"LIQUID FIRE WITHIN ME":
Language, Self and Society in Transcendentalism and Early Evangelicalism, 1825-1855

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Introduction

Historians and literary scholars have tended to view New England Transcendentalism and early Evangelical Protestantism in isolation from one another. In the classroom and in the scholarly literature, these two most significant religious movements of the antebellum period rarely appear in the same discussion. The Transcendentalists and their literary brethren occupy a kind of *ex officio* position on the syllabi of college courses in the "American Renaissance," and the evangelical Protestants receive ample attention in courses on nineteenth-century American religious history, but seldom do the twain meet. The respective fiefdoms of Religious Studies and English have found scant common ground on which to explore the variety of revealing intersections between literature and spirituality in American culture -- a phenomenon we may attribute to a long-standing divergence in the vocabularies, theoretical interests and pedagogical aims of each field.

Still, the traditional division of Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism involves more than professional speciation. The simplest explanation involves the frankly striking demographic and stylistic differences between the two movements. In the Transcendentalist camp we find a highly educated coterie of the young Boston elite, many of them nurtured at Harvard and its Divinity School, many from well-to-do families. Among the early Evangelical leadership we find a motley collection of homespun, occasionally coarse preachers exhorting their assembled audiences to emotional outbursts of religious ecstasy -- often in a tent, or under the trees. A feeling of incongruity would result not only from the meeting of a Transcendentalist and an Evangelical in the same room, but from their meeting on the same page. The aristocratic figure of Emerson, which he himself described as "apart and critical," would seem as out of place in a discussion of a revivalist camp-meeting as the manic presence of Lorenzo Dow would in a discussion of the genteel conversations of the Transcendentalist Club.

Beyond these stylistic and demographic dissimilarities, other, more significant reasons help to explain the scholarly segregation of Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism. The religious and aesthetic vocabularies they employed differed sharply, and they scarcely ever found occasion to refer to one another. This "self-segregation" derived in part from the fact that the two movements expressed a number of theological beliefs which, strictly speaking, were incompatible (this problem is examined in more detail in the next section). And the social milieu and historical legacy of each movement

suggest more differences than they do similarities. The immediate circles in which the Transcendentalists moved all existed in eastern Massachusetts; hence their tangible impact on American society amounted to comparatively little, although they did achieve respectable fame in Europe. The Transcendentalists' true legacy lay in the influence they would exert on American literature and in their articulation of a philosophy that has descended, in one form or another, through some seven generations of American life. By contrast, the Evangelicals cannot really be said to have moved in "circles" at all; rather, they made their mark on American society by bringing religion to anyone and everyone, from the uncouth settlers of Kentucky to the slaves of Mississippi to the homemakers of upper New York state. Their social impact was immediate and widespread, their successes tangible; out to convert as many people as possible, Evangelicals transformed Protestantism and left an indelible imprint on American society.

While the habitual separation of Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism is, in these terms, understandable, one important consequence is to obscure the genuine affinities the two movements shared. The philosophical and religious ripples of Transcendentalism and early Evangelical Protestantism have grown so remote over time that it is easy for descendants of each movement to overlook commonalities in their histories. With the dramatic pluralization of American religion since the middle of the nineteenth century, ideological fissures have developed among the country's various religious or philosophical groups. Transcendentalism and Evangelical Protestantism may be aligned with distinct trends within this religious evolution. The Transcendentalists, through their questioning of Christian hegemony and their affirmation of individual spirituality, helped to blaze the trail for both secular humanism, which has made steady progress during the twentieth century, and for a more recent strain of "new age" mysticism. The Evangelicals, for their part, were instrumental in making the United States a "Protestant nation" and did not relinquish their belief in the importance of Christian churches as loci of moral and social authority. In the centrifuge of history, however, both the religious foundation of Transcendentalism and the radical origins of Evangelical Protestantism have too often been forgotten. Put simply, we expect to see Henry David Thoreau in the classroom or on the coffee table, and a Methodist preacher in the church, leading a congregation in Sunday worship.

By placing Transcendentalism and early Evangelicalism in direct juxtaposition in this essay, I hope to make explicit what is implicit in the scholarly literature and in the primary source material: namely, that the two movements shared a fundamentally

compatible religious philosophy and derived their strength from kindred emotional and intellectual motives in their audiences. The study attempts not so much a revision of the existing scholarship, which is extensive and generally quite good (within the given parameters), as it does a re-envisioning of the antebellum era itself. By examining the areas of overlap and points of departure in the two belief systems, I try to provide a richer understanding of American society -- its religious aspects in particular -- during the 1830s and 1840s.

First, in what sense may we speak of Transcendentalism and early Evangelicalism as "movements," given the diversity of thought and personality that characterized each? One should be wary of painting either with too broad a brush, or of viewing them as pure and stable systems of belief abstracted from human activity and social change, but it is possible to identify certain consistent intellectual and spiritual themes that the Transcendentalists sounded and others that the Evangelicals sounded. These themes formed the core of their religious philosophies, and acted as ballast against the pressures of ideological and societal flux. Also, the term "movement" should be understood to denote the conscious activities of a group of people promoting a particular belief system or social agenda, and is therefore distinguished from established or inherited systems and agendas that persist out of inertia as much as deliberate endeavor. By "Transcendentalism," I refer to the sermons, journals and published writings of the major contributors to a new philosophical and literary sensibility which developed in Boston through the late 1820s and 1830s, and which continued to be an active, though waning, force through the 1840s. The major Transcendentalists on whose work I draw include Amos Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, and Henry David Thoreau, all of whom knew each other and were instrumental in articulating the religious philosophy that received, early in its career, the pejorative epithet of "Transcendentalism."

By "early Evangelicalism," I refer to a more heterogeneous phenomenon: the spread of religious revivalism throughout the country as itinerant preachers brought their version of the gospel to people in less developed regions of the expanding country. This geographical spread accompanied, and hastened, a loosening of the traditional theologetical tenets and ecclesiastical structures of the major Protestant denominations, particularly Baptism, Methodism and Presbyterianism. The principal focus here is on these three denominations because they were the most successful in their efforts to win converts among the general population; by the time of the Civil War, "the South was 90

percent Protestant, and 90 percent of the Protestants were Baptists or Methodists."[1] The outstanding figures of this movement include Richard Allen, Lyman Beecher, Horace Bushnell, Alexander Campbell, Peter Cartwright, James Freeman Clarke, Lorenzo Dow, and Charles Finney, who, along with their lesser known colleagues, did more than anyone else to "Christianize" the American way of life during the nineteenth century.

A concise statement of the core affinities between Transcendentalism and early Evangelicalism might run as follows: Above all, the two movements affirmed the ability of the individual human being to experience an unmediated relation with or faith in "God." Their spirituality depended not on traditional ecclesiastical structures, nor on a closely reasoned exegesis of the Bible, nor on any external evidence of salvation (known as "works"), but solely on the subjective feeling of communion with the holy spirit. Although they held contrasting theological beliefs of what constituted God, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals rested their religious philosophies on the conviction that God is benevolent, merciful and accessible to every human being. In true antinomian fashion, they described the experience of becoming aware of God as one "of the heart" or as the sensing of an "inner light." Paradoxically, the social strength of both movements in large measure derived from this affirmation of the accessibility of the divine.

A number of striking resemblances follow from this shared fundamental belief. First, a clarion note of optimism sounds throughout their writings, sermons, and exhortations. Turning away from orthodox Calvinism's grim preoccupation with predestination and ineradicable sin, Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism expressed a deep-seated faith in the moral capacity of humankind. Concomitantly, they argued against any social conventions or institutions which seemed to interfere with the spiritual growth of the individual, including inherited ritual, unjust divisions of wealth, and obtuse expositions of scripture. Resistance to these various social realities varied over time and place and across individuals or groups, but tends to impart a distinct, occasionally strident, tone of anti-authoritarianism to both movement's teachings. They also devalued the Enlightenment's legacy of intellectual rationalism in favor of personal emotion as the window into spiritual "truth."

A central assumption of this study is that the most instructive and revealing approach to exploring these correspondences between Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism is not an analysis of the movements' various theological differences but

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[1] William McLoughlin, Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform, p. 132

an assessment of the psychological impact of their teachings on individuals and the ways in which this impact translated, or failed to translate, into personal and social reform. Consequent to this methodological commitment, there may be times when affinities between the two movements appear to receive disproportionate attention. While important distinctions are not ignored, certainly, they are generally raised only as they illuminate or complicate particular issues of convergence. My principal aim is to tell the story in a way that it has not been told before, through an investigation of the pragmatic methods and practical outcomes of Transcendentalism and early Evangelicalism.

Taking as its approximate time frame, then, the 1820s through the 1850s, this paper examines four areas where the religious philosophies of the two movements converged in significant ways: the experience of conversion, the use of written and spoken language, the relation of individuals to communities, and the question of social reform. Of course, convergence implies neither congruence nor permanence. What is striking, however, is the fact that for a brief yet dynamic period of religious ferment in the United States, two groups of people separated by region, culture, wealth, education and temperament aritculated ideas so similar in essence.

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America in the early 1800s

Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism did not evolve or operate in a vacuum. It is essential to consider the ways in which members of both groups participated in and changed their culture, and, conversely, to assess how their social context provided both the ideas which they adopted or transformed and those which they actively rejected or resisted.[2] As movements that came of age during the first half of the nineteenth century, Transcendentalism and Evangelical Protestantism can be understood most clearly in the political, economic, and religious contexts of post-revolutionary American society.

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[2] I have refrained from explicitly tying either movement to what are often regarded as the deep, determinative themes of American culture, such as "anti-authoritarianism," in the belief that the reader is perfectly well-equipped to make or reject such connections. While it is true that both movements rebelled against traditional forms of established authority, I see no reason to assert, with a kind of teleological insistence, that they were therefore displaying one of the eternal quiddities of American life -- an essentialist strategy that can have the effect of draining much of the complexity out of an historical or literary discussion.

Although each movement would come to effect profound changes in their respective spheres, both were very much of their time in the sense that the culture had grown ripe for their emergence. This tension between the movements' radicalism and centrism suggests that American society was still very much in transition from one epoch to another: the Revolution was not yet complete.

The fifty years following independence witnessed dramatic changes in the character of American society. As is the case with all periods of momentous social change, the early national period generated both optimism and unease. While the Revolution had succeeded in throwing off the British yoke, it by no means resolved the fledgling nation's infrastructural, political and racial problems. Rather, in the sudden absence of imperial control, Americans of all stations were confronted with the task of structuring and preserving a viable society in a time of great uncertainty and flux, when internal political discord, unstable international allegiances and the disorienting surge of capitalist enterprise shook the foundations of tradition and security that they had long relied upon. Particularly distressing was the realization that political union did not necessarily entail cultural harmony, and that conflicts between Americans could become vitriolic and even violent, as exampled by the hysterical party warfare of the 1790s, by such eruptions of economic discontent as Shay's Rebellion, by ethnic- and class-based urban disturbances, and by the seemingly insoluble dispute over slavery.[3] In many ways, American society seemed to be growing more rather than less fragmented.

Several interwoven strands of social development contributed to this sense of anxiety. Most noticeably, the demography of the United States was changing rapidly under the pressures of both centripetal and centrifugal forces. In one direction, a burgeoning population, especially along the eastern seaboard, fed the growth of cities with all their attendant signs of disorder and social atomization. In the other direction, the treaty with Britain in 1783 and the Louisiana Purchase of 1804 had provided the United States with access to vast tracts of western land, drawing a steady stream of Americans into remote areas where the central government had trouble exerting authority.[4] Either

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[3] See Paul Gilje, The Road to Mobocracy, for a revealing discussion of a general shift from urban rioting aimed at preserving a communal consensus to rioting that reflected the disparate interests of a more fragmented culture. See David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution and Ira Berlin Ronald Hoffman, Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution for two portraits of the impact of the Revolution on antislavery movements, on slave societies and on African Americans themselves.

[4] Two insightful analyses of the relationship between territories and the federal government come from Peter Onuf's Statehood and Union and Andrew Cayton's The Frontier Republic.

phenomenon in excess -- slovenly urbanization of the British type or a lawless existence on the savage frontier -- would represent the breakdown of social order and individual virtue, two concepts that still retained a central place in American civic discourse (and, as discussed below, acted as motive forces in a widespread religious revitalization in American culture).[5]

Compounding these unsettling epiphenomena of demographic change, and encompassing similar anxieties, the rise of a competitive capitalist economy posed difficult questions about the nature and direction of American society. The appeal of capitalism, of course, was that it promised, in theory, an egalitarian form of social mobility, in which the individual citizen could achieve his highest potential, acquire property, and exercise virtue in the best republican tradition. Again, however, the problem was one of excess: unrestrained self-interest and self-advancement would run counter to the ideal of social harmony and cooperation. On a practical level, many people began to find that they were not able to achieve stable independence and that the industrialization taking place around them proved as disturbing as it did exhilirating. Alexis de Tocqueville put his finger on a common feeling resulting from the scramble for advancement that social mobility implied:

> [The Americans] have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition; the barrier has changed its shape rather than its position .... This constant strife between the inclination springing from the equality of condition and the means it supplies to satisfy them harasses and wearies the mind.[6]

And the nation's first major economic crisis, the so-called Panic of 1819, brought home to many Americans the fragile nature of economic success. Andrew Cayton has described the effect of the depression on citizens of Ohio:

> The Cincinnati Iron foundry closed its doors in early 1820, leaving more than a hundred men unemployed. Other commercial and industrial operations either closed or sharply reduced their operations. By early, 1820, much of the city's population was out of work. Even artisans and shopkeepers, who were dependent on the demand of other citizens for income, found it difficult to keep their businesses going .... As men

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[5] Henry Nash Smith provided a concise explanation of the problem in <u>Virgin Land</u>, chapters 20-22.

[6] Alexis de Tocqueville, <u>Democracy in America</u>, p. 146.

scrambled to recoup their fortunes or to feed their families, they gave a good deal of thought to what had happened to them.[7]

The technological and capitalist revolution was gaining momentum throughout early nineteenth century, but not a few Americans feared that it might leave them behind.

In addition, the capitalist ideology of the North, with its characteristic praise and need of free soil and free labor, served to exacerbate the sectional conflict regarding slavery. A fundamental incompatibility separated the economic systems of North and South, resulting in a tension which westward expansion and the unsettled status of the territories rendered more hostile and ultimately unsustainable. The "slavery question" had long haunted the American imagination; it represented for many "the architectural flaw, the noxious weed in a garden, the hidden disease in an otherwise sound and growing body."[8] The fact that neither the Revolution nor the Constitution had resolved the issue, and that economic expansion only made the regional conflict starker, tended to heighten misgivings about the direction of the young nation.

Closely tied to these demographic and economic changes was a growing fear that Americans had become more relaxed in their religious commitments. While concern over "infidelity" and religious declension had a long history in the United States, the evidence seemed particularly compelling in the post-Revolutionary decades. The paucity of churches on the frontier, the influx of Roman Catholics into the cities, and the intellectual influences of the Enlightenment, particularly the rationalism of the Deists with their model of a mechanistic universe, all seemed to betoken a general crisis in American Protestantism. In fact, however, the early nineteenth century would see an unexampled explosion of religiosity across the United States. The stage had been set.

Apprehension regarding the future coexisted with a pride in the accomplishments of the country and a faith in its potential for greatness. The success of the Revolution seemed to confirm that Americans were somehow a chosen people who, under the continued sunshine of divine favor, could achieve whatever they put their minds to. This sense of American exceptionalism derived in large measure from the rhetoric of freedom and equality which had driven the Revolution, and underlay a democratic idealism that Bernard Bailyn has aptly termed the "contagion of liberty." The language that had justified and motivated a separation from England could now inspire a kind of second, domestic revolution that consisted, in its essence, of an exaltation of the "common man"

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[7] Cayton, pp. 127-8.
[8] Davis, p. 283.

and a leveling of the traditional bastions and symbols of authority. Methodist preacher Lorenzo Dow struck the characteristic chord by invoking the Declaration of Independence:

> But if all men are 'BORN EQUAL,' and endowed with unalienable RIGHTS by their CREATOR, in the blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness -- then there can be no just reason, as a cause, why he may or should not think, and judge, and act for himself in matters of religion, opinion, and private judgment.[9]

This rhetorical elevation of the individual had practical limits, of course, but it did help to create an ethos of personal liberation which validated the private ambition of every citizen.[10] In staking their claims to lands on the frontier, setting up new businesses, stepping into the political arena in word and deed, and declaring independence from Calvinist doctrine, Americans put the language of individualism into practice.

Side by side with this new individualism, the public ideology of the young country retained a moral emphasis on communal responsibility which unbridled individualism would tend to corrode. The Revolution, after all, had been fought in the name of "the people," and great effort had been exerted since then to forge a union in the social as well as political sphere.[11] The ideals of American exceptionalism, then, combined with anxiety over social fragmentation to open new channels for energies in the culture which had previously lain dormant or found few outlets for expression. In the proliferation of benevolent societies, the temperance and feminist movements, reforms in education, an increasingly vocal abolitionist corps and other civic associations, we see the impulse to create a more ordered and morally upright society. Somewhat paradoxically, many of

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[9] Cited in Nathan Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity, p. 37.

[10] The promises of the Revolution were, predictably, slower in coming for women and African Americans, but these two groups did internalize and translate the rhetoric of liberty into an active force. Benjamin Quarles wrote that "to a degree approaching unanimity, [African Americans] clothed the War for Independence with a meaning and a significance transcending their own day and time and not confined to the shores of the new republic. To them the full worth of the American Revolution lay ahead" (Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution, p. 301). Linda Kerber also stressed psychology in discussing how women dealt with the persistent societal obstacles they encountered: "They devised their own interpretation of what the Revolution had meant to them as women, and they began to invent an ideology of citizenship that merged the domestic domain of the preindustrial woman with the new public ideology of individual responsibility and civic virtue" (Women of the Republic, p. 269).

[11] Jay Fliegelman argued in Declaring Independence that a desire for non-subjective social harmony characterized the Revolutionary generation's approach to public issues following independence. He described a "wishful quest to escape the narrow corridor of the perspectival and subjective by attaining to a prospect point that permitted a comprehensive, transcendent, or universalist view" (72).

these social organizations took as their immediate goal the uplifting of individuals. The percolation of sentiments of individual advancement and social responsibility found greatest expression, however, in a religious earthquake that shook the country during the early nineteenth century. The basis of this religious transformation can be found in the longing of many people for an intensity of spiritual experience.

The Second Great Awakening and Rise of Evangelicalism

Transformations in American economics, politics and intellectual culture found their parallel in a transformation of American religion in the decades following independence, as the United States underwent a widespread flowering of religious sentiment and unprecedented expansion of church membership known as the Second Great Awakening. Definitions of the term and assessments of the causes, contours, and effects of the Awakening are in dispute, but a number of basic features are generally agreed upon. The Awakening lasted some 50 years, from the 1790s to the 1840s, and spanned the entire United States. The religious revitalization that the Awakening represented manifested itself in different ways according to the local population and church establishment, but was definitely a Protestant phenomenon. Methodist and Baptist denominations experienced a surge of membership, often at the expense of other denominations, prompting a move toward liberalization and competitiveness on the part of the Anglican, Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches. The numerical success of the Methodists and Baptists lay primarily in their reliance on itinerant preachers who actively brought the message of the church to the people, converting great numbers through emotionally charged revivals. These revivals occurred on a scale and with a frequency previously unseen in the United States, and usually struck more conservative clergymen as excessive emotionalism masquerading as religion. With the maturation of revivalism and the evolution of a distinct revivalist methodology aimed at converting people *en masse*, the age of evangelicalism had arrived, with the Protestants leading the charge.

The social impact of the Second Great Awakening may be gauged by reviewing several main thrusts of the scholarly literature. The traditional school of thought has tended to portray the period as one marked by widespread secularization and the concomitant efforts of church elites to reestablish order and bring wandering Christians

back into the ecclesiastical fold. [12] From this perspective, the Second Great Awakening appears as a process of centripetal reorientation, a reassertion of centralized religious authority, as established churches tried to co-opt Evangelical activism by dressing their old theologies in new clothes. By concentrating on the conservative impulses of the Presbyterian and Congregationalist establishments, however, while neglecting the unfolding of the Second Great Awakening outside New England, these scholars often slight the activities of less powerful denominations or of the people themselves.

More recent interpretations of the era have done much to counterbalance this overemphasis on centralization. Two of the more significant contributions come from Nathan Hatch and Donald Mathews. Hatch, in The Democratization of American Christianity, set out to revise the "social control interpretation" of the Second Great Awakening by exploring its role in galvanizing the nation's religious culture of insurgent populist preachers and of the tremendous numbers of common people who hearkened to their message. Hatch wrote:

> ...we have ignored the most dynamic and characteristic elements of
> Christianity during this time: the displacement from power of the religious
> people of ideas by those who leaned toward popular culture; the powerful
> centrifugal forces that drove churches apart and gave new significance to
> local and grass-roots endeavors; and the stark emotionalism, disorder,
> extremism, and crudeness that accompanied expressions of the faith fed by
> the passions of ordinary people. [13]

In tracing the siphoning of religious power away from the established churches and into the hands of local preachers and their flocks, Hatch posited an organic relationship between political and religious liberty. The success of the Revolution, he argues, created an atmosphere where resistance to authority and orthodoxy formed the ascendant ethos in the religious sphere as well as the secular.

A driving force in this resistance, as Hatch presented it, was class conflict: the desire of people of comparatively low socio-economic status to undermine or even usurp the consuetudinary power not only of clergymen, but of lawyers and doctors as well. A

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[12] Representative works of this camp include John Bodo's The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848 (Princeton, 1954); Charles Cole's The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists, 1820-1860 (New York, 1954); and Charles Foster's An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837 (Chapel Hill, 1960). Perry Miller, in "From the Covenant to the Revival," argued that the problem facing clerics was "how to preserve a spiritual unity throughout a multitude of sects amid the increasing violence of political dissension" (Nature's Nation, p. 115).

[13] Nathan Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity, p. 222.

second driving force, and one which thrived on the first, was leadership. Highly charismatic, hard-working lay preachers inspired large numbers of the population to reawakened religious sentiment through their dynamism, the use of vernacular speech, a refusal to condescend to the audience, their criticism of elites, and, above all, their faith in the ability of people to think for themselves. As the mass movements led by these lay preachers multiplied, and as people felt increasingly free to chart their own spiritual course, religion during this period began to resemble a competitive marketplace, where the traditional establishments could no longer count on a guaranteed level of membership in the face of highly appealing and energetic alternatives.

Hatch's revisionary look at the Second Great Awakening as a fundamentally centrifugal event has provided the field of American religious history with a useful lens through which to view the period, but he gives short shrift to the ways in which the Awakening entailed myriad forms of centripetal cohesion on the local level. Donald Mathews is more sensitive to this phenomenon. In his influential 1969 essay, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process," Mathews argued that religious revivalism represented a crucial source of stability in American society, integrating huge numbers of people under the common umbrella of Protestantism. The Awakening, in his words, was "more than a series of religious 'crazes' and camp meetings" and more than the reactionary efforts of New England conservatives. Rather, it was "an organizing process that helped to give meaning and direction to people suffering in various degrees from the social strains of a nation on the move into new political, economic and geographical areas." In effect, Mathews's approach fused the traditional emphasis on authority and cohesion with Hatch's centrifugal model by identifying the Awakening as "a general social movement that organized thousands of people into small groups."[14] Because Mathews's article is admittedly a "hypothesis" intended mainly to suggest a new way of thinking about the Awakening and new directions for research, it cannot fully address all of the relevant issues. He highlighted the unifying nature of Awakening at the expense of an analysis of regional variation, and left open the question as to how the actual words or messages of itinerant preachers and the psychological advantages of evangelical Protestantism were instrumental in winning over so many converts.

An answer to the second question must begin by considering the spiritual and theological tenets of evangelical Protestantism. It was in the transformation of Calvinist

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[14] Donald Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis," pp. 31, 27, 30.

theology that the Second Great Awakening had the most profound impact on individuals and on American religious culture. In its broad strokes, the Awakening entailed a virtual abandonment of the stricter aspects of Calvinism, in particular the doctrines of predestination and innate depravity, and established as normative the Arminian belief in the possibility of universal salvation through personal faith and devotional service. Where traditional Calvinism had taught that divine grace, or election into heaven, depended on the arbitrary will of a severe God, the evangelical Protestants preached that the regeneration and salvation of the soul depended on one's inner faith. As the belief in unalterable reprobation faded, the notion of free will was correspondingly elevated. Reconciliation with God still required the continued practice of moral living -- free will was understood to mean the freedom to do good -- but salvation had been effectively democratized.

This tectonic shift that the Awakening brought about reflected the contributions of Enlightenment philosophy in moving humanity toward an ontological center, in emphasizing the instrumentality of free will and in conceiving of God and nature as benevolent entities. It is not surprising that this religious philosophy found such a receptive audience in the United States, where the Calvinist doctrine of "inability" seemed out of touch with a culture steeped in the ideology of universal equality and political and economic mobility. It also corresponded nicely with many Americans' self-image as creators of a new Eden; just as the individual soul could be redeemed through the exercise of free will, a national redemption could also follow from collective efforts toward social improvement. Internal moral reform and social reform thus emerged as the two principal and parallel legacies of the Second Great Awakening.

This religious epoch, then, involved much more than theological evolution. In its social aspects, the Awakening had as profound an impact on American culture as the Constitution on American government and the Hamiltonian system on American economics. The Awakening, however, was not a uniform phenomenon; the theological and social changes it effected took place at different times, and with varying intensity, in different areas of the nation. In one sense, the Awakening had the unifying effect of making evangelical Protestantism the nation's overwhelmingly predominant religion. At the same time, within the parameters of Protestantism, the Awakening had a diversifying effect by breeding numerous schisms between the various denominations; after all, sectarianism was only natural in a "competitive marketplace" of religion. In short, more

and more people called themselves Protestants, but they also began to distinguish themselves from other Protestants.

The first stirrings of the Awakening occurred in the South and sparsely populated old Southwest, with its predominantly rural economy and poorly developed infrastructure and institutions, where religious organization served the critical function of providing social stability for the populace. Here the two clearly dominant groups were the Methodists and Baptists, although other active sects included the Presbyterians, the Christians and the Disciples (the last two formed by followers of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell). The South did not produce, in Martin Marty's words, "first-rate theological minds" on the order of Jonathan Edwards, but in the decades after independence Evangelical Protestantism spread like wildfire through the region, with preachers fanning the flames at camp-meetings.[15] Methodist circuit rider Peter Cartwright, in his autobiography, describes a typical revival:

> They would ... erect a shed, sufficiently large to protect five thousand people from wind and rain, and cover it with boards or shingles; build a large stand, seat the shed, and here they would collect together from forty to fifty miles around, sometimes further than that. Ten, twenty, and sometimes thirty ministers, of different denominations, would come together and preach night and day, four or five days together; and, indeed, I have known these camp-meetings to last three or four weeks, and great good resulted from them. I have seen more than a hundred sinners fall like dead men under one powerful sermon, and I have seen and heard more than five hundred Christians all shouting aloud the high praises of God at once; and I will venture to assert that many happy thousands were awakened and converted to God at these camp-meetings.[16]

Precise numbers are difficult to ascertain, but Donald Mathews estimates that approximately 83 percent of Southern church members in 1792 were Evangelicals, and this percentage would climb in the decades to follow.[17]

The picture was much the same in the Midwest. Here, Protestantism achieved steady gains as evangelical methodology received greater definition under the influence of Charles Grandison Finney, who turned revivalism into a virtual science. In an 1834 lecture to his Presbyterian church in New York, entitled "What a Revival of Religion

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[15] From the foreword to Donald Mathews, Religion in the Old South, p. x.

[16] William McLoughlin, The American Evangelicals, p. 47.

[17] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, p. 47.

Is," Finney went further than anyone else had to date in setting out the precise methods and objectives of revivalist Evangelicalism. First, he stressed the importance of emotion:

> Men are so sluggish, there are so many things to lead their minds off from religion, and to oppose the influence of the gospel, that it is necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles.[18]

While emotionalism had long been the practice of revivalists, Finney was the first major religious figure to give the technique a calculated turn. His approach was revolutionary in that it abandoned the traditional notion that only God, through miracles, could induce the intense religious fervor that characterized a revival. As Finney saw it, "[a]ll the laws of matter and mind remain in force" at a revival, which "consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature" and is a "purely philosophical [scientific] result of the right use of the constituted means."[19] With the restrictive dogma and uninspiring style of Calvinism pushed aside, then, revivalists could make deep inroads into both the non-practicing population and other denominations.

In New England, these revivalist activities represented a challenge to the Anglican and Congregationalist establishments, which, gripped by a kind of siege mentality, sought to make their own churches more vital and competitive. They did so in large measure by loosening several of the major theological doctrines of Calvinism, principally that of predestination.[20] Paradoxically, in their efforts to stem the Second Great Awakening's tide of Arminianism and revivalism, the New England Calvinists ended up participating in the Awakening. Together, these "New Light" Calvinists subverted the orthodox heritage of "hyper-Calvinism," and in so doing managed to save New England Calvinism from total obsolescence.

Three principal architects of the new Calvinism were Yale President Timothy Dwight and two of his students, Congregationalist minister Lyman Beecher and the brilliant theologian Nathaniel Taylor. In subtle ways, these men tried to revise Calvinism to appeal to a younger generation that had grown weary of the faith's rather grim

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[18] McLoughlin, The American Evangelicals, p. 87.

[19] Ibid., p. 90.

[20] As William McLoughlin put it, the Calvinists had to "concede that God was benevolent and not wrathful, merciful not stern, reasonable not mysterious ... that man was active not passive in his salvation, that grace was not arbitrarily or capriciously dispensed like the royal prerogative of a sovereign but offered freely to all men as the gift of a loving Father to his children" (The American Evangelicals, p. 4).

doctrines. They incorporated a degree of proactive evangelism into their churches and began to organize reform societies in an effort to become more socially relevant. Theologically, their critical modifications involved free will, divine benevolence, and the preacher's role of moral suasion in bringing people to God. Beecher, in an apparent affirmation of the evangelical method, declared in his sermon "The Faith Once Delivered to the Saints" that the original Christian sect spread because of revivalism:

> It was under the preaching of the word, that men were pricked in their
> hearts, and cried out, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do to be saved?'
> And it was by the moral transformation which attended the apostolic answer
> to this question, and not by the power of miracles, that the Gospel defied
> opposition, and spread during the first three hundred years.[21]

Like Beecher, Taylor also stressed the power of preaching in his contributions to New Light Calvinism. He undercut the Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards and his modern descendants, the "neo-Edwardseans," in his efforts to reconcile Calvinism with Enlightenment ideas of free will. Where Edwards maintained that human will operates almost exclusively in the service of self-interest, Taylor held that the soul retained a longing for spiritual connection and satisfaction, and that it was the role of the spoken word to draw out and encourage this longing. Consistent with Calvinism, nonetheless, in Taylor's theological position God acted as kind of moral governor whose grace depended on the observance of his moral laws. Salvation was achievable but required both the influence of a preacher to spark one's realization of God's laws and the conscious avoidance of sin after conversion.

       Across the country, then, the revivalists of the Second Great Awakening brought Evangelical Protestantism to the people and through their reorientation of Calvinist theology and practice irreversibly changed the religious landscape of the United States. It was when the Second Great Awakening had attained maturity, in the late 1820s and 1830s, that an awakening of a similar character, if of strikingly different characters, flowered in Boston under the name "Transcendentalism."

The Emergence of Transcendentalism

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[21] Ibid., p. 82.

The emergence of the Transcendentalists as an identifiable movement took place during the late 1820s and 1830s, but the roots of their religious philosophy extended much farther back into American religious history. Transcendentalism and evangelical Protestantism followed separate evolutionary branches from American Puritanism, taking as their common ancestor the Calvinism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In exploring their respective departures from Calvinism we can begin to map out the common ground the two movements shared.

Transcendentalism cannot be properly understood outside the context of Unitarianism, the dominant religion in Boston during the early nineteenth century. Unitarianism had developed during the late eighteenth century as a branch of the liberal wing of Christianity, which had separated from Orthodox Christianity during the First Great Awakening of the 1740s. That Awakening, along with its successor, revolved around the questions of divine election and original sin, and saw a brief period of revivalism. The Liberals tended to reject both the persisent Orthodox belief in inherent depravity and the emotionalism of the revivalists; on one side stood dogma, on the other stood pernicious "enthusiasm." The Liberals, in a kind of amalgamation of Enlightenment principles with American Christianity, began to stress the value of intellectual reason as the path to divine wisdom. The Unitarians descended as the Boston contingent of this tradition, while making their own unique theological contribution in rejecting the doctrine of divine trinity.

Unitarians placed a premium on stability, harmony, rational thought, progressive morality, classical learning, and other hallmarks of Enlightenment Christianity. Instead of the dogma of Calvinism intended to compel obedience, the Unitarians offered a philosophy stressing the importance of voluntary ethical conduct and the ability of the intellect to discern what constituted ethical conduct. Theirs was a "natural theology" in which the individual could, through empirical investigation or the exercise of reason, discover the ordered and benevolent nature of the universe and of God's laws. Divine "revelation," which took its highest form in the Bible, was an external event or process that would confirm the findings of reason. William Ellery Channing, in his landmark sermon "Unitarian Christianity" (1819) sounded the characteristic theme of optimistic rationality:

> Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book
> written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought
> in the same manner as that of other books.... With these views of the Bible,
> we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to

compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering new truths.[22]

The intellectual marrow of Unitarianism had its counterbalance in a strain of sentimentalism: while the rational mind could light the way, the emotions provided the drive to translate ethical knowledge into ethical conduct. Still, the Unitarians deplored the kind of excessive emotionalism that took place at revivals, regarding it as a temporary burst of religious feeling that would soon dissipate. Since they conceived of revelation as an external favor granted by God to assure the mind of its spiritual progress, they doubted that inner "revelation" without prior conscious effort really represented a spiritual transformation.

Nonetheless, even in New England Evangelical Protestants were making many converts through their revivalist activities, especially in the 1820s and 1830s. The accelerating diversification of Boston increased the number of denominations that could compete for the loyalties of the population, even as urbanization and industrialization pushed many Bostonians in a secular direction. In an effort to become more relevant, and to instill their values of sobriety and order in a modernizing city, the Unitarians themselves adopted certain evangelical techniques. Through founding and participating in missionary and benevolent societies, they sought both to spread the Unitarian message and to bind people together in an increasingly fragmented social climate. Ezra Stiles Gannett, for example, a minister at the Federal Street Church, supplemented his regular pastoral duties with membership in the Colonization, Peace and Temperance societies, while Henry Ware Jr. helped found the Boston Philanthropic Society. Simultaneously, Unitarians tried to appeal more to the heart in their sermons, a trend reflected in the new Harvard professorship of Pastoral Theology and Pulpit Eloquence. Such Unitarian preachers as Joseph Stevens Buckminster and Edward Everett "set the model for a minister who could be literate rather than pedantic, who could quote poetry rather than eschatology, who could be a stylist and scorn controversy."[23] But they came nowhere near the emotionalism of the rural Evangelical Protestants. Unitarianism was a religion for upright, respectable, wealthy Boston citizens, not for the rough jostle of the streets or the backwoods. The liberalism Unitarians displayed in their embrace of Enlightenment

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[22] Cited in Anne Rose, Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, p. 11.
[23] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 10.

philosophy was stabilized by a solid conservatism they retained in matters of social conduct and status.

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Unitarians effectively captured Harvard with the election of Rev. Henry Ware Sr. as Hollis Professor of Divinity in 1805 and of Rev. John Thorton Kirkland as President in 1810. It was at Harvard that most of the younger generation of Transcendentalists received their education, and it was here that their rebellion against Unitarianism began. It would be misleading, however, to say that Transcendentalism entailed a rejection of Unitarianism; rather, it evolved almost as an organic consequence of its parent religion. By opening the door wide to the exercise of the intellect and free conscience, and encouraging the individual in his quest for divine meaning, Unitarians had unwittingly sowed the seeds of the Transcendentalist "revolt."

The Transcendentalists felt that something was lacking in Unitarianism. Sobriety, mildness and calm rationalism failed to satisfy that side of the Transcendentalists which yearned for a more intense spiritual experience. The source of the discontent that prompted Emerson to renounce the "corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College" is suggested by the bland job description that Harvard issued for the new Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy and Civil Polity. The professor's duties were to

> ... demonstrate the existence of a Deity or first cause, to prove and illustrate his essential attributes, both natural and moral; to evince and explain his providence and government, together with the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments; also to deduce and enforce the obligations which man is under to his Maker .... together with the most important duties of social life, resulting from the several relations which men mutually bear to each other; .... interspersing the whole with remarks, shewing the coincidence between the doctrines of revelation and the dictates of reason in these important points; and lastly, notwithstanding this coincidence, to state the absolute necessity and vast utility of a divine revelation.[24]

Perry Miller has argued persuasively that the Transcendentalists still retained in their characters certain vestiges of New England Puritanism, and that in their reaction against the "pale negations" of Unitarianism, they tapped into the grittier pietistic side of Calvinism in which New England culture had been steeped. The Calvinists, after all, conceived of their religion in part as man's quest to discover his place in the divine

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[24] Daniel Walker Howe, The Unitarian Conscience, pp. 2-3.

scheme and the possibility of spiritual regeneration, and though their view of humanity was pessimistic to a high degree, their pietism could give rise to such early, heretical expressions of inner spirituality as those of the Quakers and Anne Hutchinson. Miller saw that the Unitarians acted as crucial intermediaries between the Calvinists and the Transcendentalists by abandoning the notion of original sin and human imperfectability:

> The ecstasy and the vision which Calvinists knew only in the moment of vocation, the passing of which left them agonizingly aware of depravity and sin, could become the permanent joy of those who had put aside the conception of depravity, and the moments between could be filled no longer with self-accusation but with praise and wonder.[25]

For the Transcendentalists, then, the critical realization, or conviction, was that finding God depended on neither orthodox creedalism nor the Unitarians' sensible exercise of virtue, but on one's inner striving toward spiritual communion with the divine spirit. From this wellspring of belief would flow all the rest of their religious philosophy.

Transcendentalism was not a purely native movement, however. The Transcendentalists received inspiration from overseas in the form of English and German romanticism, particularly the literature of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Goethe, and in the post-Kantian idealism of Thomas Carlyle and Victor Cousin. Under the influence of these writers (which was not a determinative influence, but rather an introduction to the cutting edge of Continental philosophy), the Transcendentalists developed their ideas of human "Reason," or what we today would call intuition. For the Transcendentalists, as for the Romantics, subjective intuition was at least as reliable a source of truth as empirical investigation, which underlay both deism and the natural theology of the Unitarians. Kant had written skeptically of the ability of scientific methods to discover the true nature of the universe; now the rebels at Harvard college (the very institution which had exposed them to such modern notions!) would turn the ammuntion against their elders. In an 1833 article in *The Christian Examiner* entitled simply "Coleridge," Frederic Henry Hedge, once professor of logic at Harvard and now minister in West Cambridge, explained and defended the Romantic/Kantian philosophy, positing a correspondence between internal human reality and external spiritual reality. He wrote:

> The method [of Kantian philosophy] is synthetical, proceeding from a given point, the lowest that can be found in our consciousness, and deducing

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[25] Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson," in <u>Errand into the Wilderness</u>, p. 198.

from that point 'the whole world of intelligences, with the whole system of
their representations' .... The last step in the process, the keystone of the
fabric, is the deduction of time, space, and variety, or, in other words (as
time, space, and variety include the elements of all empiric knowledge), the
establishing of a coincidence between the facts of ordinary experience and
those which we have discovered within ourselves ....[26]

Although written in a highly intellectual style, as many of the Transcendentalist tracts

were, Hedge's argument was typical of the movement's philosophical emphasis on non-

rational, intuitive feeling. The role of the Continental Romantics in this regard was to

provide the sort of intellectual validation we may suppose a fledgling movement of

comparative youngsters would want in their rebellion against the Harvard establishment.

For Transcendentalism was entering theological realms which struck the elder

generation of Unitarians as heretical apostasy or, at the very least, as ingratitude. The

immediate controversy surrounded the question of miracles, or whether God

communicated his existence to humanity through miracles as performed by Jesus Christ.

The Transcendentalists thought, and declared, that this position alienated humanity from

divinity. Emerson leveled the charge forcefully in his scandalous Divinity School

Address (1838), asserting that "the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches,

gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the

falling rain."[27] The same year, in a bold critique of Harvard professor Andrews

Norton's magnum opus *The Evidence of the Genuineness of the Four Gospels*, Orestes

Brownson identified what he regarded as the odious implications of the Unitarian

position: "there is no revelation made from God to the human soul; we can know nothing

of religion but what is taught us from abroad, by an individual raised up and specially

endowed with wisdom from on high to be our instructor."[28] For Brownson and the

other Transcendentalists, God displayed his presence in every aspect of the natural

world, not just at isolated times. In a sharp rhetorical move, Brownson proceeded to

identify the spirituality of the Transcendentalists with liberty and democracy:

...truth lights her torch in the inner temple of every man's soul, whether
patrician or plebian, a shepherd or a philosopher, a Croesus or a beggar. It
is only on the reality of this inner light, and on the fact, that it is universal,
in all men, and in every man, that you can found a democracy, which shall

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[26] Miller, The Transcendentalists, pp. 70-71.

[27] Stephen Whicher, Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 105.

[28] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 207.

have a firm basis, and which shall be able to survive the storms of human passions.[29]

To Norton, such a rejection of the existence of divine miracles, and the assertion of an intuitive communion with God, amounted to a rejection of Christianity itself. In his reply to the Transcendentalists, "A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity," Norton wrote that their position "strikes at root of faith in Christianity," and he reiterated the "orthodox" Unitarian belief that inner revelation was inherently unreliable and a potential lure away from the truths of religion.

> The religion of which they speak, therefore, exists merely, if it exists at all, in undefined and unintelligible feelings, having reference perhaps to certain imaginations, the result of impressions communicated in childhood, or produced by the visible signs of religious belief existing around us, or awakened by the beautiful and magnificent spectacles which nature presents.[30]

Despite its dismissive intent and tone, Norton's blast against Transcendentalism is an excellent recapitulation of their religious philosophy. The crucial difference consisted in the respect accorded to "undefined and unintelligible feelings."

The miracles controversy revealed how far removed the Harvard rebels had grown from their theological upbringing. It opened a window onto the fundamental dispute between the Transcendentalists and the Unitarians, which centered around the relationship between God, nature and humanity. The heresy of the Transcendentalists (for which the early Puritans had hanged people) was to countenance mysticism and pantheism, or the beliefs in the potential of the human mind to commune with God and in a God who is present in all of nature, rather than unequivocally distinct from it. Nevertheless, the Transcendentalists continued to think of themselves as Christians and to articulate their philosophy within a Christian theological framework, although some eventually moved past Christianity (as Emerson did in evolving his idea of an "oversoul") or abandoned organized religion altogether.

Transcendentalists and Evangelicals

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[29] Ibid., p. 208.
[30] Ibid., p. 212.

The theological dispute raging at Harvard would also place the Transcendentalists beyond the Christian pale in the eyes of many Evangelicals. This distinction between the two movements has, as suggested earlier, contributed to the customary scholarly segregation of Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism, and merits explicit delineation. Evangelicals retained a fundamental Protestant belief in a dualistic universe: God formed the universe, but remains above it, separate from it. The creator is *not* one with the creation. The spiritual world is absolutely discrete from the material world, and an unbridgeable gulf divides the two; a human being can only "reach" the spiritual world through death. The one "contact point" between the material and spiritual spheres was the figure of Jesus Christ, who existed as both human being and divine envoy; people could therefore not experience God directly, but could receive an influx of the divine spirit through the mediation of Christ. Corresponding to this gulf between the spiritual and material worlds was the Protestant belief in supernaturalism. Certain mysterious or awe-evoking events of the material world, such as miracles and "wonders," could only be explained by reference to the spiritual world and the action of God or Christ.

Transcendentalists, in contrast, believed in a monistic universe, or one in which God is immanent in nature. The creation is an emanation of the creator; although a distinct entity, God is permanently and directly present in all things. Spirit and matter are perfectly fused, or "interpenetrate," and differ not in essence but in degree. In such a pantheistic world, the objects of nature, including people, are all equally divine (hence Transcendentalism's preoccupation with the details of nature, which seemed to encapsulate divine glory in microcosmic form). In a pantheistic and mystical world, one can experience direct contact with the divinity, then, during a walk in the woods, for instance, or through introspective contemplation. Similarly, one does not need to attribute the events of the natural world to "removed" spiritual causes because there is no such separation; all events are both material and spiritual; a miracle is indeed "one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."

The theological distinctions between Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism, however, are not as definitively important as they might appear. As stated at the outset, the criteria by which this essay attempts to judge the affinities between the two depend less on abstract theological issues than on the ways in which the preaching of both movements affected individuals psychologically and brought about moral and social reform. Issues of theology should not, in my opinion, assume a greater significance for

the historian than for the historical actors themselves, and should not obscure that the whole point of religion was conceived of as giving meaning to human existence. A semi-literate farmer in Kentucky likely had little interest in or practical use for a recondite debate in ontological dualism; he would be more concerned with how the words of the preacher who came to town changed his life for the better. The question of vocabulary also forms a significant part of the problem, and should be addressed carefully. We shall see that, just as the movements had different conceptual referents for the same word -- "God" -- in many cases they expressed in dissimilar terms ideas that were in fact very much alike, such as the notion of a "sinner" or "unconverted" person. What must be kept in mind is that Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism paralleled each other as social and philosophical forces in their unstinting affirmation of the ability of the common man or woman of any race to take their spirituality into their own hands -- at a time when the institutions and social patterns of American life seemed increasingly alienating.

The remainder of this study is devoted to an investigation of these issues, and consists of four sections: conversion, language, community, and reform. The first explores the Transcendentalist and Evangelical conceptions and methods of personal spiritual transformation. This section provides a framework for the remaining three in that internal conversion generally entailed a reorientation of the conceptual approach of the individual, or the group, toward language, community and reform. In each case, Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism fused philosophical and religious ideas with practical techniques and outcomes. By addressing these areas of overlap we may begin to reorient our own conceptual approach toward antebellum American religion.

The Experience of Conversion

Transcendentalists and Evangelicals regarded the inner spiritual transformation of the individual as the central event of human existence. This experience of conversion involved a transcendence of the specious pleasures and routine miseries of everyday life, into the joy and righteousness that was to be found in a new, or renewed, relationship with God. The transformation took place on a subjective level; both movements shared the antinomian belief that an individual's relationship with the divine could be, and indeed

should be, unmediated -- by institutions, by history, by conventions, or by other people. The only "requirements" were that one indeed experienced the flowering of an inner faith in the existence and benevolence of God and that one thereupon determined to lead one's life more in accordance with this spiritual wisdom. Following conversion, obviously, one remained a human being who necessarily continued to live and toil in the material world, but conversion would have transfigured one's understanding of the world and of the matrix of relationships involving the world's inhabitants, objects, and natural forms.

Both Transcendentalists and Evangelicals believed that, as a prerequisite to conversion, both individuals and their communities needed to disencumber themselves of various impediments to spiritual growth. Since conversion was understood to take place on a subjective level, the multifarious structures and habits of social existence threatened to interfere with or even prevent the communion of humanity and divinity. Retaining the ancient belief that spiritual progress necessitated the sloughing off of the base hindrances of quotidian life, Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism began to define these hindrances in a radical fashion, turning their sights on certain institutions in their own culture. The principal impediments to spiritual "rebirth" included the ossified and stagnant modes of thinking characteristic of adulthood; the distractions and depravities of the larger society, particularly the kind of coarse materialism that seemed increasingly rampant in American society; and those forms of Christianity that had grown dogmatic, formalist and outdated. The interaction between these obstacles -- for instance, the habitual quest of adults for status, inadequately countered by the modern clergy, and leading to various types of sin -- served to reinforce and perpetuate the psychological and social hindrance of personal spiritual fulfillment.

A recurrent theme of the Romantic era was that children were closer to God than adults, who had spent so much time in the material world competing and sinning that their spiritual natures were numbed or crippled. Intuition seemed to operate more freely in children, since their minds had not yet accumulated the various forms of social education and modes of rationalistic inquiry which represented the common lot of growing up. The religious philosophies of Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism placed a high value on intuition because they thought the human soul needed to be sensitive to its inner stirrings or impulses in order to feel the touch of the divine spirit. One of the more florid statements of this idea came from Theodore Parker in "A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion":

Now to many men, who have but once felt this [the 'inspiration of God in man']; when heaven lay about them, in their infancy, before the world was too much with them, and they laid waste their powers, getting and spending, when they look back upon it, across the dreary gulf, where Honor, Virtue, Religion have made a shipwreck and perished with their youth, it seems visionary, a shadow, dream-like, unreal. They count it a phantom of their inexperience; the vision of a child's fancy, raw and unused to the world.[31]

Parker did not think that adults should despair of ever recapturing that "vision of a child's fancy" and discovering that it is not illusion but divine inspiration. Yet he grew vague in his solution to the dilemma of adulthood, writing that "he that is faithful to Reason, Conscience, and Religion, will, through them, receive inspiration...."[32] Amos Bronson Alcott, in an effort to be more practical and precise, conceived of the idea of questioning children about the Bible in order to educate adults about the true meaning of religion. The result, published in 1836, was his "Conversations with Children on the Gospels" (which struck orthodox Christians not just as folly but as a corruptive influence on the children). In the preface to the work, Alcott made his intent clear:

...[he] hoped that, through their simple consciousness, the Divine Idea of a Man, as Imaged in Jesus, yet almost lost to the world, might be revived in the mind of adults, who might thus be recalled into the spiritual kingdom .... [T]he bright visions of childhood [are] the promise of the soul's future blessedness.[33]

The concrete threat to the spiritual well-being of adults consisted of the materialism to which capitalist society inclined them and which distracted their minds and souls from the higher pursuits of a spiritual life. "Money is money," wrote Henry Ward Beecher, "and, though locked up in the deepest and darkest vault, every coin is one more coin of the world's wealth. The heart is God's mint ...."[34] Like the Transcendentalists, the Evangelicals regarded the disease of materialism as an affliction peculiar to adults, and "stressed Christ's words that men must become like little children if they would understand God's will."[35]

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[31] Ibid., p. 322.

[32] Ibid., p. 324.

[33] Ibid., p. 152.

[34] Henry Ward Beecher, "Preaching Christ," in McLoughlin, The American Evangelicals, p. 139.

[35] McLoughlin, Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform, p. 116.

Perhaps the most formidable obstacles to "true religion" were the existing religious institutions. In the opinions of both movements, the major American denominations -- Anglicanism, Congregationalism, Unitarianism -- had lost much of their power to move the hearts of their flocks, and Transcendentalits and Evangelicals sought to return to a purer, more visceral form of religion that derived its strength from emotion rather than convention or duty. Modern Christianity seemed to them to have become clotted with doctrine, defined by superficial ritual, and overly rationalistic. Under the influence of stale "priest-craft" and tiresome theological disputes, a pall of religious malaise seemed to have spread over the land. As Emerson told the aghast members of the Harvard Divinity School, "it is still true that tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul...."[36] The most comprehensive formulation was given by Theodore Parker in his "Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity." Here, Parker rhetorically separated the chaff from the wheat; the mere outward forms and methods of historical Christianity from the enduring principles that Christ taught. Waxing uncharacteristically aggressive in his indictment of passionless theologians, Parker declared: "They have piled their own rubbish against the temple of Truth where Piety comes up to worship; what wonder the pile seems unshapely and like to fall?" By contrast, he wrote, "true" Christianity has nothing to do with theological sophistication; it "is absolute, pure morality; absolute, pure religion, -- the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance."[37]

The Evangelical critique of Christianity also centered around the presumed inefficacy of traditional preachers in promoting "absolute, pure religion." Social discord and resentment may have played as much of a part in this critique as spiritual longing, since many of the Evangelicals had little wealth or formal education, and had come under contemptuous criticism from the established clergy for their rough-hewn and emotional preaching style. In retaliation, the Evangelicals painted the clergy as a corrupt fraternity of bland men who often succumbed to the temptations of wealth and prestige to which their offices exposed them. In The Clergyman's Looking Glass, Elias Smith, one of the central figures in the Disciples of Christ, offered the "men of the cloth" a sarcastic challenge:

> The reverend clergy who are with me I advise, who am also a clergyman ...
> feed yourselves upon the church and parish, over which we have settled

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[36] Whicher, p. 111.

[37] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 266, p. 277.

you for life, and who are obliged to support you, whether they like you or
not; taking the command by constraint, for filthy lucre, not of a ready mind,
as lords over men's souls, not as ensamples to them, and when
commencement day shall appear, you shall receive some honorary title,
which shall make you appear very respectable among the reverend clergy.[38]

For the Evangelicals, the importance of preaching lay, above all else, in the ability to
bring about a spiritual transformation in members of the preacher's flock, to help them
find the faith in Christian teaching that would lead them away from a life of ignorance and
sin. The rituals and formal preaching of established Christian churches seemed to hinder
ministers' ability to accomplish this.

Such were the negative impediments to spiritual progress, but equally important in
bringing about conversion, in a positive sense, were certain activities or circumstances
that played a catalytic role. An unmediated personal relationship with divinity did not
spring into being on its own, but depended in large measure on the conscious effort of
the individual and on the participation of other people. The Transcendentalists tended to
emphasize the former and the Evangelicals the latter, but both movements, in accordance
with their belief in free will, regarded conversion as an active more than a passive
process. Put more precisely, the individual and his or her immediate circle could
consciously and reliably prepare for an influx of the divine spirit. In simple terms,
Transcendentalist conversion consisted of a newfound awareness of the benevolence and
interconnectedness of the universe, while Evangelical conversion consisted of an inner
faith in one's eventual reconciliation and reconnection with God.

The Transcendentalists can be exasperatingly vague in their prescriptions for
spiritual transformation, a vagueness which derives principally from their distrust of all
forms of ritual and inherited religious forms. The transcendent individual is often a
solitary figure, contemplating his soul (and by analogy, the soul of all humanity), and
contemplating other souls through the reading of serious literature. But the central
recurring theme that emerges is a return to nature, where the artifice and depravity of
society cannot reach. Thus Thoreau leaves Concord and heads for Walden Pond to
explore the great truths of the natural world. Thus Jones Very, in his poem "The
Silent," distinguishes between the sounds that strike the ear and those that strike the soul
when one walks in the woods:

'Tis all unheard; that Silent Voice,

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[38] Cited in Hatch, p. 75.

Whose goings forth unknown to all,
Bids bending reed and bird rejoice,
And fills with music Nature's hall.

And in the speechless human heart
It speaks, where'er man's feet have trod;
Beyond the lips' deceitful art,
To tell of Him, the Unseen God.[39]

Emerson, in "Nature," tries to capture the feeling of conversion as experienced during his (or his narrator's) sojourn in the woods. In a famous passage that has become a classic yet frequently parodied description of the "transcendent moment," he writes:

> In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.[40]

For the reading or listening audience of the Transcendentalists, however, the question remained whether this kind of spiritual experience was the inevitable result of a walk in the woods. It is a question that the Transcendentalists would have answered indirectly, implicitly, through the demonstration of spiritual transformation rather than instruction in its causative methods. That is, they were less interested in mapping out the precise route to conversion than in describing the general feeling of spiritual awakening. Experiencing nature was of critical importance because the natural world was the face and essence of God; becoming physically closer to nature, contemplating it, understanding it -- these were the actions that brought man closer to his maker.

In contrast to Transcendentalism's romantic emphasis on solitude and nature, the Evangelical conception of conversion was a highly pragmatic and communal one. The Evangelicals were in the business of saving, or "winning," souls, and they developed a definite program to carry it off. Charles Finney had outlined the methods and goals of a revival, famously asserting that preachers should "work up" a revival rather than "praying it down" as a miracle from God. Over time, the Evangelicals developed a clearly defined sequence of steps toward spiritual transformation, or a "morphology of

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[39] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 365.
[40] Whicher, p. 24.

conversion, " in which the three stages were conviction of sin, conversion, and assurance of salvation.[41] The spiritual transformation of the individual ordinarily occurred in the social setting of a revival or camp meeting, where the other people present -- in addition to the preacher -- played an instrumental role in one's conversion, through exhortations and singing and personal accounts of their own salvation. The first goal was to have the individual become aware, agonizingly aware, of the depth of his or her sin. D. Dickson Bruce described this awareness as "the point at which the tension between the worldly life and the religious became unbearable, the religious life being recognized as immensely desirable."[42] Only in this state of conviction could the individual achieve the abject humility which turning away from sin required, and become open to conversion. Conversion depended on the active intervention of the divine spirit in the form of Christ, but this interposition would only take place if the self had become sufficiently alienated, through conviction of sin, from the material world. In the moment of conversion, one felt that the heart had been touched by the hand of God. Following conversion, the third stage was that of assurance of salvation, or the belief that one's sins were forgiven and that one could, after death, enter the realm of heaven and be reunited with God and with other saved souls.

Clearly, the theological differences between Transcendentalists and Evangelicals -- their divergent conceptions of the relationship between God, nature, and humanity -- lend a different tone to their respective descriptions of spiritual transformation. For the Transcendentalists, who more often emphasized the importance of the active imagination, conversion tended to resemble an intellectual epiphany as much as a visceral religious wrenching, whereby the transcendent individual achieves a conscious awareness of an internal divinity, and of the universal divinity present in the world and people around him. Since there was theoretically no division between God and God's world, and no corresponding need to bridge an insuperable gulf between matter and spirit, the transcendent moment was like the lifting of a veil enabling the immediate recognition of a *present* communion with divinity. For the Evangelicals, who believed that the individual mortal could not experience God directly, the feeling of conversion was more oriented toward the future. It consisted of the faith that, after death, and with continued

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[41] A comprehensive description of the morphology of conversion appears in chapter three of D. Dickson Bruce's And They All Sang Hallelujah.

[42] Bruce, p. 62.

observance of the laws of God, a sinful person could receive divine grace and admission into the kingdom of God.

However, the intended psychological impact of conversion in each case did not differ as much as these theological issues might suggest. In the first place, both movements expressed similar notions of "sin," even though they did so in frequently dissimilar terms. Evangelical descriptions of sinful behavior, in which Satan makes frequent appearances, generally invoked the traditional, vague categories of "wickedness," "sloth," "lust," or "greed." In his autobiography, Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright is somewhat more specific in identifying his own sins, recalling his youthful days of dancing, drinking, and card-playing.[43] The Transcendentalists tended to employ a slightly less Biblical vocabulary in referring to "sinful" behavior, but their set of conceptual referents is remarkably similar. In the Divinity School Address, Emerson explained the idea of "moral sentiment" in terms of action and consequence: "He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted .... If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being."[44] For both movements, the plight of the unconverted individual is that he does not feel in the fibers of his being a sense of connection with divinity, but rather a sense of alienation from a benevolent universe. The practical intent of Transcendental and Evangelical preaching was essentially the same, the fundamental message being: "renounce the distractions and temptations to which social intercourse or human nature expose you, and which will interfere with your spiritual development." Failing to do so resulted in what the Evangelicals would call damnation and what the Transcendentalists would call alienation from divinity.

The Transcendentalist and Evangelical beliefs regarding conversion also converged in regard to the subjective psychological feeling of spiritual transformation. Although for the Evangelicals conversion was understood theologically to take place through external agency -- the spirit of God touching a person who has become properly humbled -- their descriptions of conversion frequently invoke the individual's inner feelings: the sense of having "seen the light" or "heard the voice of God." Finney, for example, relates in his memoirs how he was converted after grappling with religious doubts for three days: "My heart seemed to be liquid fire within me. All my feelings seemed to rise and flow out ... it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face." Finney then fell prostrate before

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[43] McLoughlin, The American Evangelicals, p. 42.
[44] Whicher, p. 102.

the vision and "received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost ... [which] ... like a wave of electricity going through and through me ... seemed to come in waves of liquid love."[45] Similarly, Methodist preacher John Hagerty recalled the moment he "received" assurance: "When I was on my knees crying to God for a full Deliverance I heard a voice *inwardly* say, 'I have sealed the pardon of thy sins with my blood'" [italics mine].[46] Conversely, the Transcendentalists made room in their philosophy of conversion -- which generally accepted the mystical premise of pure inner vision -- for external agency. In the Divinity School Address, Emerson asserted that "if a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do *enter into* that man with justice" [italics mine].[47] In essence, while Transcendentalists and Evangelicals offered contrary theological explanations of the ultimate source of spiritual transformation, for both movements that transformation was itself fairly constant: a newfound self-awareness and an unshakeable inner faith in the benevolence and accessibility of the divine realm.

A major paradoxical corollary to this central common belief is that in the critical moment of conversion and self-knowledge a complete effacement or abnegation of self supposedly occurs; the contact of humanity with divinity entails an absolute suspension of ego. For the Evangelicals, the overwhelming majesty of the divine spirit acted to obliterate the ordinary concerns of the individual self during a revival. Indeed, the divine spirit, in the form of Christ, would intervene only after a suspension of individual identity had occurred, a state that D. Dickson Bruce terms "an unstructured or liminal condition in man."[48] For the Transcendentalists the same theme is often expressed as a dissolving of individual identity in the supreme pattern of nature, or the recognition that one's soul is but a single part of a much greater overarching spirit. In "The Oversoul," Emerson expresses the fundamental Transcendentalist belief that a higher view of reality can only be achieved by ascending above the plane of individual subjectivity. He writes that

> [f]rom within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and
> makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all .... And the

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[45] Cited in McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, p. 16.

[46] Cited in William Warren Sweet, The Methodists: A Collection of Source Materials, p. 126.

[47] Whicher, p. 102. Lawrence Buell shrewdly points out that the concluding phrase of this passage actually renders the statement "quite tame" by qualifying and undermining and apparent assertion of man's identity with God (Literary Transcendentalism, p. 14).

[48] Bruce, p. 100.

blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself.[49]

By stressing a negation of ego as a necessary stage of enlightenment, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals both drew on the ancient religious idea that the confines of the individual mind and soul limited the operation of spirit in a person. Significantly, they both held that such confines could be temporarily stretched or suspended to allow for spiritual development.

The theoretical and practical problem both groups faced revolved around the *temporary* nature of the ego-effacing moment of conversion: How could the post-conversion individual, once again an integrated identity, derive ongoing meaning from the experience? Could the experience be repeated, or prolonged? How was the experience to be communicated to or brought about in other people? The answers to these questions lie in the psychological "residue" of the conversion experience, that is, the ways in which a spiritual transformation resulted in transformations in other areas of a person's thinking. The following section addresses those issues surrounding the linguistic representation of spiritual transformation and a new understadning of the role of moral suasion in effecting conversion.

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The Role of Language

In their efforts to precipitate in their audiences a new understanding of the world through the experience of conversion, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals evolved a mode of *representing* the world which corresponded with this new understanding. Most importantly, they sought to employ language in a fashion that would assist the process of spiritual conversion by moving the hearts of their auditors as well as their minds. While the Transcendentalists tended to be more self-consciously literary in their style, both movements understood that words had a power to enchant which could more effective

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[49] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Oversoul," in <u>The American Tradition in Literature</u>, p. 872.

than their power to instruct, in written as well as oral forms.[50] Their sermons and published writings are testimony to this understanding.

Broadly speaking, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals participated in a shift from a traditional form of religious discourse in which language primarily served the function of scriptual exegesis to one in which language operated to spark religious emotion. In this move from linguistic rationalism to linguistic emotionalism, both movements engaged in what has come to be understood as a realignment from an Enlightenment to a Romantic understanding of language. Preaching was still meant to persuade, but now it could persuade by exciting a different area of the self. Instead of addressing their auditors' intellectual faculties by expounding Biblical "truths" logically, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals sought to persuade their audiences in non-rational, or even anti-rational, ways. Doctrinal niceties and complicated theological disputations gave way to a simpler, more "authentic" form of language that would move people emotionally rather than alienate them. In part, this view of language reflected the contemporaneous advance of scriptural "higher criticism," which held that the language of the Bible did not possess absolute authority but, as a product of human endeavor, filtered through the imperfect medium of the human mind, could only approximate those Christian truths which did possess absolute authority. In effect, the evidence of truth was not the words themselves, but the intuitive feeling that what the words attempted to express was truth.

We have seen that Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism deplored the kind of preaching that failed to touch the hearts of the audience. Poor preaching, choked with difficult words and obscure doctrine, seemed to operate as a impediment to spiritual progress. Conversely, good preaching played a critical part in bringing people closer to God. But what exactly constituted good preaching? Above all, it consisted in the ability of one soul to communicate the truths of the heart to another soul. These "truths" were not will-o-wisps of the ego, nor the mere enthusiasm that orthodox Calvinists so distrusted, but the eternal principles and transcendent wisdom which God communicated to Christ and which Christ taught to his disciples. The speaker thus acted as a kind of organ-pipe for immutable spiritual principle, and since his language took as its reference this principle, his auditor would automatically sense its truth. This outlook had a

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[50] By "literary," I refer to what we consider the "higher" forms of literature or belles-lettres, such as poetry, and to a writing style in which elegance and sophistication are given high priority. Still, while the Transcendentalists participated more actively and deliberately in their era's literary scene, the Evangelicals also made use of the spread of printing technology by publishing sermons for wider distribution and by composing religious essays for such periodicals as the *Western Messenger*.

levelling effect: anybody with a heart of Christian truth could preach. "The poorest man, the most ignorant man, is mighty through God," wrote Beecher. "If his soul is aroused and inspired by the hope, but the faith, and the love which are in Christ Jesus, he has a power that others can not derive from mere learning, from wisdom, or from any other source."[51] Good preaching did not require a degree in divinity, but only the ability to move an audience -- which was based on the preacher's own prior conversion.

In Evangelical practice, this philosophy often resulted in the kind of preaching that horrified the orthodox clergy -- not only because of the highly emotional style, but because of the elision or simplification of what the conservatives considered important theological subject matter. The preacher communicated with the audience on their intellectual level; he became for them a riveting example of the transported soul; his body language commanded attention while his spoken language made scripture seem eminently and practically understable. Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury instructed his preachers to "[p]reach as if you had seen heaven and its celestial inhabitants and had hovered over the bottomless pit and beheld the tortures and heard the groans of the damned."[52] By dramatically *representing* hell rather than calmly explaining it, and by displaying all the physical signs of inner conviction, the preacher would presumably have more success in turning his auditors away from the path of wickedness. (If church membership figures are any indication, this style of preaching was in fact hugely successful for the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians).

A more universal, if less melodramatic, feature of the "new preaching" was its emphasis on the human implications of scriptural teachings, as opposed to the abstractions of high theology. This "authentic" mode of sermonizing was supposedly rooted more firmly in actual experience than the language of technical exposition; rather than explaining human existence, Evangelicals wanted to illuminate and rhetorically vivify those aspects of existence which formed the subject matter of Christian teaching. The distance the Evangelicals had traveled since the time of Jonathan Edwards is suggested by juxtaposition of two representative passages. In his sermon "A Divine and Supernatural Light," Edwards was ahead of his time in positing the direct contact of God with the human soul in the form of a "light," yet very much of his time in his obtuse phrasing. He wrote:

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[51] Beecher, "Preaching Christ," p. 133.
[52] Cited in Hatch, p. 137.

...this light is not the less immediately from God for [its appeal to the
rational faculties]; though the faculties are made use of, it is as the subject
and not as the cause; and that acting of the faculties in it, is not the cause,
but is either implied in the thing itself (in the light that is imparted) or is the
consequence of it....[53]

While Evangelicals may have agreed with the gist of Edwards's argument -- that the soul
can experience the influx of divine spirit -- they would have framed the passage in more
"natural" cadences. Finney, for instance, in his sermon on "True and False
Repentance," first stated what he means by that distinction, and then proceeded to
illustrate the point in practical terms:

> Observe that young convert. If he is deceived [in believing himself
> repentant], you will find that there is only a partial change in his conduct.
> He is reformed in certain things, but there are many things which are wrong
> that he continues to practice. If you become intimately acquainted with him,
> instead of finding him tremblingly alive to sin every where, and quick to
> detect it in every thing that is contrary to the spirit of the gospel, you will
> find him, perhaps strict and quick-sighted in regard to certain things, but
> loose in his conduct and lax in his views on other points....[54]

Three principal features of this passage distinguish it from Edwards's. First, the diction
does not rise significantly above the level of common speech; secondly, the passage
refers directly to the audience, personally drawing them into the argument; and lastly,
Finney shows a greater concern with the real workings of psychology in everyday human
conduct. This passage is typical of much Evangelical preaching in the sense that, while
Finney may have delivered it in a gripping and persuasive style, the words themselves
evince the simplicity and lucidity that the Evangelicals valued.

The Transcendentalists also prized preaching that stirred the emotions, numbering
among their models the Unitarian ministers Henry Ware Sr., for whom religion was "not
merely the act of assenting to the truth," and John Emery Abbot, who counseled that the
goal of preaching was "less to communicate new truth, than to give impressiveness and
efficacy to what is known."[55] Like the Evangelicals, they felt that preaching should
stress the personal above the doctrinal. In his address to the Divinity School, Emerson
recalled listening disconsolately to a passionless preacher who "had no one word

[53] Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in <u>The American Tradition in Literature</u>, p.
164.
[54] Charles Finney, "True and False Repentance," in <u>Lectures to Professing Christians</u>, p. 121.
[55] Cited in Howe, p. 164.

intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined."[56] George Ripley's sermon on "Jesus Christ, the Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever" (1834) would have been more to Emerson's liking. Describing the human yearning for spiritual meaning, Ripley rose to the level of poetry:

> There are moments when life seems like a dream, and the shadows which we have pursued are revealed to us in all their emptiness and vanity .... We want a Father to whom we can go -- upon whom we can depend -- whom we can worship, venerate, and love. We want him when the burdens of life press heavily upon our hearts.[57]

Ripley's language in the sermon is intended less to instruct than to share with his auditors the sense of longing that he himself felt; the persuasive power of the sermon operates on the level of emotion rather than rationality. Still, it should be noted that the Transcendentalists could not escape their background as highly intelligent and educated people, and their sermons and writings bear the impress of their intellectual upbringing. A tension frequently exists between the content and the form of a Transcendentalist sermon -- between the rhetorical obeisance paid to simple, emotive language and the sophisticated language in which the idea is clothed. This tension glares particularly brightly in the writings of Emerson, who could never find it within himself to abandon proper syntax or an elevated vocabulary even as he glorified unrestrained or non-intellectual expression. In "The Poet," for instance, he employs a remarkably precise style to lionize the poet-priest who had mastered the art of "freer speech":

> The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or 'with the flower of the mind'; not with the intellect used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life; or as the ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect alone but with the intellect inebriated by nectar.[58]

Emerson and his Transcendentalist colleagues were of a mind with the Evangelicals when it came to authentic speech, but their attachment -- or addiction -- to a cerebral form language tended to limit somewhat the popular appeal of their writings.

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[56] Whicher, p. 109.
[57] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 293.
[58] Whicher, p. 233.

Nonetheless, both movements' fundamental belief in the primacy of authentic language, in which words grew organically out of human experience and communicated that experience in ways that emotionally stimulated the auditor, precipitated important changes in their writings and sermons. Two principal linguistic techniques in the religious discourse of Transcendentalists and Evangelicals were narrative and metaphor, which were non-rational in the sense that they depended less on argumentation than on image and suggestion. Narrative and metaphor stimulated the imagination of the listener or reader by implying rather than explicitly delineating connections between multiple elements or ideas. They sought to express the truths of a human life through the representation of personal experience, which naturally took the form of stories, and through the metaphorical harmonizing of technically unrelated events or ideas. In both cases, the intent was to draw in and excite the auditor in ways that expository preaching could not achieve.

Narrative both characterized minor anecdotes that appeared in Transcendentalist and Evangelical preaching and served as the overarching structure of the numerous spiritual autobiographies of each group. On the level of anecdote, it was a particularly effective means of communicating an idea to an audience. As Nathan Hatch pointed out, "[s]tories are rich sources of belief precisely because they are just stories and are therefore immune from falsehood and from logical fallacy."[59] Moreover, stories acted in a positive sense to illustrate truth, in effect recapitulating the original method of the Bible itself. By showing human experience rather than explaining it, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals could excite their audiences at the same time they educated them. Drawn from scripture, from history and from personal experience, stories could move the heart precisely because they dramatized experience. At the same time, they were intended to move the heart in a particular direction: toward self-awarness, toward righteousness, toward God. Almost always, the stories illustrated a moral point; they were parables; often the experience of the characters demonstrated a cause-and-effect relationship involving moral issues. In his sermon "Selfishness Not True Religion" (1837), Finney sought to encourage the "duty of disinterested benevolence" through reference to a brief story:

> Here are two men walking along the street together. They come across a
> man that has just been run over by a cart, and lies weltering in his gore.
> They take him up and carry him to the surgeon, and relieve him. Now it is

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[59] Hatch, p. 138.

plain that their gratification is in proportion to the intensity of their desire for his relief. If one of them felt but little and cared but little about the sufferings of the poor man, he will be but little gratified.[60]

The story-telling is not practiced for its own sake, but for the sake of the higher purpose of illustrating the teachings of the Bible. Similarly, in <u>Walden</u>, Thoreau tells the story of a "strolling Indian" who "went to sell baskets at the house of a well-known lawyer in my neighborhood." The Indian thought that

> ...when he had made the baskets he would have done his part, and then it would be the white man's to buy them. He had not discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so ... I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy them. Yet not the less, in my case, did I think it worth my while to weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them.[61]

This anecdote can be misleading because it appears on the surface that Thoreau is advocating a purely non-didactic philosophy of art -- yet the whole of <u>Walden</u>, including this passage, needs to be understood as a spiritual journey which the author committed to paper with the purpose of inculcating wisdom in his readers. The work is a narrative of conversion whose effectiveness derives, in large measure, from the technique of clothing didacticism in the yarns of Thoreau's imagination. And <u>Walden</u> was by no means a unique production. Conversion narratives occupied a central place in the literature and writings that both movements produced. James Freeman Clarke's *Autobiography*, Margaret Fuller's *Memoirs*, Thoreau's "Natural History of Massachusetts," and "Theodore Parker's Experience as a Minister" are representative of the Transcendentalist form of personal narrative. The Evangelicals were at least as prolific in their production of conversion narratives, numbering among their autobiographies those of Richard Allen, Peter Cartwright, Charles Finney, Alexander Campbell, James Freeman Clark, Charlotte Forten, Margaret Prior, and Jarena Lee.

Along with narrative, metaphor served an important non-rationalist function. It helped the mind to see and understand connections that might not have become visible through technical expostulation. Through image and metaphor, the speaker vitalized

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[60] Finney, "Selfishness Not True Religion," in <u>Lectures to Professing Christians</u>, p. 193.
[61] Henry David Thoreau, <u>Walden</u>, p. 14.

whatever point he was making. In his "Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," Parker uses metaphor to great effect. Distinguishing the "truth of God" from the "word of man," he writes:

> ... [a] mountain stands to catch the clouds, to win the blessing they bear, and send it down to moisten the fainting violet, to form streams which gladden valley and meadow, and sweep on at last to the sea in deep channels, laden with fleets. Thus the forms of the church, the creeds of the sects, the conflicting opinions of teachers, float round the sides of the Christian mount, and swell and toss, and rise and fall, and dart their lightning, and roll their thunder, but they neither make nor mar the mount itself. Its lofty summit far transcends the tumult, knows nothing of the storm which roars below....[62]

The Evangelicals rarely approached this degree of self-conscious literariness in their sermons, but did show a flair for the gripping metaphorical phrase. The metaphorical images that they employed tended to cluster around two principal themes: the subjective feeling of spiritual transformation and the relationship between humanity and divinity. The first group includes those metaphors which represent conversion as taking place "in the heart," or as hearing the "voice of God." The second group centers around images of the passage of humankind through the mortal world to the divine realm, as in the following chorus:

> We'll stem the storm, it won't be long
> The heav'nly port is nigh.
> We'll stem the storm, it won't be long
> We'll anchor by and by.[63]

In their quest to represent the truth of human experience in an authentic fashion, Evangelicals and Transcendentalists employed metaphor as way to stimulate that part of the mind which *sensed* connections as much as rationally understanding them. By discarding the arid preaching of Calvinism in favor of metaphorical imagery and by representing personal experience as a microcosm of universal human experience, both movements helped to liberate religious language from a heritage which had grown increasingly irrelevant to younger generations of Americans. The challenge that still confronted Transcendentalists and Evangelicals was to stay relevant themselves by

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[62] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 280
[63] Cited in Dickson, p. 156.

translating their religious philosophies not only into new forms of language but into concrete forms of behavior and social organization.

Individuals and Communities

The process of conversion entailed the spiritual transformation of the individual -- yet, as observed above, the actual moment of conversion was temporary. The initiate into evangelical Protestantism, after the required period for achieving abject humility, felt touched and spiritually transfigured by the presence of the divine spirit in Christ, but then the moment was gone. Likewise, the Transcendentalist could, during a spiritual epiphany, thrill at the seeming dissolution of identity in the cosmic order or oversoul, but the moment then passed. In each case, the significance of conversion lay primarily in the psychological aftereffects of the temporary experience, in an elevation of the individual's consciousness above the plane of worldly things and specious pleasures; the converted Evangelical felt the assurance of salvation, and the Transcendent individual felt the truth of the immediate presence of divinity. For both movements, however, a difficult issue remained unresolved: the relationship of the converted individual to the larger community. The individual continued living as flesh and blood, as a human being with social instincts, but his life had changed in a fundamental way with far-ranging implications. The problem encompassed both philosophical and practical issues. Philosophically, the postulates of individual transcendence raised difficult theoretical questions regarding community: Should the individual withdraw from a wicked world, assuming that was even possible? Should he form associations with other converted individuals? Should he work to bring other people, the uninitiated, into the fold? And the problem had practical significance because members of each movement were in the process of forming very real communities at specific times and places in American culture.

The philosophical solution for both movements lay in an understanding of community which reconciled the individualism of their religious philosophies with the social requirements of human life. Personal spiritual transformation could help to regenerate the individual's immediate community; it would provide the moral and

religious underpinning that both movements thought a healthy society required. In turn, a regenerated community would provide both the sustaining environment for the continued practice of righteous behavior and the catalytic environment for future conversions. Individualism was thus asserted not for its own sake, but as a necessary stage on the road to forging a more holy society. Orestes Brownson captured the pith of the idea in his essay "Progress of Society" (1835), declaring that "mankind collectively has a growth precisely analogous to that of the individual."[64]

The common structural pattern in both movements' philosophy of community begins with a period of isolation, during which the individual can develop spiritually without social interference. Often, this stage entails a self-imposed separation from those people, including family and friends, who have not yet made the transition from worldiness to godliness. Subseqent to personal spiritual transformation, the individual is reintegrated with society, but the relationship is established on grounds fundamentally different from those that previously existed. This new relationship ordinarily derives from the individual's identification with and participation in a "subgroup" composed of other people with a compatible religious outlook (generally those people who had gone through the same conversion experience). The stage of "recongregation" takes place in a pure form only in heaven; on earth, the creation of a better community necessarily faces the obstacles that society and human nature inevitably present. Finally, this new community is seen, by its members at least, as representing the holiness to which the larger society should aspire; ideally the larger society adopts the values and practices of the smaller religious community.[65] This process, which we may term a "morphology of social conversion," stemmed naturally from the idealism of the religious philosophies of both movements, and had a distinctly millenial cast for the Transcendentalists and an overtly millenial significance for the Evangelicals. The millenium, Christ's thousand-year reign on earth, during which time all the injustice and wickedness of the world would be set aright, represented the most perfect community that could exist on earth. Despite their best efforts, however, the Transcendentalists and Evangelicals fell somewhat short of this ideal.

The most concise Transcendentalist statement of these issues is Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (1840). Here, transcendence is achieved through cleaving to one's own truth

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[64] Orestes Brownson, "Progress of Society" (1835) in Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 92.

[65] The theme of a withdrawal from the larger society and creation of a smaller social subset has its roots in the Puritan concept of "visible saints," those people who have voluntarily removed themselves from the sullying influence of the unconverted, who are "in the world, but not of the world."

and voluntarily withdrawing from society at the same time that the world "whips you with its displeasure." He declares that "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me," while insisting that this isolation "must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation." Significantly, the final resting point of Emerson's self-reliant indivudal is not a solipsistic detachment from all humanity, but a reunion with a more transcendent society. Individualism coexists with a longing for an intensity of personal contact and with a prophetic belief that society will eventually "come around" to the spiritual truth that the individual has witnessed. "If I see a trait," Emerson predicts, "my children will see it after me, and in course of time all mankind -- although it may chance that no one has seen it before me." The assumption behind Emerson's confidence here is that the expression of the soul, or oversoul, in human life will be recognized by others as fundamental truth: "You will soon love what is dictated by your nature as well as mine, and if we follow the truth it will bring us out safe at last."[66]

A common motif of both movements which expressed the separation-recongregation structure is that of a journey of pilgrims. For the Evangelicals, the ultimate goal of the pilgrimage was heaven, where all would be reunited with God; until then, the pilgrims formed a self-contained band of people making their difficult way through the world. The following song chorus captures the principal themes: the tension between community and isolation, the sense of an ongoing journey, and the evangelical impulse to recruit the uninitiated:

> O come and join our pilgrim band
> Our toils and triumphs share.
> We soon shall reach the promised land
> And rest forever there.[67]

The same motif, although generally without the Evangelicals' constant invocation of heaven as the destination, appears in the writings of Transcendentalists. George Ripley, in "Jesus Christ, the Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever" envisioned human existence as a journey toward some unnamed destination.

> The friends with whom we pursue the journey of life remain with us but a
> little while and leave us alone. Many who set out with us at the beginning

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[66] Whicher, pp. 150, 159, 156, 160.
[67] Cited in Dickson, pp. 155-6.

are not with us now; and many who are with us now, must be parted from our company before the journey is finished.[68]

The theme of life as an uncompleted journey which one pursues at times alone and at times with other kindred spirits, enabled both movements to assert rhetorically the primacy of the individual without abandoning in a revolutionary sense the principle of community. The individual's spiritual journey was not supposed to end futilely, in isolation, but in a reconnection with a more enriching and godly community.

This philosophical position derived in large measure from both movements' experience in the expanding young republic. As social fluidity and fragmentation seemed increasingly to characterize American life, both in the cities and on the frontier, community assumed a proportionately greater importance. What R. Jackson Wilson wrote in regard to the Transcendentalists helps to reveal the mindset of many Evangelicals as well:

> The ideal of the transcendent individual was, in part, a compensatory value, a hope that by rejecting society as he had found it a man might enter an unchanging, innocent, and altogether uncompetitive realm of sublimity, a counter-reality to the unsteady flux of experience in America.[69]

This point of view is instructive in its linking of philosophy to concrete social conditions, but places too much emphasis on the idea of "rejecting" society. Rather than abandoning society altogether, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals were more concerned with forging new types of community within the parameters of American life -- indeed, they sought to create a better America. For both movements, the challenge consisted of translating philosophy into practical forms of living, of finding a viable way to bring a higher form of society into being.

For the Transcendentalists, the quest for a more spiritual community that would provide the most meaning for its members led them to experiment with alternative forms of social, and asocial, existence. These experiments -- notably Thoreau's sojourn at Walden pond, George Ripley's Brook Farm, and Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands -- all represented utopian undertakings in their efforts to follow through on the ideas to which a religious philosophy had committed them. As a general principle, they sought a form of community that would free them from the debasing materialism and spiritually bankrupt

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[68] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 285.

[69] R. Jackson Wilson, In Quest of Community, p. 22.

conventions and institutions of American society. What they found, however, was that this idealism had its practical limits in the form of economic necessity, interpersonal strife, and the demoralizing effects of attrition.

To escape the distractions of Concord, Thoreau removed himself to Emerson's land near Walden pond and lived there for two years in order to put into practice the principles that the Transcendentalists had long articulated: self-reliance, simplicity, spiritual contemplation, the love of nature. Inverting the ordinary notions of economy prevalent in antebellum America, Thoreau writes that he was motivated by a desire to disburden himself of the false "luxuries" of life to return to the real "necessities," from which return the spiritual riches of solitiude and asceticism would flow. He tells us that, even though he lives alone, he has ample recompense in the company of nature:

> In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since.[70]

But the pond neither remains Thoreau's permanent home, nor shields him entirely from the influence of his culture. All the while, his thoughts are as much in Concord as they are with the beans he hoes and the creatures he observes; and the train he hears far in the distance reflects the destiny of American society more accurately than does one man's sojourn in the woods, a fact of which he is well aware. His return to Concord and society is inevitable. Thoreau writes that he leaves the woods "for as good a reason as [he] went there," namely, to avoid falling into a rut of conformity.[71] But his experience at the pond meant that he returned to Concord a changed man, wiser, more spiritually enlightened. His attitude toward his culture at the end of his narrative is one of bemused detachment:

> I delight to come to my bearings, -- not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may, -- not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by.[72]

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[70] Thoreau, Walden, p. 108.

[71] Ibid., p. 269.

[72] Ibid., p. 275.

Thoreau did more, of course, than sit thoughtfully -- he penned <u>Walden</u>. The narrative structure of the book recapitulates the spiritual journey that Transcendentalists and Evangelicals conceived of as the highest form of living: a temporary sojourn away from society which results in the elevation of both individual and community upon their reunion. The book itself would serve this latter purpose by (re)presenting the experience of one man as an exemplar for others; Thoreau assumed the role not of an orator of the pulpit but of a preacher of the page.

And he was not alone. His individual journey echoed other communal living experiments the Transcendentalists had undertaken. The most important of these was George Ripley's utopian project, Brook Farm. In an 1840 letter to Emerson, Ripley outlined what he had in mind for Brook Farm. The motivation for the experiment, as for Thoreau, seems to have arisen from Ripley's deep dissatisfaction with American economic practices and oppotunities. But his hopes for the project soar to such heights of idealism that disappointment appears inevitable:

> Our objects as you know are to ensure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual, to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can now be led amidst the pressures of our competitive institutions.[73]

Between September 1841, when the ten charter members established Brook Farm, and the end of 1847, when the community disbanded, the Brook Farmers sought to make Ripley's ideals a reality by instituting a series of social and economic practices.[74] They made agriculture their chief occupation, emphasized the voluntary and communal aspects of labor, and sought to reestablish gender and class relations on a more equitable basis.[75] Over time, interpersonal reform began to give way to far-reaching social reform as

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[73] Cited in Rose, p. 105.

[74] The original members were: George Ripley, Sophia Ripley, Marianne Ripley, William Allen, Charles Dana, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Maria Pratt, Minot Pratt, Sarah Stearns, and Charles Whitmore.

[75] For a thorough discussion of the people and practices of Brook Farm, see Anne Rose's <u>Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850</u>.

members became involved in such national movements as Fourierism (a scientific approach to social reform that was generally hostile to capitalism and slavery). The tension could not long be sustained; Brook Farmers found that they could not split their time between a utopian project that defined itself in almost passive opposition to society and those movements which actively sought to change society. Their retirement to the spiritual solace of the country kept them from what they increasingly regarded as their duty, structural social change.

A more radical and less successful attempt at creating a holy community was Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands. This utopian experiment was to be, even more so than Brook Farm, a withdrawal from a world of commerce into one of pure spirituality. "The entrance to paradise," Alcott wrote, "is still through the strait and narrow gate of self-denial ... Eden's avenue is yet guarded by the fiery-sworded cherubim, and humility and charity are the credentials for admission."[76] In conceiving of the project, Alcott had already arrived at the conclusion that private property of any sort was the root of evil in modern society. As he wrote in the *Dial* in 1841, "to property man has no moral claim whatsoever; use, not ownership of the planet and parts thereof, constitutes his sole inheritance..."[77] The practical result of this absolutist position was an effort at Fruitlands to eliminate as far as possible any conventional economic activity in favor of strict asceticism and a subsistence livelihood. As with Brook Farm, however, Fruitlands could not long withstand the march of history. It was simply too small and economically weak a community to slow or alter significantly the accelerating industrialization, expansion and modernization of American society. Instead, the significance of both lay in their representative quality -- representative of the efforts of many other people to create a new kind of community that would not reject their culture but serve as an example to that culture.

The Evangelicals, on the other hand, by sheer virtue of their numbers, operated as a socially cohesive force in many areas of the country by bringing people together in orderly communities. The two fundamental units of community were the family and the church, both of which were supposedly to provide an environment conducive to the spiritual growth of the individual. The proliferation of Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches in particular, from the far Southwest to the upper reaches of New England is testimony to the success of the Evangelicals in providing the focal points and

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[76] Cited in Rose, pp. 126-127.
[77] Ibid., p. 119.

social structures around which viable communities could form. Where the Transcendentalists experimented with fairly small-scale and theoretically-based experiments in righteous living, the Evangelicals were engaged in organizing hundreds of thousands of Americans under the common banner of Protestantism. Still, not every Evangelical Protestant would have considered those of another denomination to have found the one truly holy community; this sectarianism is what gave the Protestant Christianizing of the United States its peculiarly diverse character. Nonetheless, in terms of the adhesive nature of Evangelicalism in promoting communal existence among disperse groups of individuals, no other religious movement had such a wide-ranging and long-lasting impact on American society.

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Social Reform and Societal Inertia

The perfectionist or idealist strain within Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism, which stressed the spiritual advancement of the individual, also gave rise to a recurring, analagous impulse to minister to the spiritual health of the larger society. Accordingly , both movements took steps toward social reform in the belief that people of religious conviction could and ought to make society over in accordance with the benevolence of God and the reasonableness of God's laws. The plight of numerous marginalized populations of society -- the extremely poor, the mentally ill, the exploited, the enslaved -- drew particular attention from reformers. Yet the story of the reform efforts of Transcendentalists and Evangelicals is in large measure the story of idealism thwarted. While they succeeded at overcoming the inherited belief structures of Calvinism and Unitarianism, reformers in each movement would ultimately run up against entrenched social realities that proved remarkably resistant to change.

The United States of this era proved fertile ground for reform movements. With the success of the Revolution opening apparently limitless possibilities, American society seemed poised to lead the world into the millenium. To accomplish this, the people would need to continue the unfinished work of the Revolution by realizing its promises of liberty and equality for everyone. The country's youth, social fluidity and ethos of exceptionalism encouraged people to pursue various forms of social activism, including

educational reform, prison reform, temperance, feminism, and poverty relief. While the motivation of most reformers was religious in nature (as Charles Finney put it, "To the universal reformation of the world [true Christians] stand committed"), stark differences of opinion emerged as to the best way of achieving reform.[78] Activists of a more radical stripe believed that by vigorously challenging and changing the harsher practices of American existence -- such as the abuses of capitalism and slavery, which seemed to stunt individual growth -- they could provide an environment more conducive to personal spirituality and general social well-being. This philosophy underlay such radical approaches as the "immediatist" abolitionism of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, and the quasi-communist economic radicalism of Orestes Brownson's "The Laboring Classes." More conservative reformers cautioned against immediate structural change and the potentially bloody upheavals that would accompany it, arguing instead that individual moral reform was the safest long-term route to a righteous society. Henry Ward Beecher, for example, wrote that "those reforms which spring from the love of Christ are regulated, tempered, restrained."[79] Most social reform of the early nineteenth century would take place between these poles of aggressive confrontation and cautious amelioration.

Generalizations about how Transcendentalists and Evangelicals pursued various types of social reform are difficult to make. The Northern Evangelicals and Southern Evangelicals differed sharply and predictably over the question of slavery; among the Transcendentalists, antislavery sentiment coexisted with ignorance, apathy and even racism. On other specific questions, both groups engaged in divisive internal debates. The only generalization that can be safely made is to say that neither group achieved the kind of profound social change implied by their egalitarian and millenarian rhetoric. Examining two main areas of reform effort -- slavery and gender relations -- illuminates both the genuine idealism that drove reformers in both camps and the internal and external obstacles they encountered on the path to genuine, long-lasting social change.

Slavery reform

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[78] Cited in McLoughlin, The American Evangelicals, p. 12.
[79] Beecher, "Preaching Christ," p. 136.

The spiritual beliefs of Transcendentalists and Evangelicals virtually compelled them to denounce the institution of slavery. To religious movements that based their philosophies on the dignity and equality of humankind, a system that kept thousands of men in ignorance and chains and prevented them from practicing religion was nothing less than an abomination. Was not bodily freedom the natural counterpart to spiritual freedom? Both movements tended to stress the negative psychological and moral impact of servitude, which seemed not only to stunt the spiritual growth of the slaves, but to warp and deprave the morals of the masters as well. Practical opposition to slavery, however, proved an entirely different matter than merely denouncing it. The institution was too deeply rooted in American society -- economically, politically, psychologically -- to admit of profound alteration without a level of social trauma that most people wished to avoid. As immediatist abolitionism and the less aggressive policy of "containment" gained momentum in the 1840s and 1850s, proslavery forces in the South stepped up their defense of their economic system, while controversial legal and political decisions (notably the Dred Scott case, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and the Fugitive Slave Act) rendered the conflict ever starker. The battle raged on such a scale that the voices of the Transcendentalists out of New England could scarcely be heard in the tumult, and the Evangelicals, who counted among their members a vast majority of Southerners, found that antislavery agitation threatened to tear their churches apart.

Compounding the structural obstacles to antislavery reform, psychological and theological issues adulterated Transcendentalist and Evangelicals opposition to the peculiar institution. First, a nominal commitment to abolition frequently coexisted with lingering feelings of racism. Unresolved and unsettling questions remained with respect to the place of freed slaves in American society, assuming abolition came to pass. Would it result in a northward tide of "hordes of dusky Negroes"? Did blacks possess the moral or intellectual capacity for participation in the American economic and political system? If so, could the races ever live in peace in the same country? Was the solution to recolonize freedmen in Liberia? Ship them all west? Could the country afford to lose such a valuable labor source, when no clear replacement existed? The answers given to these questions, especially by Evangelicals, fell far short of a consensus, and revealed the practical limits of antislavery ideology. Philosophically, moreover, both movements displayed an ambivalence toward the idea of outright philanthropy. For many of the Transcendentalists, who placed a rhetorical premium on self-reliance, reform which was

external in nature -- rather than originating from within the given sphere of reform -- represented a false and even presumptuous form of social change. Similarly, most Evangelicals took seriously the maxim that "charity begins at home," and regarded the immediate family as the most important -- and often as the only legitimate -- sphere for the "implementation" of personal beliefs.

Ever since 1835, when William Henry Channing published *Slavery*, the Transcendentalist camp had publicly identified itself with the antislavery cause, at least in spirit. In this essay, Channing argued that chattel slavery contravened Christian teaching and thwarted the Christian desire to knit humankind together in a divine fabric of spirituality and freedom. Importantly, he did not blame individual Southerners for slavery, but rather concentrated on the institution as a systemic, impersonal evil. The dilemma for the Transcendentalists, however, was that systemic reform proved infinitely more difficult than a literary critique of slavery that subordinated structural change to questions of individual character. The Transcendentalist antislavery "report card," accordingly, is mixed. Theodore Parker, William Henry Furness, and Thoreau emerged as the more consistent and practically-minded antislavery activists. Their colleagues did not. Elizabeth Peabody and Bronson Alcott simply found other topics and projects more interesting; Orestes Brownson, after converting to Catholicism in 1850, cautioned against the disruptive potential of abolitionism; and George Ripley's conservative instincts led him away from activist reform.

As for Emerson, he stands as a striking example of the inner conflicts regarding race and abolitionism. On one level, the fact of slavery could not but offend the sensibilities of a man who had declared his eternal theme to be "the infinitude of the private man." This is the Emerson who denounced the Fugitive Slave Act as a "detestable law" and vowed that "[a]ll I have and all I can do shall be given and done in opposition to the execution of the law."[80] Yet another side of Emerson proved capable of expressing racist sentiments that are distressing for a modern audience, and he often questioned the wisdom and practicality of abolitionism. In a kind of icy proto-Darwinianism, Emerson reasoned that "[i]f the black man is feeble and not important to the existing races, not on a parity with the best race, the black man must serve, and be exterminated." He continued, "The anti-slavery of the whole world is dust in the balance before this, -- is a poor squeamishness and nervousness ... I say to you, you

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[80] Emerson, journal entry of Spring, 1851, in Whicher, p. 354.

must save yourself, black or white, man or woman; other help is none."[81] Here is an extreme version of Emerson's vaunted philosophy of self-reliance -- the private man helps himself; if he cannot compete, he will perish; antislavery agitation, and charity in general, is "love afar [but] spite at home."[82] We may regard these statements in any number of lights: as the guilt-effacing rationalizations of a good-hearted Northerner who knows he can do nothing about slavery, as the genuine beliefs of a man who really does not care all that much about the plight of slaves, or perhaps simply as instances of rhetorical extremism intended to make a strong point by overstating the point. But however we regard them, Emerson's equivocations point up the internal battles that Transcendentalists -- and indeed all antislavery whites -- had to wage as part of their larger battle against slavery.

Among the Evangelicals, the antislavery experience of the Southern wing of the movement provides the clearest insight into the practical limits of a reformist idealism, as personal psychology and societal inertia combined to stymie efforts to ameliorate slavery. As a general principle, Evangelicals conceived of themselves as a select community removed from the world, yet determined to work for the world's betterment, and believed that the best way to promote good was for the individual to make his or her life an example of godly behavior. From the egalitarian spirituality of Evangelicalism and its desire to uplift the downtrodden, opposition to slavery emerged as an obvious arena in which to improve the world. To varying degrees, Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians in the South embraced blacks as members, and to varying degrees white Evangelicals worked for the slaves' emancipation. Yet the walls of societal inertia loomed, and their initial enthusiasm stumbled. "The social realities of slavery," writes Donald Mathews, "and the psychological realities of racial prejudice simply could not be counterbalanced by religious commitment -- they could be affected but not destroyed."[83] Increasingly, white Evangelicals resigned themselves to failure in opposing slavery, and turned to an emphasis on individual psychological and spiritual emancipation through the conversion experience. In a crucial compromise that would provide the rationale for inaction, Evangelicals increasingly stressed that the soul could be free regardless of the body's station in society. Peter Cartwright spoke for many of his brethren when he wrote:

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[81] Emerson, journal entry of July, 1844, in Whicher, pp. 277-8.

[82] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Whicher, p. 150. We should note that Thoreau also approaches an abjuration of charity, writing in Walden that "Doing-good ... does not agree with my constitution" (p. 59).

[83] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, p. 75.

> I will not attempt to enumerate the moral evils that have been produced by slavery; their name is legion. And now, notwithstanding these are my honest views of slavery, I have never seen a rabid abolition or free-soil society that I could join, because they resort to unjustifiable agitation, and the means they employ are generally unchristian. They condemn and confound the innocent with the guilty; the means they employ are not truthful, at all times; and I am perfectly satisfied that if force is resorted to, this glorious Union will be dissolved, a civil war will follow, death and carnage will ensue, and the only free nation on the earth will be destroyed.[84]

The conservative resting place of an initial antislavery impulse can be seen in the Mission to Slaves and of a later slaveholding ethic, neither of which represent a proud moment in the history of white southern Evangelicalism. The Mission, which Mathews terms "a volatile compound of anxiety, shame, guilt, humane concern, rationalization, and self-interest,"[85] grew out of the residual impulse of white Evangelicals to do something about slavery, but had the "advantage" of operating safely within a slave system. As Mathews tells it, there were really three missions: to society, to masters, and to slaves. The mission to society, most importantly, would make the South safer from race war, while the mission to masters would promote Evangelical values and good relations, and the mission to slaves would strengthen the black family, spread the gospel, and encourage self-discipline among slaves over a desire for revenge. Predictably, the failure of the Mission lay in not only its lowered moral vision, but in its inability even to realize the compromised ideal, as racism and misunderstanding prevented white and black culture from forming meaningful bridges one to the other. Finally, compounding this "tragedy" was the articulation of a slaveholding ethic that arose in tandem with the Mission's demise. The ethic stripped slaveholding of its traditional immoral connotations and reinforced notions of the racial and cultural inferiority of blacks.

Evangelicals faced an additional problem that the Transcendentalists did not: their movement straddled the Mason-Dixon line. As antislavery agitation gathered steam in the 1830s and 1840s, strain developed between the Northern and Southern camps and by 1845 would result in an official ecclesiastical division of the Methodist and Baptist churches. Since the former had less at stake in the slave system, they could more

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[84] Peter Cartwright, "The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright," in McLoughlin, The American Evangelicals, p. 67.

[85] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, p. 140.

aggressively and consistently argue for slavery reform, as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lyman Beecher's daughter, did by writing <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin</u> and giving vent to a passionate outrage with slavery which far exceeded the position of most Southern Evangelicals. For those Evangelicals with a stake in slavery, religion was not supposed to be mixed with politics, and particularly not with slavery politics. An increasing number of them also began to argue that the Bible did not explicitly forbid slavery and actually seemed to imply that it might be the necessary lot of some people. William McLoughlin has identified the prevailing mood in the South when it came to the question of slavery reform:

> In a land with little real poverty, no urban slums or factory towns, minimal cultural conflict with Roman Catholic immigrants, with the Indians removed to the West and the blacks considered childlike beneficiaries of civilization, the white southerner felt that this region of the nation was already closer to millennial perfection than any other part of the country.[86]

Such complacency, however, did not prevent the egalitarian message of Evangelicalism from reaching the slaves themselves. While the reform efforts of white Evangelicals could not overcome the inertia of the slavery system, the efforts of African Americans to alleviate their own conditions proved psychologically much more successful. To an oppressed population already receptive to the balm of religion, Evangelicalism offered a new world of salvation and a powerful point of contact with the dominant culture. A sense of mutual spirituality united members of the same denomination; whites did not condescend to blacks; blacks proved to be highly expressive preachers from whom white preachers could learn; in essence, slaves discovered that Christianity was not just for whites. Gradually, haltingly, against flareups of white resistance, blacks developed their own churches and their own Evangelicalism. It incorporated African folk religion, the Arminian promise of deliverance through self-disciplined morality, an empowering sense of independence, and a feeling of being somehow a chosen people, all of which helped to ameliorate the psychological and spiritual damage of slavery.

Gender Relations

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[86] McLoughlin, <u>Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform</u>, p. 137.

In addition to slavery, the philosophical and practical implications of individualist rhetoric extended to relations between the sexes. Most noticeably, by positing the equality of the individual in the eyes of God Transcendentalists and Evangelicals could hardly avoid questions regarding women's status in the eyes of society. At the same time, their enduring emphasis on community suggested the existence of certain bounds to which individual freedom could be safely pushed. In one sense, gender relations were of more immediate concern than slavery to Transcendentalists and Evangelicals because they structured and gave meaning to the personal lives of members of both movements. While for Northerners slavery could remain safely at a distance, as "that awful problem down South," questions of marriage and family lay at the heart of their social existence. For white Southern Evangelicals, the presence of slavery was an omnipresent fact of life, but they also tended to subordinate issues of race and bondage to those of hearth and home.

The early decades of the nineteenth century saw the crystallization of the "cult of domesticity," which upheld the nuclear family as the province of safety and virtue in a world of uncertainty and competition. The home represented a port, tenderly nurtured by the woman, in which the man could take refuge from the churning sea of politics and economics outside the door. This division of gender roles had long been the norm of American life, but what differed after the Revolution was the explicitness with which it was articulated. By universalizing the rhetoric of equality and by drawing women partially into the political and military spheres during the actual conflict, the Revolution raised unsettling questions regarding the proper role of women in the new republic. What followed was, in its essence, a conservative reassertion of the traditional segregation between men's place in the world and women's place in the home. Yet the home had acquired a new importance as the site not only of feminine virtue but of political education, in which the men -- future lawyers, doctors, politicians -- would benefit from the wisdom and care of the mother. Linda Kerber termed this new role for women "Republican Motherhood," and described it as follows:

> [W]omen devised their own interpretation of what the Revolution had meant to them as women, and they began to invent an ideology of citizenship that merged the domestic domain of the preindustrial woman with the new public ideology of individual responsibility and civic virtue. They did this in the face of severe ridicule, responding both to the anti-intellectual complaint that educating women served no practical purpose and the conservative complaint that women had no political significance.[87]

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[87] Kerber, p. 269.

This expansion of the participation of women in American culture occurred within the limits of the home and family, but formed nonetheless one of the streams of social development through which post-Revolutionary energies could flow. It underlay and helped to validate the more overtly political feminist efforts of the antebellum period.

As Evangelical Protestantism matured, it grew in a more conservative direction; by the 1840s the movement had developed intricate links to society, significant economic power, and a definite air of respectability. As Evangelicalism became a religion of the middle-class and of stability, it also became a religion that perpetuated itself through schools and colleges, and that emphasized the family as the most basic social unit. Within the family, Christian precepts were to be faithfully inculcated in all the members; as Samuel Davies put it, families were "either to set up the worship of God immediately in your families or sin willfully against the knowledge of the truth."[88] Accordingly, women were increasingly granted ideological importance as pious nurturers of the Christian home, yet did not gain total independence to operate outside their sphere. They were supposed to be moral complements to men's worldly affairs, yet still dependent on their husbands. Nevertheless, Evangelicalism provided women, as it did African Americans, with a vital measure of "psychological and social space"[89] by affirming their individual importance in the eyes of God. The relation of parents to children was also particularly important, and symbolically paralleled the relation of divinity to humanity; the father was supposed to act toward his children as a stern yet forgiving God would toward humankind, while the mother assumed the role of Christ, selflessly sacrificing her needs for those of the children.

The Transcendentalists also experienced a tension between the individualism of their religious philosophy and the conservative instincts they retained in respect to family. For those members of a movement which developed during a time of disquieting social flux and which had distinguished itself by an intellectual and religious rebellion against tradition, home remained one of the few areas where emotional stability could reliably be found. The ideal of the perfectly free individual ran up against the mutual responsibilities of domestic life -- and the typical result for women was a continuation of their traditional roles. After Lidian Emerson, for instance, gave up on the idea of teaching Sunday school, she wrote to her husband:

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[88] Cited in Mathews, Religion in the Old South, p. 99.
[89] Ibid., p. 104.

> I seek only to improve my character -- in doing which intellect will of
> course make some progress -- but I shall never again as I formerly did make
> mental cultivation of a chief aim. God help me to have no aim in the future
> but to do his will in seeking the happiness of others -- forgetting my
> own.[90]

Lidian Emerson's dilemma paralleled that of other women attached to the
Transcendentalist movement, even those who participated in the Brook Farm and
Fruitlands communities. At Brook Farm, while women were granted limited voting
rights and officeholding priveleges, they continued to take most of the responsibility for
the traditional forms of "women's work" and did not take part in the farm's major
decisions. Sophia Ripley, who converted to Catholicism after Brook Farm disbanded in
a continued effort to find a spiritually satisfying community, expressed the feeling that the
community's commitment to a new mode of gender relations subverted itself because it
derived more from abstract philosophy than from emotion. She wrote, "I saw that all
through my life my ties with others were those of the intellect & imagination, & not warm
heart ties; that I do not love anyone & never did, with the heart, & of course never could
have been worthy in any relation [without the Catholic church]."[91] While Brook Farm
and Fruitlands had been envisioned as extended families, in which both married and
single adults could strive for their highest potential, they remained moored to the
traditional norms of family life that continued to define individual marriages.

Of all the Transcendentalists who took steps toward redefining their own
conceptions of gender relations, Margaret Fuller stands out as the one who blazed the
clearest path and managed to cleave unerrantly to her principles. Her booklet "Woman in
the Nineteenth Century" (1845) is generally acknowledged as a seminal publication in the
American feminist movement. This work expanded and amplified an article she wrote for
the *Dial* in 1843 entitled "The Great Lawsuit." Here, Fuller delves under immediate
political questions of female suffrage and extra-domestic activity in order to, in Perry
Miller's words, "go to fundamentals." Fuller's central idea is as follows:

> ....I would have woman lay aside all thought, such as she habitually
> cherishes, of being taught and led by men. I would have her, like the
> Indian girl, dedicate herself to the Sun, the Sun of Truth, and go no where
> if his beams did not make clear the path. I would have her free from

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[90] Cited in Rose, p. 170.
[91] Ibid., p. 196.

compromise, from complaisance, from helplessness, because I would have her good enough and strong enough to love one and all beings, from the fulness, not the poverty of being.

Men, as at presented instructed, will not help this work, because they also are under the slavery of habit....[92]

Fuller's radicalism here consisted of applying the principles of transcendent freedom explicitly to woman, rather than articulating them, as her colleagues often did, in an abstract or phallocentric form. For Fuller, the experience of conversion and attainment of an independent relationship with divinity had far-ranging implications for women: no longer were they to define themselves in relation to the masculine strictures of society, but in relation to themselves and to God.

Conclusion

In the decades following the emergence of Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism, American culture absorbed their respective contributions in markedly different ways. The Transcendentalists, who never claimed enough members to become a significant religious movement, bequeathed an invaluable legacy to American literature and philosophy. As a distinct movement, Transcendentalism had disintegrated by the dawn of civil war; twenty years later its shining lights had all faded: George Ripley and Jones Very died in 1880, Emerson in 1882, Orestes Brownson in 1876, Bronson Alcott in 1888. The torch passed to those writers and thinkers who wrestled with the philosophy of their Transcendentalist forebears, keeping it alive in the mind more than in the church. At his one-hundredth lecture before the Concord Lyceum in 1880, Emerson looked back at the heyday of Transcendentalism and described it thus:

> It seemed a war between intellect and affection; a crack in Nature, which split every church in Christendom into Papal and Protestant; Calvinism into Old and New schools; Quakerism into Old and New; brought new divisions in politics; as the new conscience touching temperance and slavery. The key to the period appeared to be that the mind had become aware of itself. Men grew reflective and intellectual. There was a new consciousness ....
> The modern mind believed that the nation existed for the individual, for the

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[92] Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 461.

guardianship and education of every man. This idea, roughly written in revolutions and national movements, in the mind of the philosopher had far more precision; the individual is the world.[93]

The Transcendentalists had stood at the vanguard of the "new consciousness" Emerson recalled so fondly, and it is for their intellectual and moral fervor that we remember them now as much as for their religious philosophy; the light of Transcendentalism today burns strongest on the page and in the classroom, rather than from the pulpit.

The reverberations of Evangelicalism have moved in other directions. Because the Evangelicals were, from the outset, intent on expanding church membership, they managed to define the daily religious life of the United States in a way that no other movement had done before, or has done since. Ever since the Second Great Awakening, the power of Evangelicalism has derived from its practical character -- its ability to disseminate its message, to help guide the religious lives of its adherents, to organize its members into cohesive groups. In the process of maturation and nationalization, evangelical Protestantism has lost something of its original rebellious flair, but continues as an omnipresent force. Churches of the major Evangelical denominations are common sights for the traveler. Modern Evangelical preachers follow in their predecessors' footsteps by continuing to spread the word of God -- although now they have moved beyond rural camp meetings to take advantage of the power of television.

One can understand, therefore, the gulf that separates Transcendentalism and Evangelicalism in the public consciousness. Memories of their provenance have grown hazy and imprecise, and it is easy to lose sight of their common heritage. By placing the two movements side by side, however, we gain a better understanding of how they both reacted to and helped to define a particular cultural moment in similar ways. At a time when political, economic and social transformations often exceeded the psychological ability of many Americans to keep pace, Transcendentalists and Evangelicals affirmed the dignity and moral capacity of the individual, while retaining the promise of the individual's reconnection with a higher form of community. In a time of disorienting change and exhilirating potential, they sought to attain a higher plane of consciousness, from which the diverse elements of American society could be successfully integrated into a meaningful whole. Having closed the gap between humanity and divinity, they strove -- with varying degrees of success -- to bridge divisions between individuals, between the possessed and dispossessed, men and women, blacks and whites.

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[93] Ibid., p. 494.

Transcendentalists and Evangelicals articulated religious ideas that both rebelled against and grew out of their culture, and in the process the two movements came closer together philosophically than either would have liked to admit.

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