Thus “there can be nothing true or real in the world,—only appearances” (84).

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<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 146. See also Jeffrey Steele, *The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 69, which comments on the nineteenth century’s discovery of the body.

According to Warner, it was “in Arthur Schopenhauer that the philosophy of the East ... found its fullest recognition in Europe” (78). In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer expressly claimed affinity with Buddhism: “If I wished to take the results of my philosophy as the standard of truth,” he wrote, “I should have to concede Buddhism pre-eminence over the others. In any case it must be a pleasure to me to see my doctrine in such close agreement with a religion that the majority of men on earth hold as their own” (*WW*, 2:169). Schopenhauer’s involvement with Buddhist thought began in 1813 when he became acquainted with the Orientalist scholar Friedrich Maier, who opened to him the door of the new world of Asia. From 1815 onward, Schopenhauer gathered information on Buddhism from the available issues of the English journal *Asiatic Researches* (cf. *WW*, 2:169–170). Schopenhauer’s *Manuscript Remains* for the later periods, 1818 to 1830, and 1830 to 1860, reveal the increased availability of information in journals and secondary texts, in particular two books on Buddhism written by R. Spence Hardy: *Eastern Monachism* (1850) and the *Manual of Buddhism, in its Modern Development* (1853) (cf. *WW*, 1:384; 2:503, 614). According to Schopenhauer, the coincidence of his philosophy with Buddhism was one of affinity rather than influence (*WW*, 2:169). Overall, his assessment of Buddhism reflected a trite view popularized in works like Edward Upham’s *The History and the Doctrine of Buddhism* (1829) (cf. *WW*, 2:488). Thus Schopenhauer erroneously made use of Buddhism by name to support his idea of the will to life-denial. While Buddhism actually affirms the necessity of exerting human will, it turned in Schopenhauer’s hands into a philosophy that aims at annihilating the will. For Schopenhauer, the world was a wretched place permeated by endless suffering that resulted from the aimless striving of all beings—an inevitable striving since all beings were manifestations of the will. In this context Buddhism seemed to offer an escape from suffering by succumbing to a form of nihilism represented by the negation of the will to live. Buddhist nirvana was, according to Schopenhauer, “the state of the complete abolition of the will ... for all who are still full of the will” (*WW*, 1:412). The Buddha, Schopenhauer insisted, has absolutely overcome the will to live and the adherence to phenomenal reality. With affirmative resignation he accepts all that fate brings. Through renunciation and perfect will-lessness he is capable of the practice of supreme love and compassion. The lives of the Buddha and Christian saints were identical, in Schopenhauer’s view, and Christianity, rightly understood,



was “much more closely akin” to Buddhism than commonly assumed (*WW*, 2:444).

Convinced of the superiority of Christianity, Warner was sure that Buddhism would make no inroads in America. Buddhism’s “grim despair,” Warner judged, could be attractive to the “worn-out political society of Europe,” but the “genius of the New World” would “permit no such pollution” (88). Yet the vogue of Buddhism was already well under way. The European cultural phenomenon Warner introduced as the “Oriental Renaissance” had a parallel manifestation in Transcendentalist Orientalism. The Transcendentalists were among the first Americans to incorporate strains of Eastern thought. Emerson’s early adaptation of this thought already surfaced in his senior project *Indian Superstition*, but Mary Moody Emerson’s interest in Buddhism marked the real beginning of Emerson’s study of Asia.<sup>30</sup> During the 1820s and 1830s, Emerson read translations of Eastern texts in the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Asiatic Journal* and he also worked his way through a list of books that offered detailed introductions to Oriental thought, in particular Joseph Priestley’s *Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy* (1804), Joseph-Marie de Gérando’s *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie* (2nd ed., 1822), Victor Cousin’s *Cours de philosophie* (1828), and Arnold H.L. Heeren’s *Historical Researches* (1832) (cf. *JMN*, 3:360; *L*, 6:246 n. 37; 1:322–323 n. 26; 2:154 n. 190, 158, 174–175).

During 1844 and 1845 Emerson became increasingly interested in Buddhism. He read Eugène Burnouf’s *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844) and worked with Henry David Thoreau on the January 1844 issue of the *Dial*, which printed selections from the sayings of Buddha entitled “The Preaching of Buddha,” a translation of a chapter from Burnouf’s French version of the Buddhist *Saddharma-Pundarika*. Emerson also read the account of Buddhism in Heinrich Ritter’s *History of Ancient Philosophy* (1838), and in November 1846 he became familiar with the treatment of Buddhism in Upham’s *History and the Doctrine of Buddhism* (cf. *JMN*, 9:312, 322; *L*, 3:360 n. 150). During the mid-1850s, Emerson began his notebook “Orientalist,” which he

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<sup>30</sup> See Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson’s “Indian Superstition” with Studies in his Poetry, Biography, and Early Orientalism* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1954). For the Eastern influence on Emerson, see Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (1932; reprint, New York: Octagon, 1963); Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (1930; reprint, New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968); and Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981). On Mary Moody Emerson’s interest in Buddhism, see Barish, *The Roots of Prophecy*, 47.

maintained through the late 1870s. Throughout the notebook, Emerson entered references to Buddhism gathered from secondary studies like Hardy's *Eastern Monachism*, according to Arthur Christy one of the "most influential" books "in disseminating Buddhist lore in Concord."<sup>31</sup>

The Transcendentalist exploration of Buddhism climaxed in 1871 with the publication of James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions*, the most popular nineteenth-century American treatment of Eastern religions. Clarke shared Emerson's desire to find the common denominator of the diverse faiths of mankind. In this context Buddhism was approached from the perspective of comparative religion. If "the noblest saint among the Buddhists, the noblest Mahometan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest & wisest Christian, Menu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet & converse together," Emerson wrote in his journals in 1868, "they would all find themselves of one religion" (*JMN*, 16:91). "[C]entral in the whirl a faith abides," Emerson observed, "which does not pass, a central doctrine which Judaism, Stoicism, Mahometism, Buddhism, Christianity, all teach" (*W*, 7:443 n. 1). In the same way, Clarke conceived of a universal religion and blurred distinctions. He paralleled Buddhism's revolt against Hinduism with Protestantism's revolt against Roman Catholicism and introduced Buddhism as the "*Protestantism* of the East." This appraisal fed into the Buddhist vogue that swept New England in the nineteenth century's last two decades. Thus Phillips Brooks, minister of Boston's historic Trinity Church, observed in 1883: "[T]hese days ... a large part of Boston prefers to consider itself Buddhist rather than Christian."<sup>32</sup>

Schopenhauer preferred to call Buddhists his "fellow-believers," his "Glaubensgenossen."<sup>33</sup> Emerson noted Schopenhauer's close affinity with Buddhism, observing that Schopenhauer obviously "learned [the] ... secret of the Buddhists" "in his youth" (*JMN*, 15:56). Emerson's reception of Schopenhauer in the 1860s clearly stood in the context of his Oriental studies. Thus the seven-column clipping from the *New York Commercial Advertiser* on "Buddhism in Europe" is tipped in on several

<sup>31</sup> Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, 296.

<sup>32</sup> James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, 2 vols. (16th ed.; Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1894–1895), 1:139; Alexander V.G. Allen, *Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks*, 3 vols. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1901), 2:519; quoted in Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Gespräche und Selbstgespräche*, ed. Eduard Grisebach (Berlin: E. Hofmann & Co., 1902), 50.

pages in Emerson’s notebook “Orientalist.” For Schopenhauer, Buddhism represented the negation of the will to live and of empirical reality. In a similar way, Emerson contrasted Western “affirmation” with the Asian and in particular Buddhist denial of reality and the idea of “unimplorable fate” (*W*, 4:52). In his lecture on poetry, Emerson wrote that the “Hindoos . . . , following Buddha, have made it the central doctrine of their religion that what we call Nature, the external world, has no real existence,—is only phenomenal” (*W*, 8:14). For Emerson, this denial of the value or reality of phenomenal existence appeared in Buddhism in the context of an intellectualized philosophy. Buddha is “He who knows,” the “enlightened” (*JMN*, 10:89; *TN*, 2:132). Emerson felt alienated by the “audacious intellectual” inclination and over-rational element of Buddhism (*TN*, 3:29). The “conceptions of Buddhism,” he wrote in his journals, are “always the necessary or structural action of the human mind” (*JMN*, 9:312–313). “We see railroads, banks, & mills. And we pity the poverty of these dreaming Buddhists” (*TN*, 2:264).

Emerson’s account of Buddhist fatalism was even less sympathetic. While Schopenhauer celebrated the Buddhist denial of the will to existence, Emerson rejected the Buddhist submission to a “deaf,” “immense fate.” Emerson was too much on the “active” and “creative” side of the “genius of Europe” to accept Buddhist “resignation” (*W*, 4:52). “Occidentalism is Freedom & Will” and Buddhism in particular, “read literally,” Emerson maintained, “is the tenet of Fate” (*JMN*, 10:90; 9:313). Unlike Schopenhauer, Emerson placed “active” human will above necessity and criticized Buddhism as “abandonment”: “[T]he man wriggles this way & that[,] then dives to ecstasy & abandonment & that is Buddhism” (*JMN*, 9:277). Emerson further described Buddhism as a metaphor for the passive and dark aspects of human life. “*Buddhism*. Winter, Night, Sleep,” Emerson wrote in his journals, “are all the invasions of eternal Buddh, and it gains a point every day” (*JMN*, 8:383).

Unlike Schopenhauer, Emerson was repelled by the concept of nirvana and found here the signs of a “Murderous Buddhism” (*JMN*, 12:525). While Schopenhauer celebrated Buddhist nirvana as a state of “extinction” wherein all desire and willing were put to rest, Emerson rebelled against such resignation to fate and associated Buddhism with quietism (*WW*, 2:508). “Let be, *Laissez faire*, . . . that is bald Buddhism; & then very fine names has it got to cover up its chaos withal, namely trances, raptures, abandonment, ecstasy, all Buddh, naked Buddh” (*JMN*, 8:383). Emerson in the late 1860s and early 1870s continued to

be skeptical of the Buddhist submission to fatal aspects of life because he felt that fated limitation did not excuse man from acting. Emerson's acquiescence never progressed to Schopenhauerian self-renunciation and remained committed to a positive assertion of strength and action. At this juncture, Norton observed, Emerson's "fidelity to his early ideals" persisted (*LN*, 1:512)

The aged Emerson was still too mentally active to accept things quietistically. Schopenhauer, on the other hand, advocated quietism, "the giving up of all willing" as "the road to salvation" (*WW*, 2:613, 634). Ascetic renunciation or abrogation of the will within man was for Schopenhauer a possible avenue of escape from the driving of the cosmic will. Whoever feels selflessness and compassion is on the way to the abnegation of the will to live. For Schopenhauer, this was achieved by the saints in asceticism, above all the Christian ascetics of the Middle Ages and the followers of Buddha who sought nirvana. In the lives of these saints individual will is quieted. The distance to Emerson in this regard is more than obvious. The Schopenhauerian saint reaches a superior position by renunciation and "extinction," by denying the world, while Emerson's self-reliant man realizes human potential by "affirmative" experience, by validating the world (*W*, 8:138).

## V

American critics dubbed Schopenhauer the "philosopher of pessimism" and presented his notorious pessimism as the unifying theme of his thought. The pessimist Schopenhauer designated this world as "the *worst* of all possible worlds" (*WW*, 2:583). At the core of this negative evaluation is a voluntarism that describes will as a striving power whose operations are characterized by blindness and insatiability. Will has no intelligent aim and is without consciousness. Its "desires are unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one" (*WW*, 2:573). Will has no further end than its own continuation, without any special direction. It is dumb, restless activity involving man in goal-less striving. Its very nature makes the defeat of all human striving after happiness inevitable.

This sense of futility casts a deep shadow over life. "[E]ssentially *all life is suffering*" (*WW*, 1:310). It is a long desire that never reaches a point of final satisfaction because the will always remains as the permanent element. "No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still [the

will's]craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart" (*WW*, 2:573). Suffering derives from our very nature as desiring beings. "The basis of all willing," Schopenhauer insists, "is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin it is therefore destined to pain" (*WW*, 1:312). Man is thus engaged in a frustrating strife of existence that shows everything to be invalid. Therefore "we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world" (*WW*, 2:576). The overriding will to live causes misery to self and other selves in a continual struggle of the higher forms against the lower, an aimless striving that uncovers boundless malice and egoism.

Schopenhauer's identification of the will with fatalistic impulse or instinct casts another shadow of gloom over existence. As blind incessant impulse the will is necessitarian and deterministic. Human actions are the result of both stimuli, external causes and motives, and the individual's innate character. But the true inner nature of volition, Schopenhauer argues, cannot be explained from these motives. All human actions are in fact impulsive willing. Man is compelled to action by the will "as a mere machine of necessity running down" (*WW*, 2:320). The world is a "puppet show" in which "determinism stands firm" (*WW*, 2:321). We are not in control of our own nature but rather frozen in a chain of necessity and exposed to the restless urge to exist. The freedom of the will is thus merely an illusion of the imagination. Conscious acts of choice do not really determine behavior. All decisions are actually made by the will below the level of conceptualizing reason. We merely respond to an urge that is inflicted upon us without choice and have to accommodate ourselves to the inevitable.

Contemporaneous critics noted in the aging Emerson a shift from transcendental optimism to a sobered view of life and religious experience that seemed somewhat akin to Schopenhauer's fatalism and pessimism. "Mr. Emerson himself," the *Athenaeum's* reviewer of *The Conduct of Life* (1860) judged, "appears to have reached a sublime centre of indifference, from which he contemplates life and human things as a spectacle." With the decline of his own religious enthusiasm, Emerson seemed to have abandoned all claims to ecstasy and optimistic idealism. To Emerson, the *Athenaeum* reviewer observed, "human life, with its joys and sorrows, has become a dumb phantasmagoria." For Noah Porter Jr., *The Conduct of Life* read like a document of quiet disillusionment and resignation. Emerson's Transcendentalism, Porter argued, here had given way to a basic fatalism, to the "hideous aspects of

over-mastering necessity.” In these gestures of acquiescence, a Schopenhauerian fatalism surfaced at several points. Thus Emerson appeared in Porter’s judgment as “a stoic ... in his acquiescence in all powerful Fate.” From bold egotism Emerson had shifted to a “merciless and remorseless” fatalism.<sup>34</sup>

But what critics subsumed under the banner of a “remorseless” fatalism departed significantly from Schopenhauer’s voluntaristic version of fatalism. Emerson did not helplessly bow down to a disposing fate, nor was he fatalistic about man’s submission to immovable forces of nature. The aged Emerson whom Norton encountered still subscribed to optimistic affirmations that validated a melioristic vision. To Emerson, Norton wrote in his journals, “[t]his world ... is all the time improving” (*LN*, 1:505). Emerson’s faith in the capacity of self-improvement overcame all fatalism and gloom. Emerson, Thomas Carlyle observed in 1873, “takes much satisfaction in the world.... It’s a ... curious spectacle to behold a man so confidently cheerful as Emerson in these days” (*LN*, 1:484).

The Emerson of the 1850s displayed less confidence and cheerfulness and affirmed a fatalism that at first sight seemed to come close to Schopenhauer’s insistence on the strict necessity of all events. Man, Emerson held, must accept that there are fixed and immovable forces in the universe one cannot escape. “Great men, great nations, have not been boasters or buffoons,” Emerson insisted in the essay “Fate,” “but perceivers of the terror of life” (*CW*, 6:2). Fate enters human experience in natural disasters, wars, heredity, circumstances and cultural conditioning. Fate and limitation are present in all forms of finitude. But even “limitation [has] its limits.” “In its last and loftiest ascensions, insight itself, and the freedom of the will, is one of [fate’s] obedient members” (*CW*, 6:11, 12). This freedom is a necessary power of choice: “the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul.” Emerson associated this freedom with the power of thought which requires the discipline of insight. If one transcends the submission to fate by cultivation of insight, the key to power is intellect. “Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free” (*CW*, 6:12, 13).

Freedom and power are opposed to fate. “There can be no driving force,” Emerson argued, “except through the conversion of the man

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<sup>34</sup> “Review of *The Conduct of Life*,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 284; Noah Porter, Jr., “Ralph Waldo Emerson on the Conduct of Life,” in Myerson, *Emerson and Thoreau*, 299, 303.

into his will.... The one serious and formidable thing in nature is a will” (*CW*, 6:16). At this juncture, Emerson clearly departed from Schopenhauer, for whom will was the ground of a rigid determinism. Emerson, by contrast, opposed will and circumstances. “There are two forces in Nature, by whose antagonism we exist; the power of Fate, Fortune, ... the material necessities on the one hand,—and Will or Duty or Freedom on the other” (*W*, 11:231). Emerson clearly sided with the counterforces of freedom. “If we must accept Fate,” he wrote, “we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual” (*CW*, 6:2). The individual is capable of self-determination. Necessity is therefore for Emerson not something to which one submits but something one puts “to use as a potential source of power.”<sup>35</sup> Emerson’s acquiescence is thus optimistic fatalism, a submission based on individual strength and self-reliance. There is, then, the possibility of conducting life through fate to freedom. “Fatal” limitation is converted into the foundation for growth, the possibility of melioration.

In this optimistic teleology, the confidence in human potential prevails. In Schopenhauer’s fatalistic philosophy, the irremediable wretchedness of man’s condition precludes the possibility of human progress and the perfectibility of man. Emerson, by contrast, is convinced that individuals can perfect themselves. The “infinitude of the private man” transcends fate (*JMN*, 7:342). This view also persisted into Emerson’s later years. “Fatal” limitation notwithstanding, the aged Emerson believed, man is able to use his resources productively. “Men are made up of potencies,” Emerson wrote in the essay “Resources.” “[E]very man is provided, in the new bias of his faculty, with a key to nature” that is independent of fate (*W*, 8:137, 138). For Emerson, Schopenhauer here offered only “negatives.” “But if instead of these negatives you give me affirmatives,” Emerson wrote, “if you tell me that there is always life for the living; that what man has done man can do; that this world belongs to the energetic; that there is always a way to everything desirable, ... I am invigorated, put into genial and working temper.” With these “affirmatives,” the obstacles Emerson perceived as fate can be overcome. “[T]he horizon opens, and we are full of good will and gratitude to the Cause of Causes” (*W*, 8:138).

Emerson’s answer to fatalism and atheism was one of faith. So was his answer to Schopenhauer’s pessimism. “A Schopenhauer, with logic

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<sup>35</sup> Lopez, “*The Conduct of Life*,” 261.

and learning and wit, teaching pessimism ... and inferring that sleep is better than waking, and death than sleep,—all the talent in the world,” Emerson insisted, “cannot save him from being odious” (*W*, 8:138). Emerson did not see this pessimism as inevitably stemming from Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the will. For Emerson, it represented a theory of life “which sees only the worst; believes neither in virtue nor in genius; which says ’tis is all of no use, life is eating us up, ’t is only question who shall be last devoured” (*W*, 8:138).

Schopenhauer’s man is immersed in a turmoil of human quarrels and frustrations without a single trace of hope. By contrast, Emerson in his late years reaffirmed the optimism—the belief in man’s “resources” and “potencies”—that he once celebrated as the “absolute boundlessness of our capacity” (*JMN*, 4:353). “A low, hopeless spirit” like Schopenhauer, Emerson was convinced, “puts out the eyes” (*W*, 8:138). Emerson preferred to look to examples that “wake an infinite hope, and call every man to emulation” (*W*, 8:137–138). Pessimism was always only a passing moment for the aged Emerson who regarded man’s spiritual perfectibility as a given and never let go of “affirmatives.” For Emerson, Norton observed acutely, we inhabit “the best of all worlds.... He has not allowed himself to doubt the supremacy of the best in the moral order. He is never weary of declaring the superiority of assertion and faith over negation” (*LN*, 1:503–504).



## CONCLUSION

With his belief in the superiority of faith over negation, the aged Emerson could stand up to the threat of atheism and pessimism. His early dreams of God-like greatness, when he identified self-consciousness with God-consciousness, had leveled off to a point where he accepted the realities of man struggling with pragmatic givens. But in spite of a more chastened view of the potential of mysticism, Emerson arrived at an optimistic acquiescence that had no place for atheism as an option. Throughout his career, Emerson claimed that his “philosophy [was] affirmative” (*CW*, 2:90). He did not doubt “the conviction that All is Well, that Good & God is at the centre” (*JMN*, 7:136).

To some extent, Emerson’s work—in fact Transcendentalism itself—constituted a refutation of atheism. A central counterargument stemmed from the “discovery that God must be sought within, not without” (*JMN*, 5:5). On this rock, the primary experience of divinity, Emerson found a faith that persisted even in confrontations with atheism and skepticism. Emerson might have come close to anthropotheism, as critics of his extreme idealism charged, but he did not doubt the integrity of the soul’s intuitions as the final proof of God’s presence. Emerson was aware that the discovery of the God “within” was the “discovery of Jesus” (*JMN* 5:5). A messianic Emerson would ask his audience in the “Divinity School Address” to go alone and refuse great models. But Emerson’s insistence on a “first hand” revelation of divinity never accepted the atheistic “rhetoric” of a “fabulous Christ” (*CW*, 1:90). In the end, Emerson’s adherence to the superiority of faith over negation was also an affirmation of “a faith like Christ’s in the infinitude of man” (*CW*, 1:89).

When Emerson condemned the “Monster” of historical Christianity in his “Address,” he undermined the once rock-solid religious convictions of many who in turn branded him an infidel and atheist (*CW*, 1:81). Yet Emerson was actually a theist in that he did believe that there is a divine reality. With his rejection of the supernatural God of historical Christianity, Emerson sought to establish his theism on more solid foundations. Above all, he sought to establish faith in the divine as a

postulate of daily moral life. At this juncture, both Parker and Emerson agreed that the real threat of the time was not the “speculative atheism” of Feuerbach but rather a “practical atheism” in which man may believe that a supreme being exists but lives as though there were no God.

Today practical atheism has developed into religious indifference. Religious faith is not so much rejected as judged to be without consequences. Emerson fought against the supernatural God of historical Christianity, but he still arrived at a faith in the “God within.” In a culture of religious indifference, people no longer fight against God, the question is simply of no interest any more or is often no longer even posed.

If one follows the argument of one of Emerson’s sharpest critics, Orestes Brownson, then the culture of unbelief has one historical root in the Transcendentalists’ attempt to base religion on religious sentiments of the heart. The Emersonian insistence on the “God within” paved the way for a non-religious interpretation of religious consciousness, transforming theology into anthropology—a transformation finally made explicit by Feuerbach. Brownson acutely sensed in Emerson’s Transcendentalism the danger of an anthropological account of Christianity. To eliminate all transcendence and believe in a spiritual God operative in man was to follow the road to a “religion without God.”

If the Emersonian “God within” with its anthropocentric strain is a precursor of a secularized culture of unbelief, so is Emerson’s view of Christ. For the Christian, Jesus Christ is a witness of God. The existence of God is evidenced by the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus thus makes claims about God. For Emerson, Jesus makes claims about man. Jesus, Emerson held, “preaches the greatness of Man” (*JMN*, 5:459). But precisely by defining the significance of Christ primarily with regard to his significance for man, Emerson sowed the seeds for what Barth called the “apotheosis of man” with its “inversion” of heaven and earth.

Yet Emerson’s Transcendentalist gospel also contains a cure for religious indifference and unbelief. What theologians have to confront today is an indifference to the nearness of God. The Transcendentalist Emerson always interpreted his existence with reference to a primary experience of the Deity. In contrast to Feuerbach’s projection theory of religion, Emerson’s God is not just a disguised way in which man talks about himself; Emerson’s God is near, immediate, present, and significant in human life. He enters the soul and endows it with a sanctity

that leads to moral action. Emerson thus makes a convincing case for the belief that the immediate presence of the Deity is a firm anchor for an optimistic faith in man. In this regard, Emerson's alleged "infidelity" is not only a challenge but also a contribution to a modern theology of faith under the pressure of unbelief and indifference.



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## INDEX

- Alcott, Amos Bronson, 56, 73,  
73n68, 75, 75n75, 101, 105,  
105n42, 113, 114, 114n65, 142, 153,  
183
- Allen, Gay Wilson, 152, 152n8,  
152n9
- Allen, Joseph Henry, 57n19, 58n20,  
64n35, 72n64, 80n10, 97n7,  
98n13, 115, 115n69, 115n70,  
115n71, 116, 116n73, 116n74,  
118, 121, 121n83, 133n23, 145,  
145n37
- Asiatic Journal*, 193
- Atheism, 1–3, 10, 11, 34, 37, 46, 53,  
55, 60, 74, 79, 82, 90, 93, 95, 97–  
101, 105, 107–114, 117, 119–145,  
147, 148, 153, 172, 178, 189, 191,  
199, 201
- Atheism: implicit atheism, 3, 97, 159
- Atheism: negative atheism, 1
- Atheism: positive atheism, 1
- Atheism: practical atheism, 147, 148,  
202
- Atheism: religious atheism, 98
- Atheism: speculative atheism, 117,  
129–131, 136, 147, 202
- Atheism: vulgar atheism, 98, 115
- Bancroft, George, 6n4, 7, 8, 11,  
11n19, 11n21, 11n22, 12, 12n25,  
13, 14, 14n31, 14n32, 14n35, 15,  
15n36, 15n37, 16, 19, 20, 20n50,  
21, 32, 33n10
- Barth, Karl, 127, 127n10, 127n11, 141,  
202
- Bartol, Cyrus, 66n38, 81n12, 86n28,  
100, 107n47, 121, 121n87, 122n88,  
143n32
- Becker, Johann August, 176
- Bibliotheca Sacra*, 71, 97, 98, 110
- Böhme, Jakob, 149, 150, 150n4,  
150n5, 151–153, 153n10, 154–172
- Bosco, Ronald A., 152, 152n8
- Bowen, Francis, 40n28, 57n18, 69,  
70, 72n65, 72n66, 115, 115n68,  
149n2, 179, 180n15
- Brigham, Charles Henry, 120,  
120n82, 121, 121n84
- Brooks, Charles Timothy, 78n2, 82,  
82n14, 82n15, 82n16
- Brooks, Phillips, 194
- Brownson, Orestes, 2, 3, 75, 75n73,  
99, 99n15, 99n16, 99n18, 99n19,  
99n20, 105n41, 106, 106n45,  
107n46, 107n50, 108, 108n52, 109,  
109n55, 109n58, 111, 111n59, 125,  
125n7, 126, 127, 136–139, 139n25,  
140–142, 144–147, 149, 149n2,  
202
- Büchner, Ludwig, 114
- Bulfinch, Stephen G., 69, 69n54,  
69n55
- Burnouf, Eugène, 193
- Cabot, James Elliot, 102, 102n28,  
173, 183
- Calvert, George, 7
- Campbell, George, 21
- Carlyle, Thomas, 198
- Chadwick, John W., 13n30, 84,  
143n31
- Channing, William Ellery, 99n15
- Christian Examiner*, 15, 31, 54, 61, 67,  
80, 84, 95, 98, 115, 118, 120, 177–  
179, 185, 191
- Christy, Arthur, 193n30, 194, 194n31
- Clarke, James Freeman, 46, 46n46,  
53, 53n2, 55, 84, 91, 94n67,  
107n49, 126, 142, 142n28, 143,  
143n29, 194, 194n32

- Clarke, Samuel, 5, 5n2  
 Clarkson, Thomas, 26  
 Cogswell, Joseph, 6n4, 7  
 Coleridge, Samuel T., 108, 168,  
 168n21, 168n22  
 Comte, Auguste, 114, 115, 115n69,  
 116, 118, 130  
 Conway, Moncure, 98n12, 101, 102,  
 102n26, 129n16  
 Cousin, Victor, 71, 193  
 Cranch, Christopher, 172  
 Cunningham, Francis, 10n16, 70,  
 70n58
- Davis, Hasbrouck, 95, 95n2, 96,  
 96n2, 99n19, 100n22, 110, 128n13  
 De Wette, Wilhelm Martin Lebe-  
 recht, 55, 66, 67, 72, 94, 97  
*Dial*, 58, 90, 193  
 Dod, Albert, 71
- Edinburgh Review*, 34, 193  
 Edwards, Jonathan, 98n13, 134–136,  
 188, 188n27  
 Eichhorn, Johann Gottfried, 6n4,  
 9–12, 12n24, 13, 14, 16–21, 22n54,  
 23, 25, 27, 28, 32, 33  
 Eliot, George, 54, 96, 96n3, 97,  
 97n5, 101, 123–125  
 Emerson, Edward Waldo, 5n1  
 Emerson, Mary Moody, 18, 28, 29,  
 29n63, 154, 193, 193n30  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 2, 3, 5,  
 5n1, 8, 17–22, 22n54, 23–30, 33–  
 36, 39, 41, 45–47, 56, 57, 57n17,  
 58, 73–75, 81, 86, 87, 91, 99,  
 101, 102, 102n29, 103, 104n35,  
 105–113, 122, 123, 126, 137, 142,  
 143, 146, 149–152, 152n8, 153,  
 153n10, 154–161, 161n18, 162–  
 173, 176n5, 177–181, 181n19, 182–  
 185, 187–191, 193, 193n30, 194–  
 203  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “The  
 American Scholar”, 166  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: *The Conduct  
 of Life*, 197, 198n34  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “Divin-  
 ity School Address”, 45, 47,  
 73, 87, 106, 154, 155, 169, 188,  
 201  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “Fate”, 180,  
 198  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “Inspira-  
 tion”, 155, 163  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: *Letters and  
 Social Aims*, 173, 185  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “Lord’s  
 Supper Sermon”, 25–27  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “Mon-  
 taigne, or the Skeptic”, 171  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: *Nature*,  
 107n50, 109n55, 111, 111n59,  
 111n60, 112, 122, 149, 152, 158,  
 165, 166, 170, 172  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “New  
 England Reformers”, 155  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “The Over-  
 Soul”, 160–162  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “The  
 Poet”, 163, 165, 166, 168–170  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: *Representa-  
 tive Men*, 81, 167, 171, 172  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: “Re-  
 sources”, 173, 199  
 Emerson, William, 6–8, 12, 13n28,  
 14, 14n33, 16–19, 19n49, 28, 29  
 Everett, Charles C., 177, 177n10, 185,  
 185n25  
 Everett, Edward, 6n4, 7, 11, 11n22,  
 13, 13n29, 13n30, 15, 16, 16n39,  
 16n41, 16n43, 17, 19
- Feuerbach, Ludwig, 1, 2, 95, 96,  
 96n3, 97, 97n5, 98–102, 102n29,  
 103, 104, 104n35, 105–118, 118n76,  
 119–121, 123, 124, 124n5, 125–127,  
 127n10, 128–130, 132–136, 140–  
 147, 202  
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, 99, 108,  
 109, 109n58, 110, 139, 141, 144,  
 170, 174, 179  
 Francis, Convers, 31, 46, 46n47,  
 46n48, 55, 75, 75n74, 143n30



- Frauenstädt, Julius, 176
- Frothingham, Octavius Brooks,  
 31n2, 31n5, 47n51, 53n1, 54n4,  
 77, 77n1, 78n3, 83, 83n20, 100,  
 100n21, 101, 104n37, 105n39,  
 106n43, 113n62, 113n63, 118,  
 118n76, 119, 119n79, 120, 121,  
 121n87, 123n4, 132n20, 132n22,  
 134n24, 147n41, 176n6
- Furness, William Henry, 39, 40,  
 40n27, 40n29, 40n30, 41, 41n32,  
 41n33, 41n34, 42, 42n35, 43,  
 43n40, 44, 44n41, 44n42, 44n43,  
 44n44, 45, 82n16, 84, 85, 85n25,  
 86, 86n26, 86n27, 86n29, 86n30,  
 86n31, 87, 87n32, 87n34, 87n35,  
 88, 88n36, 88n37, 88n38, 88n39,  
 88n40, 88n41, 88n42, 88n43,  
 88n44, 89, 89n45, 89n46, 89n47,  
 89n48, 90, 90n49, 90n50, 90n51,  
 90n52, 90n53, 93n64
- Gannett, Ezra Stile, 67, 67n48
- Gieseler, Johann Karl Ludwig, 23,  
 23n56
- Göttingen, 5, 6, 6n4, 7, 7n8, 8, 9,  
 11–17, 19, 20, 25, 27, 28, 32, 33,  
 174
- Greenleaf, Simon, 70, 70n57
- Griesbach, Johann Jacob, 15, 17, 21,  
 22, 22n54
- Grinnell, Charles H., 84
- Gryzanovski, Ernst, 178, 178n12
- Hackett, Horatio B., 9n11, 61n30, 71,  
 71n59, 71n60, 80
- Hale, Edward E., 84, 84n21, 84n22,  
 84n23
- Hanley, Mark Y., 103n33, 128,  
 129n15
- Harris, William Torrey, 114, 115n67,  
 117, 118, 118n75, 177, 177n9, 178,  
 183, 184
- Hartmann, Eduard von, 176, 180
- Hase, Karl, 84
- Hedge, Frederic Henry, 2, 46,  
 46n49, 53n1, 54, 55, 72n65, 91,  
 91n55, 91n56, 91n57, 91n58, 92,  
 92n60, 92n61, 93, 93n62, 93n63,  
 99, 108, 109, 109n54, 114n66, 126,  
 142, 143, 143n29, 143n30, 144,  
 144n34, 144n36, 176, 176n6, 177–  
 179, 179n12, 179n13, 182, 182n21,  
 183, 185–187, 189, 189n28
- Heeren, Arnold H.L., 8, 193
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich,  
 58, 95, 101, 103, 110, 153, 170, 174,  
 176, 179, 182–185
- Hengstenberg, Ernst W., 83
- Hennell, Sara, 91n54, 96, 123
- Herder, Johann Gottfried, 38, 45, 73,  
 75, 94
- Hilaire, Auguste Theodore, 153, 165
- Hildreth, Richard, 72, 72n67
- Hodge, Charles, 71
- Hotham, Durant, 150, 150n5, 151,  
 155
- Hurlbut, Martin Luther, 39n25, 40,  
 40n26, 41n31, 42, 42n36, 42n37,  
 43, 45, 85
- James, William, 152, 160, 161, 161n17
- Johnston, Carol, 96n3, 118n76, 155,  
 155n13, 156n14
- Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 178
- Kant, Immanuel, 53, 174, 180, 184–  
 187
- Kaufmann, Peter, 101, 191n29
- Keim, Theodor, 84, 85
- Kern, Robert, 167, 167n20
- Knickerbocker*, 149
- Lane, Charles, 153
- Lardner, Nathaniel, 21
- Lathrop, Samuel, 51, 51n59, 67,  
 67n46
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 13,  
 13n30, 18n47, 33
- Lopez, Michael, 181, 181n19, 181n20,  
 199n35
- Macknight, James, 21, 22
- Mann, Thomas, 176

- Marsh, Herbert, 21, 22  
 Martineau, Harriet, 80, 115  
 Martineau, James, 37, 97n4, 123n2, 128  
 Marx, Karl, 114  
*Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 102, 149  
 Michaelis, Johann David, 6n4, 21  
 Morison, John H., 68n49, 80n9, 84, 84n22, 94, 94n65, 94n69  
 Motley, John, 7  
 Murdock, James, 109, 109n56, 183, 183n22
- Neander, August, 54n4, 55, 66, 83, 83n18, 94  
*New Englander*, 97, 177  
*New York Commercial Advertiser*, 177, 184, 194  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 176, 190, 191n29  
*North American Review*, 54, 70, 77, 115  
 Norton, Andrews, 2, 5–7, 7n6, 7n7, 8, 8n9, 9, 9n12, 10, 10n15, 23, 23n55, 29, 32, 32n7, 32n8, 35, 35n12, 37, 37n17, 38–42, 44, 46, 46n50, 47, 48, 54, 54n9, 55, 60, 61n28, 67, 68, 68n51, 69–74, 77, 88, 89, 93, 97, 97n10, 98, 98n11, 99, 108  
 Norton, Charles Eliot, 151, 151n7, 173, 196, 198, 200  
 Noyes, George R., 60n26, 66n39, 83, 83n17
- Oegger, Guillaume, 167  
 Oken, Lorenz, 102, 103, 103n32, 170  
 Osgood, Samuel, 2, 55n13, 66, 66n41, 66n42, 66n43, 67n44, 67n45, 84, 94, 94n68, 95, 95n1, 98, 128, 128n12, 129, 129n17  
 Oxenford, John, 175, 175n3, 175n4, 176, 176n5, 177, 182, 182n21
- Parker, Theodore, 2, 3, 47, 47n53, 48, 48n54, 49–51, 53, 55n13, 57, 58, 61–63, 63n34, 64–66, 66n39, 66n40, 67, 68, 71, 74, 74n71, 91n54, 92, 99n14, 100, 101, 104, 104n37, 105, 105n39, 117, 119, 123, 123n4, 124, 124n5, 125–127, 129, 129n16, 129n18, 130, 130n19, 131–134, 134n24, 135–139, 141–145, 145n38, 146, 146n39, 147–150, 150n4, 151, 151n6, 202
- Parkes, Henry B., 149, 149n1, 159n15  
 Paulus, Heinrich Eberhard, 42, 43, 43n38, 43n39, 44, 60, 87  
 Peabody, Andrew P., 53n3, 67, 67n47, 68n50, 69n53, 72, 72n62, 80n11, 87n33, 87n34  
 Peabody, Elizabeth Palmer, 60n25, 61n32, 111, 111n60, 115n67, 143n33, 146n39, 154, 167  
 Pochmann, Henry August, 6n4, 14n34, 23n56, 54n6, 102, 102n30, 103n34, 104n36, 104n38, 108n53, 114n65, 124n5, 142n27, 176n7, 177, 177n8, 184n23  
 Porter, Noah, 97, 97n9, 98, 197, 198, 198n34  
 Priestley, Joseph, 193  
*Princeton Review*, 54, 71
- Reimarus, Hermann Samuel, 18, 49, 59, 60  
 Renan, Ernest, 78, 78n3, 78n4, 78n5, 79, 79n6, 80–82, 89, 114, 120, 120n80, 120n81, 121, 128, 128n14  
 Richardson, Robert D., 18n48, 34n11, 50, 50n57, 62n33, 75n72, 152n8, 154n11  
 Ripley, Ezra, 17  
 Ripley, George, 31, 31n3, 31n4, 36, 36n13, 36n14, 37, 37n15, 37n16, 37n18, 38, 38n19, 38n20, 38n21, 39, 39n22, 39n23, 39n24, 41, 42, 45, 45n45, 47, 47n52, 48, 55n12, 56, 73, 73n69, 73n70, 92, 104, 104n36, 104n37, 104n38, 105n40, 113, 123, 125, 126, 132, 132n21, 132n22, 143, 147, 176, 179, 179n14, 189

- Robinson, Edward, 56n15, 83,  
152n9, 181m18
- Ronge, Johannes, 125, 135, 147
- Rusk, Ralph L., 5n1, 17n44, 17n45,  
24n57, 25n58, 29n63, 152, 152n8
- Saltus, Edgar Evertson, 180, 180n16
- Schenkel, Daniel, 84, 85, 89n46
- Scherb, Emmanel V., 103, 123, 124n5
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 14, 14n33,  
15, 17, 18n46, 19, 22, 25, 25n59,  
26, 26n60, 26n61, 27, 28, 33, 38,  
39, 45, 49, 53, 55, 72, 75, 97, 131,  
170, 185
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, 1, 173, 174,  
174n2, 175, 176, 176n5, 176n7, 177,  
177n8, 178–187, 189–192, 194,  
194n33, 195–200
- Schweitzer, Albert, 18n47, 43n38,  
43n39, 48, 48n55, 59, 60, 60n24,  
85
- Sparrow, John, 150n5, 154
- Stallo, John Bernhard, 101, 102,  
102n27, 102n31, 103, 103n32, 104,  
104n35, 109, 109n57, 123, 183
- Stirling, James Hutchison, 114, 183,  
184, 184n24, 185
- Stirner, Max, 118, 118n76, 118n77,  
119, 119n78
- Stoddard, Solomon, 17
- Strauss, David Friedrich, 48, 49,  
49n56, 50, 51, 53, 54, 54n5, 55–  
65, 65n36, 65n37, 66–80, 82–85,  
87–95, 97, 101, 128, 129
- Stuart, Moses, 16, 16n39, 72, 72n63
- Swedenborg, Emanuel, 151, 160,  
163, 165–169, 171
- Taylor, Edward, 154
- Thirwall, Connop, 22
- Tholuck, August, 83
- Thoreau, Henry David, 107n50, 193
- Ticknor, George, 6n4, 7, 9n11, 10,  
10n13, 10n14, 11, 11n17, 11n20, 19,  
32, 32n9, 43n40
- Tiffany, Charles C., 97, 97n6, 99n19,  
110, 123, 145
- Turner, James, 2, 100n21
- Uhlhorn, Gerhard, 84
- Underhill, Evelyn, 160, 160n16
- Upham, Edward, 192, 193
- Vossische Zeitung*, 175
- Wagner, Richard, 176
- Ware, Henry, 5, 20, 61, 61n31, 69,  
108, 108n51, 115
- Warner, Herman J., 178, 178n12,  
191–193
- Weitling, Wilhelm, 103
- Westminster Review*, 96, 175, 176
- Weydemeyer, Joseph, 103
- Whicher, Stephen E., 5n1, 113n61,  
149n1, 159n15, 181, 181n19
- Willich, August, 101, 103
- Wilson, William D., 51n59, 58,  
58n23, 96n3



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