

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST CONTROVERSY

THE REJECTION OF SUPERNATURALISM

With his health in danger from overwork at Boston's Second Church, Henry Ware, Jr.,* obtained the help of a younger colleague, a personally shy but publicly eloquent young man, Ralph Waldo Emerson.* Emerson's father, William, had been an influential Boston pastor of the liberal school, and when he died (young Waldo was only eight), Joseph Stevens Buckminster* preached the funeral sermon. With Ware destined for the newly created chair of pulpit eloquence and the pastoral care at Harvard, in a mistaken attempt to find a less stressful vocation, Emerson was being groomed for the pastorate of a historic church, recently revitalized under Ware's dedicated and energetic pastorate. There Emerson was ordained in 1829, but by 1832, after the death of his young and beloved wife, Ellen, and a period of intellectual unrest, he resigned his pastorate and embarked for Europe. Whether or not his parishioners attributed the resignation to grief, they did know that Emerson had made what was to them an unacceptable demand: he had asked to be excused from administering the Lord's Supper. With some regret they had accepted his resignation, and it seemed that a promising pastoral career had come to an abrupt end.

In fact Emerson's resignation was only the beginning of his new career as lecturer, essayist, and poet, a career that brought him to be the fountainhead of American literature. But his resignation also signaled the stirrings of a movement of rebellion within the Unitarian denomination, called by its supporters the "new views" or "absolute religion" and by the opposition "Transcendentalism" or, more bluntly, "infidelity." Transcendentalism became the popular (and confusing) label for the movement whose fundamental ideas Emerson would later insist were "the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times."¹ To some Unitarians the ideas were instead new and dangerous, and their willingness to comment on those dangers in forceful terms caused the

Transcendentalist controversy. It was more than just another of New England's theological disputes. Part of its importance is attributable to the stature of Emerson and to a lesser extent to individuals of the ability of Theodore Parker,* George Ripley,* Orestes Brownson,* Frederic Henry Hedge,* and James Freeman Clarke,* all Transcendentalists of great accomplishment and influence. These essentially religious leaders were joined by literary talents such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller,* and Jones Very to create an epoch of central importance to American literary history. But a further importance has been argued by Perry Miller, who saw in the movement a reflection of "a crisis of the spirit and of the nation."² To Miller, the Transcendentalists represented idealistic youth in revolt against materialistic age, a drama that has been repeated frequently in American life. The Transcendentalists gave a uniquely forceful expression to that revolt.

Miller made another point of importance about Transcendentalism when he pointed out that the movement was primarily "a religious demonstration."³ Noting the general lack of cohesion among the group, he argued that the one unifying factor among them was an aversion to the Unitarianism they knew in their youth. Miller insisted on this interpretation in part as a corrective to an excessively literary sense of the movement, flowing out of an increasing interest in the poetic achievement of Emerson and Thoreau. It was an important corrective, one that has since set the tone of Transcendentalist historiography. It was, in fact, more important than Miller probably knew, because its upshot has been to call into question Miller's fundamental assumption of a "revolt" or "rebellion" by suggesting a continuity between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism that is often overlooked in the descriptions of the conflicts between them. His sense of the religious nature of Transcendentalism carries the implication that the Transcendentalist controversy, although it had many larger implications, was at bottom a Unitarian dispute. It was in fact a cluster of several distinct disputes, each triggered by a provocative text, a challenging articulation of the new views that in the eyes of the conservative Unitarians demanded a rejoinder. Ripley, Emerson, and Parker in turn were the authors of the controversial texts, and in each case their argument had specific reference to central questions within the current Unitarian discourse. Emerson's and Parker's texts were also addresses delivered at ceremonial occasions within Unitarianism, further dramatizing the conflict. Emerson's Divinity School Address (1838) was delivered before a graduating class of young men trained for the Unitarian ministry at Harvard Divinity School, and Parker's *Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* (1841) was delivered as the sermon for Charles Shackford's ordination.

But these two major Unitarian manifestoes were preceded by a somewhat less dramatic, but nevertheless important review article by George Ripley. Ripley had been a student of Andrews Norton* and shared Norton's concern with questions of biblical accuracy and authority, although his studies in the early 1830s were to take him far beyond the position of Norton on the importance of

the biblical miracles. In 1836 Ripley reviewed the English Unitarian James Martineau's *Rationale of Religious Enquiry* for the *Christian Examiner*, the foremost Unitarian journal of the day and one in which Norton had had a major role since its inception. The position as organ of Unitarian opinion gave its contents a large role in denominational definition and identity—at least it did so in the eyes of many, including Norton. So when Ripley broached ideas that seemed dangerous to Norton, their appearance in the *Examiner* only exacerbated the problem. Norton's attack on Ripley, which is analyzed below, was, as William Hutchison saw it, a protest not only against his ideas but against their vehicle of expression. Norton believed he was defending the Unitarian name as well as criticizing false ideas.⁴

We can surmise that the "danger" of Ripley's comments in the review was related to the inflammatory power of his rhetorical attack on the "prevailing systems of theology": "It is hard to imagine a study more dry, more repulsive, more perplexing, and more totally unsatisfactory to a scientific mind, than theology, as it is presented in the works of by far the larger part of English writers on the subject." This was no attack on Norton or his theology by name, but it was an attack by implication, and Norton was shrewd enough to realize it. It was an expression of restlessness and a plea for nourishment that was not being provided by the established thinkers. "It is no wonder," Ripley continued, "that the heart is pulverized, that the freshness of life is exhausted, under their influence."⁵ Norton responded to this and later attacks, notably in Emerson's Divinity School Address, with real fury. But as Ripley's language here reminds us, there was emotion on both sides.

If Ripley's attack on the "prevailing systems of theology" was an oblique attack on Unitarian thinking at the time, his indictment of Christian "mythology" was a more direct challenge to Norton and to the supernatural rationalism of established Unitarianism. He characterized the development of human thought as a process of "purification" in which theology lagged far behind: "Astronomy has been separated from astrology, chemistry from the search after the philosopher's stone, medicine from the incantations of magic; but between theology and mythology, a sharp line of distinction yet remains to be drawn" (p. 130). This set of polarities associated theology with superstition and primitive ignorance, but more directly, it touched a raw nerve in theological discourse, the validity of the supernatural elements of the Bible, especially the miracles of the New Testament and the resurrection and divine nature of Christ. If mythology included the supernatural aspects of primitive religion, might it not include also the supernatural elements of Christianity? Did purification mean a reduction of Christianity to pure naturalism? Ripley was not prepared to go this far yet, but this was certainly the direction of his thought.

What was clear was that Ripley was completely unwilling, however, to use the reports of supernatural acts such as miracles as a basis for Christian faith. He argued instead that a belief in miracles depends on faith and not faith on a belief in miracles. "If, then, a firm faith in Christianity may be cherished in-

dependently of miracles; . . . and if there be great difficulties in the proof of miracles, without a previous conviction of the divine authority of him who is said to exhibit them, we hold it be an unsound method to make a belief in them the essential foundation of Christian faith, or the ultimate test of Christian character" (p. 131). Even though Ripley went on specifically to note that he had "not been inclined to controvert the truth of the Christian miracles," his attitude rendered them a largely irrelevant side issue in theological thinking and in religious faith (p. 131). In minimizing the importance of miracles, he had rendered Norton's entire critical enterprise futile.

Norton responded with a letter to a Boston newspaper impugning Ripley's scholarly competence, hardly the best grounds on which to do battle. But the battle was on, spurring Ripley to expand his views in more detail in *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion* (1836). That same year Emerson, who had by now launched a career as a lyceum lecturer, published his first book, *Nature*. Emerson did not here concern himself with the question of miracles, but it can be said that his entire procedure rendered them irrelevant. He developed his argument out of the context of eighteenth-century natural theology but expanded that tradition with an element of quasi-mystical religious experience and an idealism gauged toward his overriding concern with moral development. Out of this amalgam Emerson extracted a theory of "correspondence" in which nature and the mind are seen to be reflective versions of each other, each in turn reflecting the universal mind of God. This correspondence of nature and mind had its moral uses, especially in its suggestion of the dynamic and evolving character of the soul. In a system such as Emerson's, it was the ordinary course of nature that was endowed with divine significance, and a supernatural miracle was simply an intrusion on this process. A belief in miracles was not only unnecessary but obstructive to the religious life.

Nature was a controversial book, attracting criticism from another of Harvard's Unitarian spokesmen, Francis Bowen.* Because it existed not only in the realm of theological discourse but also as a statement of secular philosophy and even more importantly as a poetic effusion, the work was not as central to the controversy within the Unitarian camp as his Divinity School Address two years later. Here the occasion, an address before Divinity School graduates groomed for the Unitarian ministry, was all-important. Not only did Norton sense the public importance of such an address and measure out his public censure accordingly, but Emerson did as well, being keenly sensitive to social and political nuances despite his disdain for the social world. A few months before the address he recorded in his journal a meeting with some Divinity School students "who wished to talk with me concerning theism." Emerson's growing denial of the fatherlike, personal God of Christianity, still dear to most Unitarians, was coming to be well known by now, and he had some hesitation to enter dialogue on this sensitive topic.

I went rather heavy-hearted for I always find that my views chill or shock people at the first opening. But the conversation went well & I came away cheered. I told them that

the preacher should be a poet smit with love of the harmonies of moral nature: and yet look at the Unitarian Association & see if its aspect is poetic. They all smiled No. A minister nowadays is plainest prose, the prose of prose. He is a Warming-pan, a Night-chair at sick beds & rheumatic souls; and the fire of the minstrel's eye and the vivacity of his word is exchanged for intense grumbling enunciation of the Cambridge sort, & for scripture phraseology.⁶

Emerson was politic enough not to make his language this inflammatory in his public address the next July, and in fact the reader who goes to the text of the speech expecting to find the basis of controversy will be puzzled at first to find only Emerson's praise of the "refulgent summer" and his unassailable commendation of the religious sentiment. But the audience left the address with other words echoing in its collective mind: "I think no man can go with his thoughts about him, into one of our churches, without feeling that what hold the public worship had on men, is gone or going. It has lost its grasp on the affection of the good, and the fear of the bad" (CW, I, 88). This was more than just a sociological observation; it was an indictment of the clergy from which Emerson had withdrawn. Any doubt about that was confirmed by the remark that "tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual, and not what is necessary and eternal" (CW, I, 87). In a frank indictment of his colleagues, all the more searing because it was aimed at a generation coming to take a place among them, he admitted, "On this occasion, any complaisance, would be criminal, which told you, whose hope and commission it is to preach the faith of Christ, that the faith of Christ is preached" (CW, I, 84).

To this direct challenge both to the competence and faith of the Unitarian clergy Emerson added certain doctrinal remarks that came to be the controversial focus of the address, even though we may suspect that the remarks on Unitarian preaching may have burned more deeply at the moment. Expanding on the position he had developed in *Nature*, he rejected the biblical miracles in strong words: Jesus "spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle. . . . But the very word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and falling rain" (CW, I, 81). *Monster* is an accurate term from Emerson's perspective in that it denotes a departure from nature, but its graphic and pejorative qualities made it more than an expression of dissent on an abstract theological issue. Moreover, Emerson added to this attack on miracles a denial of the personal authority of Jesus. Although there was much of praise and reverence for Jesus in the address, Emerson also warned against worship of his person rather than his principles: Christianity "has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus. The soul knows no persons" (CW, I, 82). To have suggested that any reverence for the person of Jesus could be "noxious" was to court attack. Emerson appeared later to show genuine surprise at the controversy he stirred and was unwilling to engage directly in the debate that followed. Having made his point, he preferred to move on. But the

Divinity School Address marks the point at which the rift between the two parties of Unitarianism became unbridgeable. It was not only Emerson's arguments but the power of his language—both to inspire and to enrage—that widened the chasm to such extremes.

Norton responded with a blistering assault on all forms of "The New School in Literature and Religion" that is remarkable both for its unabashed anger and the breadth of its targets. After a wholesale indictment of almost the entire Romantic movement, he singled out Emerson's address less for doctrine than for its "ill-judged and indecorous" language.⁷ Norton the linguist was ever aware of the nuances of phraseology, and Emerson's slighting of the clergy, as we have seen, was by no means overly subtle. But Norton feared more deeply the poetic license with which Emerson approached sacred subjects. "The words God, Religion, Christianity, have a definite meaning, well understood. . . . We well know how shamefully they have been abused in modern times by infidels and pantheists; but their meaning remains the same; the truths which they express are unchanged and unchangeable" (p. 196). To appreciate the above passage, we must imagine the sneering weight that *infidel* and *pantheist* carried in the 1830s; we must also sense the alarm that plays just under the surface of the confident assertions of Norton. There is an implied plea for support in his insistence on the solid and commonly understood meaning of the very abstractions—God, religion, and Christianity—that Emerson and Ripley were redefining so radically. Norton was alarmed, because he understood that Emerson's whole strategy was simply to alter the shape of the discourse by redefining the whole theological enterprise. Feeling the ground move under him, Norton was grasping for life. His major counterattack, a discourse before the Divinity School alumni in 1839, attempted to expose *The Latest Form of Infidelity*. Less centered on language than doctrine this time, it defined that infidelity as the denial of "the miracles attesting to the divine mission of Christ." Those miracles he deemed necessary because of his conviction—and here was the philosophical kernel of the dispute—that a person "cannot pretend to attain, by his unassisted powers, any assurance concerning the unseen and the eternal, the great objects of religion" (pp. 210–11). To Emerson, and to a greater or lesser extent his Transcendentalist followers, the intuition of the soul was the only possible source of any religious knowledge.

It was on different grounds that Emerson's address was answered by his once senior colleague at the Second Church, Henry Ware, Jr. Ware was concerned less about the question of miracles than what he saw as Emerson's abandonment of a personal God for an abstract concept. His sermon *The Personality of the Deity* argued that a sense of a fatherlike God was essential to religious faith and human morality. Ware's talent for persuasion is clear in the sermon, especially in his emotionally charged comparison of an individual without belief in a personal God to a child raised without parents in the impersonal institution of an orphanage. Yet even Ware's invitation to respond to the sermon could not move Emerson into direct controversy. Already set on a new career as lec-

turer and essayist, he would not allow himself to be distracted from what he saw as the more important work that pressed him.⁸

If Emerson believed his mission was beyond the church, many of his followers did not, and their persistence within the Unitarian denomination permanently altered it. Even though he had denounced the clergy as it stood, Emerson himself had advised the young Divinity School graduates to remain within the church to breathe new life "through the forms already existing" (*CW*, I, 92). Theodore Parker, who heard the speech with great satisfaction, took Emerson's call to heart, and his determination to pursue Transcendentalist ideals within the institutional framework of the Unitarian church led to a further crisis in the controversy. Parker's crisis in fact was perhaps more significant for Unitarianism itself, precisely because it forced an evaluation of the denomination's identity.

THEODORE PARKER: TRANSCENDENTALISM WITHIN UNITARIANISM

In the 1830s and 1840s Parker began to distinguish himself for radical views in three areas: biblical criticism, theology, and politics. His early interest, and one that he never abandoned, was scriptural study. In his intense study of biblical history and languages, which began at Harvard, he came to doubt direct inspiration of the scriptures and other positions held by the orthodox. Committed firmly both to the moral life and to religious experience, he found less and less support for his faith in the Bible. As a result he was pushed toward a more naturalistic view of religion, a perspective that allowed him to hold on to what he thought was the valid core of Christianity while discarding the unnecessary and often obtrusive trappings of the church. His complaint, like Emerson's, was against "historical religion," and he crystalized these views in the enormously controversial sermon *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*. Although Parker admitted that "religious forms may be useful and beautiful," he believed that "an undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to God, and love to man."⁹ Those forms and doctrines were the transient things of Christianity; "the divine life of the soul" and its manifestations in "love to God, and love to man" were the permanent things. Stated thus abstractly, there seems little that is objectionable in Parker's view. Even after he had spelled out the details in the sermon at an ordination service attended by a good many Unitarian ministers, there seemed to be no alarm within the denomination. Parker insisted that doctrines and systems of theology were the most transient things of religion: "nothing changes more from age to age than the doctrines taught as Christian, and insisted on as essential to Christianity and personal salvation" (p. 122). But in these doctrines he included the sacred authority of the Bible and the divine nature of Christ; thus he entered controversial ground. The doctrines "have nothing to do with Christianity except as its aids or its adversaries;

they are not the foundation of its truths." In a further linguistic distinction, he called such issues "theological questions, not religious questions" (p. 131). For Parker, theology was transient, religion permanent. The object of his preaching was to direct his listeners to the "absolute value" of religion, which "never changes" (p. 146).

In perhaps the most forceful and, to many, shocking passage of the work, he showed how dispensable the notion of a divine Christ was to him:

If Jesus had taught at Athens, and not at Jerusalem; if he had wrought no miracle, and none but the human nature had ever been ascribed to him; if the Old Testament had forever perished at his birth,—Christianity would still have been the Word of God; it would have lost none of its truths. It would be just as true, just as beautiful, just as lasting, as now it is; though we should have lost so many a blessed word, and the work of Christianity itself would have been, perhaps, a long time retarded. (p. 131)

Parker's insistence that systems and doctrines were inconsequential justified the Unitarian rejection of Calvinism and the liberals' struggle for more modern views of the Bible. This perhaps helps to explain the lack of immediate criticism that his sermon drew. But to suggest the potential equivalence of the pagan Greeks and Jesus was to take a step too far. Still, Parker's daring might not have sparked open controversy had not three non-Unitarian ministers, with more conservative views, published the gist of the sermon in several orthodox journals. As Conrad Wright noted, they wanted "to smoke out the Unitarians and find out whether Parker would be disavowed by his fellow liberals," and all in all, they succeeded admirably.¹⁰

Parker's fate in the aftermath of the sermon has been amply narrated. In an 1843 meeting of the Boston Association of Ministers, an essentially Unitarian body, he was asked directly to withdraw because of his theological views, particularly his rejection of the miracles and the divinity of Christ. Parker saw the issue as one of free speech and refused to withdraw because of his passionate dedication to the ministry. Unable to persuade him to withdraw and unwilling to force him out, the association let the matter drop, leaving it to individual pastors to refuse to exchange pulpits with Parker if they found his theology dangerous. A good many of them did refuse, and Parker, still adamant in retaining his Unitarian identity, became something of a martyred outcast and, as a result, a hero of conscience and freedom in Unitarian history. Perry Miller's shrewd analysis of the whole episode, although taking note of a certain relish that Parker had for the role of martyr, attributed a large significance to the episode as a test of the American liberal tradition. Parker challenged the liberals' commitment to the ideal of noncreedal thought and open expression, grounds that underlay their own revolt against Calvinism. If liberalism passed this test, however narrowly, by refusing to excommunicate Parker, Parker also demonstrated what Miller termed the "concealed terror within the assurance of progress," the self-devouring nature of an impulse that must always destroy itself

to go beyond itself.¹¹ Parker had taken the tools handed to him in the liberal tradition—the use of reason in biblical interpretation and skepticism about dogmatic systems of theology—and had used them against that very tradition. He was in fact extending liberal principles, but he found himself at odds with the liberals and threatened by the very system that had nurtured him. By going beyond the intellectual boundary of many of his colleagues, he found himself alone and felt his isolation keenly. “Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit,” Emerson wrote, which is to say that change itself is the only permanence (*CW*, II, 189). Parker embodied that energizing spirit, but his own mixture of assurance and insecurity suggests the high price it exacted. The energy that he had to muster to reject and even attack the very tradition that nurtured him had to be more than matched with the energy to declare himself still part of that tradition.

If Parker embraced the Unitarians, it cannot be said that they returned the compliment. Although they did not exclude him from fellowship, he “suffered nearly complete ostracism from his Unitarian colleagues because of his theological views.”¹² The Parker episode sent shockwaves through the denomination and even moved the American Unitarian Association (AUA) to flirt with creedalism. In 1853 AUA adopted a declaration affirming among other things a belief in “Jesus Christ, the everlasting Son of God, the express image of the Father, in whom dwelt all the fulness of the God-head bodily, and who to us is the Way and the Truth and the Life.” But the statement, although officially adopted, was for the most part forgotten later in the century.¹³ The statement represented less a desire to enforce a rigid doctrine than an attempt by most Unitarians to disassociate themselves from Parker’s heresies.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

Underlying Parker’s theological struggle was a political one, and although he was one of the more dramatic of the political reformers, the political question itself permeated the entire Transcendental movement. If it was a “religious demonstration” and a phase of Unitarian development, the movement also had an inextricably political element that colored both of these other parts of its character. Transcendentalism stands at the turning point in American life when moral questions began to resolve themselves into political ones.

John White Chadwick* noted the more than coincidental fact that Parker preached his first sermon against slavery in 1841, the year of his sermon *The Transient and Permanent*.¹⁴ That overlapping of religious and theological radicalism emphasizes the way that the “new views” of Transcendentalism reached into politics as well. Slavery and its abolition, finally including the Civil War, became the dominant political issue of Parker’s day. Just as it divided the country, it also divided the Unitarian denomination. One of the first significant anti-slavery tracts was Lydia Maria Child’s* *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), which helped move William Ellery Chan-

ning* to throw his influence into the antislavery cause. Channing's *Slavery* (1835) signified his entry into that cause, but his views, which alienated Unitarian conservatives, failed to satisfy the radical abolitionists. Channing's development in the late 1830s and early 1840s from cautious criticism of slavery to more radical condemnation of it was painful for him, given his general distaste for politics. While O. B. Frothingham* attributed his general caution to the "dictates of natural feeling and Christian charity towards the masters," Andrew Delbanco more convincingly found its source in the more complex refusal of Channing to externalize evil through the antislavery cause.¹⁵

For Parker, a farm boy whose milieu was far from aristocratic, the slavery issue was more pressing. He and Channing stand as representatives of different strands of antislavery that Conrad Wright discerned among Unitarian ministers—the immediate abolitionists, influenced by William Lloyd Garrison, and the gradualists, disturbed by slavery but distanced for a number of reasons from abolitionist politics. Another more cautious and conservative group also existed among the Unitarians who opposed slavery but were even more reluctant to make the political commitment to stop it.¹⁶ These divisions within the denomination reflected its history and social position. As a denomination of the more prosperous, the Unitarians had much interest in social order and stability. But the New England conscience, so much a part of the movement's history, militated against that conservatism when it faced the repugnant immorality of slavery. Finally, the call for self-cultivation and moral growth that was the theological distinction of the movement lent itself readily to the appeal to uncompromised human freedom and dignity that the antislavery movement embodied. When northern sentiment was generally enraged after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Unitarian opposition to slavery was pushed into its most active phase. When fugitive slaves legally had to be returned South under the provisions of the law, the issue confronted northerners most explicitly, for here they felt direct complicity in the sin. "This is not meddling with other people's affairs," Emerson wrote in his journal. "This is other people meddling with us." He called it a "filthy enactment" and added, "I will not obey it, by God." In one of the most dramatic cases, Parker and the young Unitarian radical Thomas Wentworth Higginson* were involved in a failed attempt of civil disobedience in 1854 when the escaped slave Anthony Burns was captured in Boston and returned into slavery. Both Parker and Higginson were indicted, but not convicted, for their part in the incident.¹⁷ The strife surrounding the whole slavery question made Parker an even more controversial figure than his theological positions had already done.

Although slavery was undoubtedly the great political question of the time, the era was marked by a general social upheaval, a questioning of all settled political views and classes. The Transcendentalists were on the cutting edge of these reforms as well, because Emerson's call for the full development of the latent divinity of the individual often found itself on a collision course with the political establishment. Orestes Brownson, who became Unitarian under the in-

fluence of William Ellery Channing, but ultimately converted to Catholicism, tried to push beyond the doctrines of self-culture of Channing and Emerson to an analysis of American society that posited class conflict and fundamental economic inequity as basic problems. Channing's nephew William Henry Channing* criticized Emerson directly for lacking a broad enough interpretation of self-culture and redefined the concept to mean the development of humanity in a collective sense. He had gained early experience in the ministry-at-large in New York, following Joseph Tuckerman's* example in Boston, and continued efforts toward social reform by preaching a form of Christian socialism aimed at communal reorganization of society.¹⁸

George Ripley was perhaps the most notable of the Transcendental social reformers in the 1840s because of his leadership in the famous communal experiment at Brook Farm. Ripley hoped that a community "would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions."¹⁹ Based on an ideal of self-development secured through a social setting that combined manual and mental labor, the experiment embodied the highest ideals of Transcendental social reform—unless one counts Thoreau's commune of one at Walden Pond. In a strict sense Brook Farm was a failure, because it did not remain a permanent way of life for its members, collapsing after an existence of five years. But its fame while it existed, and growing fame since, attest to its importance as an act of social criticism if not an accomplishment of social reform.

The three decades before the Civil War also saw the flowering of the movement for women's rights, which partook of the same general air of reevaluation and reform. If the general goal of self-development gave impetus to the anti-slavery cause, it had an explosive effect on women for much the same reasons. Here the ideal of self-development bumped into the iron restrictions of custom, legal inequalities, and male self-interest, forcing both a philosophical rethinking of the sex roles and a political assertiveness to try to change them. Julia Ward Howe,* the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and a leader in the suffrage movement after the war, was brought into sympathy for abolitionism through hearing the sermons of Parker. Parker was also a supporter of the women's movement, and although not entirely without masculine biases, as she portrayed him, he was "the first minister who in public prayer to God addressed him as 'Father and Mother of us all.'"²⁰ Emerson's coeditor on the Transcendental journal the *Dial*, Margaret Fuller, made the chief theoretical statement of American feminism in a *Dial* article that was expanded into *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), a work that convincingly compared women under the existing social circumstances to slaves. Fuller also led a notable series of "Conversations" for women in Boston in the 1840s that aimed to bring women's intellectual powers into open exercise and display. American feminism lost a powerful voice when Fuller died in a tragic shipwreck in 1850. Her work is discussed in Chapter 10. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody* was less radical in her feminist views than Fuller, or at least did not articulate them as directly,

but she served as an example in Unitarian circles and among the Boston literati of, to adjust Emerson's phrase, "Woman Thinking." Her mentor was William Ellery Channing, whom she served as secretary and intellectual confidante, and she also had a close relationship with Emerson and the Transcendental educator Amos Bronson Alcott. Her great skill was her ability to serve as a conduit of people and ideas.²¹

It is not difficult to see in the reforms of the antebellum period the same political issues that continue to face us. It is also true that the ideology underlying these changes still persists: the quest for personal development and satisfying social relationships and for a society that will make that development possible. In other words, we live today with the issues that rose to the surface in the ferment of Transcendentalism. The breadth of these issues takes us beyond the scope of Unitarian institutional history, but that very fact argues for the central importance of the battles being fought within it. Certainly, it affirms Perry Miller's sense that Theodore Parker's fight was America's as well, that the agony of the Unitarian denomination in the 1840s was also that of American liberalism as a whole. The war into which almost all of the energies of the antebellum period eventually flowed had a profound impact both on those reform movements and on the Unitarian denomination itself. Organization, self-definition, and the nature of liberal faith all pressed Unitarianism with redoubled urgency in the late 1860s and 1870s. At that point, Unitarianism entered a new phase of its development.