THE TRANSCENDENTALISM OF THEODORE PARKER

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Major Professor

Minor Professor

[Signatures]

Director of the Department of English

[Signature]

Dean of the Graduate School
THE TRANSCENDENTALISM OF THEODORE PARKER

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Bill R. Cathey, B. A.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. PARKER'S LIFE AND THE TIMES</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. PARKER'S TRANSCENDENTALISM</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A generation before Theodore Parker's birth his grandfather, Captain John Parker, had established the family propensity for bold resoluteness. On April 19, 1775, Captain Parker, alerted by Paul Revere, had assembled a small band of some seventy Minutemen on the Lexington Common and fired the first shot of the American Revolution. Some fifty years later the Captain's grandson fired another shot that was heard around the world. Theodore Parker engaged the New England Unitarian clergy in the initial conflict of an American intellectual revolution. The Parker stock seemed destined to be the avant-garde of just causes, whether in politics or religion. After Emerson had quietly retired from the theological controversy initiated by his "Divinity School Address," Parker agitated the hot tempers to a white heat with his discourse on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." At the time Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman were publishing their best works, Parker distributed 50,000 pamphlets weekly of his printed sermons. While Whitman loafed and invited his soul and Thoreau cajoled the squirrels

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1John Weiss, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker (New York, 1864), I, 11-12, 21.
at his Walden retreat, Parker was delivering over a hundred lectures a year throughout New England, not including his Sunday sermons. About the same time that Lincoln secured a place for himself in the Illinois Republican Party, Parker attacked vehemently the evils of slavery from his South Boston pulpit. Religiously and politically Lincoln was indebted to Parker.² Twenty years before Lincoln had occasion to borrow the wording for his Gettysburg Address, Parker had evaluated American democracy as government of, by, and for the people.³ In an American society that could boast many great men, Parker had few peers. The scope of his endeavors was staggering.⁴ He was student, teacher, preacher, theologian, philosopher, reformer, abolitionist, publicist, lecturer, author, and organizer of scores of committees.⁵

Parker was at home equally among men of action and men of ideas. Among men of action, he was always a conspicuous leader; for he conscientiously practiced what he preached,

²Theodore Parker, Theism, Atheism and the Popular Theology, edited by Charles Wendte (Boston, 1907), p. xi; Theodore Parker, Rights of Man in America, edited by F.B. Sanborn (Boston, 1907), "Preface."

³Theodore Parker, Sins and Safeguards of Society, edited by Samuel B. Stewart (Boston, 1907), pp. 7, 15-16.


and he preached on almost everything. He frankly spoke his mind on the evils of the day, attacking specific injustices and naming names. In the pulpit and in practice he attacked slavery, intemperance, prostitution, capital punishment, and a host of other evils. He was not a man given to duplicity, saying one thing and doing another. Against any odds he did what he believed was right, and perhaps no man has ever so thoroughly translated his beliefs into actions. To all worthwhile causes he extended his helping hand, and to the abolition of slavery in particular he gave his whole being. Invariably, the obscure causes he espoused became popular. No injustice passed his review unnoticed, and for a score of years between 1840 and 1860 "he was the keeper of the public conscience in Boston." Today Parker is appreciated by the historian chiefly for his multifarious undertakings in the fields of philanthropy and reform, but it was as a spiritual leader that he impressed

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7Theodore Parker, *Autobiography, Poems, and Prayers*, edited by Rufus Leighton (Boston, 1907), p. 288. It is reflective of Parker's dynamic character that, upon being told on his deathbed that he had one chance in ten of making a recovery, he considered those good odds, since he had been accustomed to battling odds of a hundred, even a thousand to one all his life.


9Ibid., p. 557.
himself upon New England. He was a preacher, a minister of the word of God, first and last.

Among men of ideas, especially philosophers and theologians, Parker was also a central figure; for he had read and digested most, perhaps all, of the philosophies of the world. He assimilated little into his own philosophy; but his studies augmented that which he already believed, that faith his mother had given him. Philosophically, he was a Transcendentalist. This label is ambiguous at best because the Transcendental philosophy has never been defined adequately. There were as many versions of Transcendentalism as there were Transcendentalists. However, anyone who was considered a Transcendentalist espoused certain essential beliefs, although the practical ramifications of these beliefs rarely coincided. Transcendentalism maintained that man could communicate directly with God or the Infinite. Alcott was so enchanted with this idea that the mystical element dominated his life, and he was rarely practical in daily affairs. Parker also reveled in the thought, but he socialized the intuitive


ideas he got from God and put them into practice. Ideas to Parker were worthless unless they could be practically applied. It is not surprising that he found Kant's Critique of Practical Reason more palatable than the Critique of Pure Reason. He was the epitome of the practical Transcendentalist, because for him religion could never be divorced from life; it was life. Religion was his basis for everything.

Transcendentalism itself tended to be more practical than metaphysical. Perry Miller, the New England historian, calls the Transcendental movement a "religious demonstration," but unlike most religious demonstrations it was humanistically oriented. It stressed Man as much as God. In its initial stages Transcendentalism was a scion of liberal Unitarianism and most of its adherents had been clergymen at one time or another. Those Transcendentalists, like Ripley and Emerson,

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13 Commager, p. 5.
14 Frothingham, p. 353.
15 Goddard, p. 89.
17 Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Transcendentalism in New England (Boston, 1876), p. 40.
19 Weiss, I, 163; Frothingham, Transcendentalism, p. 302.
who had been ministers, left the church when they felt that
their beliefs could no longer be reconciled with those of
the orthodox creed. Parker, on the other hand, refused to
quit or be thrown out of the Unitarian Association.20 He
was ordained a minister of the gospel, and a minister he
was determined to remain. By virtue of those traits which
permit one to call him a Transcendentalist, Parker was a
unique preacher, preaching a unique gospel. He preached
Absolute Religion which was Transcendental to the core and
issued directly from his Transcendental view of God, man,
and the universe. His tireless and never-ending philanthropy
sprang logically from the tenets of his religion. His vast
and penetrating scholarship augmented his Transcendental or
intuitive truths, supplementing the spiritual with the ma-
terial. Parker was remarkable among Transcendentalists
because he undertook so much, accomplishing most of it in
half a lifetime, and because he had such a significant effect
upon American religious and secular life. He put into practice
what others put into their notebooks. What they talked about,
he did. He preached while they were silent. Thoreau sympa-
thized with John Brown; Parker subsidized him. With his
methodical mind Parker stated the case for Transcendentalism
and elucidated its esoteric vagaries with a systematic
doctrine.21 In the practical world Parker showed the masses

20Commager, p. 1.

21Theodore Parker, The World of Matter and the Spirit of
Transcendentalism in action. In a sense Parker was to Emerson's idealism what Mahatma Gandhi was to Thoreau's civil disobedience.

The real value of a study of Parker's Transcendentalism rests on the fact that Parker, next to Emerson, defined the Transcendental movement in America.\(^{22}\) Perry Miller is convinced that the Transcendental movement in America, although only a "parochial disturbance,"\(^{23}\) reflected the spirit of the nation. He believes that the ideas formulated and championed by the Transcendentalists have been adopted and made orthodox in the American mind.\(^{24}\) They "churned up prophetic issues,"\(^{25}\) and in the practical realm it was Parker, above all others, who did the churning. Almost every philanthropic action he instigated was prompted by his Transcendental convictions. The truths which he discovered through intuition were reasoned out and put into actual performance. Beauty, to Parker, was applied Truth; hence Transcendentalism meant not only a way of thinking but a way of living.

A work devoted solely to the Transcendentalism of Theodore Parker has not yet been written. There is, however, in almost every study of the man a mention of his Transcendentalism. John Weiss's elaborate memoir, *Life and Correspondence of*

\(^{22}\) Miller, p. 226.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 7.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 14; Frothingham, *Transcendentalism*, p. v.  
\(^{25}\) Miller, p. 7.
Theodore Parker (1864), was published in the waning years of the Civil War, the great struggle which Parker had anticipated. Transcendentalism had, by this time, subsided peacefully as a major topic of controversy in the New England scene. The two-volume work is arranged in a loose fashion, but it is essential in any study of Parker because it contains correspondence which cannot be found elsewhere. Weiss's initial biography is supplemented by two other excellent accounts of Parker's life and career, O.B. Frothingham's Life of Theodore Parker (1879) and John W. Chadwick's Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer (1901). Frothingham, a man who knew both Emerson and Parker personally and who was once himself an exponent of Transcendentalism, is a particularly able source of information on New England life and letters in the 1800s. His biography illustrates his scholarly familiarity with the religious and philosophical aspects of Parker's career. Besides this work on Parker, he has written two other books which are fundamental to any study of the New England milieu, Recollections and Impressions, 1822-1890 (1891) and Transcendentalism in New England (1876). One more recent biography deserves special mention, Henry Steele Commager's Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader (1936). Commager's comments in the "Preface" are interesting as well as telling:

I cannot pretend that I have written this life of Theodore Parker in order to fill any yawning gap in biographical literature, in order to satisfy any imperative demand. I have written it, quite simply, because I could not help myself, and I have written it for my own satisfaction more than for the edification of others.27

Such admiration is a testimonial to Parker's dedication, piety, and morality, which are obvious in his works even after the dust of a hundred years has settled on them. Parker is still an impressive figure, as one realizes after having read any of his biographies. The chief merit of Commager's book is his exceptionally candid and lucid prose style, which makes the work easily readable. It is a good introduction to Parker because Commager captures the quintessence of his dynamic personality.

In addition to the works already cited, there are several books which deal with the concurrent historical events in the age of Parker, that is, the first half of the 19th century. One of the best is Van Wyck Brook's The Flowering of New England, a charming history of men and ideas. The literary and artistic accomplishments of the age of Whitman and Emerson are interpreted in three well-known references: F.O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance, V.L. Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought, and Robert Spiller and others' Literary History of the United States. Two personal recollections, F.B. Sanborn's Recollections of Seventy Years and

T.W. Higginson's *Contemporaries*, furnish additional insight into the events of the age.

All the studies of that era in varying degrees have some discussion of Transcendentalism, because it is intimately associated with the period. Emerson's essays concerning the subject are indispensable, for Transcendentalism as a creed—which it never was—hardly ever extended beyond the vague boundaries suggested by him. Two supplementary books, however, are useful in understanding what the 19th century New Englander meant by Transcendentalism: Harold C. Goddard's *Studies in New England Transcendentalism* and William R. Hutchison's *The Transcendentalist Ministers*. Parker's own essay, "Transcendentalism," methodically illustrates what he understood the term to mean. Of course, the best and fullest definition of Parker's Transcendentalism is arrived at by a careful sifting of his collected works.  

One other book must be mentioned because of its pertinent and dissenting voice. John Edward Dirks' *The Critical Theology of Theodore Parker* undertakes, in part, the task of this thesis, although his conclusions are widely different.

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28 The bulk of Parker's works have been collected in two major editions. Shortly after his death an ardent admirer and life-long correspondent, Frances Power Cobbe, published *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker* (1863) in fourteen volumes. The fifteen volume Centenary Edition of *The Works of Theodore Parker* published between 1907 and 1913 by the American Unitarian Association is editorially superior to Cobbe's edition because each volume is edited and prefaced by different men who were variously acquainted with Parker.
From his "Introduction" it would appear that he is largely concerned with Parker's Transcendentalism. He says:

This volume is therefore to explore the primary aspects of his critical theological views, and, on the basis of this study, to estimate the extent to which Parker embraced New England Transcendentalism.29

Dirks does make some perceptive observations on Parker's Transcendentalism, but he loses himself in Parker's "critical theology" and virtually neglects his Transcendentalism. He feebly and dubiously concludes that Parker was not, strictly speaking, a Transcendentalist, but his evidence and arguments tend to contradict his conclusion. His debate is based more on semantics than actualities.30

The procedure of examining the "Transcendentalism of Theodore Parker" will begin with an abbreviated biography, which will stress the development of Parker's religious thought. This introduction to Parker will be supplemented with an analysis of the historical background of the period, focused on the climate of opinion in New England which spawned the Transcendental movement. The third chapter will address itself to the essential consideration of the thesis, that is, Parker's Transcendentalism, beginning with a definition of


30William Hutchison, in The Transcendentalist Ministers (New Haven, 1959), page 28, offers a clever and effective rebuttal to Dirks' contention that Parker was not a Transcendentalist.
Transcendentalism, an appraisal of what the 19th century New Englander understood it to mean. Then will follow an examination of Parker's Transcendentalism as expounded in his lectures and sermons. Since Parker's Transcendental truths were not restricted to his own personal conduct, as were those of Emerson, it will be necessary to examine his social and practical application of them. Parker's reforms and philanthropy reflect his Transcendental religion; consequently they cannot be wholly ignored. The concluding chapter will summarize the essential tenets of Parker's Transcendentalism and will suggest the particular brand which he espoused.
CHAPTER II

PARKER'S LIFE AND THE TIMES

Theodore Parker was born in Lexington, Massachusetts, on August 24, 1810. The Parker stock had been indigenous to Massachusetts soil since 1635 when Thomas Parker settled at the Bay Colony. In 1710 his grandson, John Parker, moved one branch of the family to what became known as Lexington. John Parker built the white house where scores of Parkers were born until Theodore Parker's birth terminated the lineage there. It was his son, Theodore Parker's grandfather, Captain John Parker, to whom Lexington was indebted for her finest hour. When he commanded the small band of American patriots who fought the British on the Lexington Green, he exclaimed the memorable words: "If they mean to have a war, let it begin here."1 Scarcely another Parker appreciated their resolute significance until Theodore Parker said essentially the same thing to organized religion. The spirit of '76 was in his blood.2

Parker, the youngest of eleven children, was born when his father was fifty and his mother forty-seven. They were mature and wise, and prophetically they named their youngest

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1 Weiss, I, 11. 
2 Parrington, p. 423.
son Theodore, "gift of God." The six generations of New England Parkers had not yet produced a minister, but this Parker was destined to become the greatest American preacher of his day. His father was a semi-educated farmer who thought for himself in religious matters; his mother, Parker claimed, had the deepest religious piety of any woman whom he had ever known. It was from her that he got his profound religious sentiment. Perhaps her most important contribution to his moral instruction was the meaning of conscience. She believed, as he always believed, in "the life of God in the soul of man." She assured him that the voice of his conscience was the voice of God. One of his earliest religious experiences occurred at the age of four when he was tempted to kill a spotted tortoise for sport. Something inside him forbade his doing it, and his mother explained the feeling as the guiding voice of God, a voice that must be obeyed. He remembered that "the first line of plain reading my mother ever taught me ran thus:-'NO MAN MAY PUT OFF THE LAW OF GOD.' He followed this edict throughout.

3Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 5.
4Commager, An Anthology, p. 1.
5Parker, Autobiography, p. 10ff.
6Ibid., p. 11.
7Ibid., p. 290ff; Weiss, I, 25-26.
8Parker, Saint Bernard, pp. 187-88.
his life, for the law of God always came first with him. With his mother's mildly Transcendental notions, it is not surprising that in later years one finds him espousing an intuitive religion based on "the primal instincts of the soul."^9

As a lad Parker delighted in treks through the woods where he could feel the immanence of God. A squirrel, a sparkling brook, a stately pine, or a fleecy cloud were, he felt, heavenly influences of God, and they spoke to man if he would open his soul.\(^1^0\) God was everywhere in nature; his mother had taught him that. Years later when "the great American preacher"\(^1^1\) was speaking to thousands of people on Sunday morning, his metaphors were rooted in the Massachusetts soil. The farmers and smiths, the carpenters and laborers understood his sermons because they were drawn from life. Any man who had plowed a field or pruned an orchard had an adequate background for the Sunday discourse. Flowers of some sort always bedecked his pulpit. They were a silent testimonial to what he spoke. When Emerson's Nature appeared in 1836, it was revered by Parker because it captured the essence of what he had believed all along. There were sections

\(^9\)Parker, Autobiography, p. 306.

\(^1^0\)Ibid., p. 62.

\(^1^1\)This title is inscribed on his tombstone in Florence. F.B. Sanborn has a picture of the grave and tombstone which shows the complete inscription, in his Recollections of Seventy Years (Boston, 1908), I, 558, 540.
in it which easily might have been penned by Parker's mother; for she had known an omnipresent Father who lovingly and beautifully filled every point of space.\textsuperscript{12} Bigotry, cant, and fear had no place in his religious instruction;\textsuperscript{13} for God was love. The sensitive child grappled silently with "the dark theology of the times"\textsuperscript{14} and abandoned it before he was seven.\textsuperscript{15} His worship was based on a love of the benevolent God who had created the seas and skies and rocks and trees for man to enjoy, not a fear of the malevolent God found in the Westminster Catechism. This assumption was the crux of his religion, and, as Parker saw it, it was the essential difference between his theology and the popular theology.

It is an understatement to say that Theodore Parker was a precocious child; his abilities began where precocious children's usually end. Before he was eight he had read Homer and Plutarch in translation, wrote verses of his own, and could photographically reproduce a poem of 500 to 1000 lines after a single reading.\textsuperscript{16} At ten he began to study Latin, at eleven, Greek, metaphysics, natural philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, and rhetoric. His scholarship

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12}Parker, Autobiography, p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Weiss, I, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{14}Parker, Autobiography, p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Ibid., pp. 295-96.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Weiss, I, 43ff.
\end{itemize}
continued with an accumulative effect. His formal education was skimpy, but his private study was portentous. Although he could not afford to go to classes, he qualified for a Harvard degree by taking the required tests. As a young man of twenty-four he was horrified at the thought that his memory was beginning to fail him because he could not remember every incident and its date since Adam. With the aid of a massive chart which covered a whole wall, he soon rectified the gap. It was common for him to spend upward of ten hours a day studying in his library, and, if he were uninterrupted, he might study around the clock.

By the late 1850s his private library was the largest in New England, containing more than 13,000 volumes and unbound stacks of pamphlets, folios, magazines, and the like. At his four-story house at Exeter Place in Boston, books flowed down the stairs from the fourth-floor library, flooding every room and stopping only at the front door. Less than one-fourth of them were written in English, and, in all, some thirty tongues were represented. He knew the table of contents of every book and precisely where each one was. There is

17 Frothingham, Theodore Parker, p. 28ff.
18 Weiss, I, 65.
19 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 123; Goddard, p. 85.
20 Weiss, II, 1-2.
21 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 123; Goddard, p. 85.
the story that he knew virtually the same about the books in the Harvard Library. His scholastic ambition was colossal, and he was happiest when he was buried under a mountain of work. Almost no subject escaped his inquiry. In addition to the more than score of languages he knew, he was an authority on comparative religion, philosophy, the classics, literature, law, science, medicine, and astronomy. Scholars in any field found it a delight to converse with him as a peer, often as a superior; for, when their fountain of information had been drained, Parker's reservoir of facts was still full. He was comfortable discussing obscure Salic Law or the disputed reading of a Greek play. He attempted to read everything ever written, and there were those who wondered if he had not succeeded. Scholarship, perhaps, became a vice with him, because books and their facts had a way of becoming ends in themselves. In any case his voluminous reading furnished him with innumerable facts, illustrations, statistics, and points of view. Arguing with Parker was a masochist's delight, for he was always prepared on any subject. He used the material and concrete to illustrate

22 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Contemporaries (Boston, 1899), pp. 44-45.
23 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 120.
24 Weiss, I, 72.
25 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 124.
26 Parker, Autobiography, "Preface."
and explore the spiritual and abstract, and he submitted first principles to demonstration. It all seemed logical enough, and surely if any man were equal to the task, he was; but what he tried could not be done. Intuitive truths were true because they were true, not because they had been proved. Emerson knew as much, but then Emerson did not have all those facts and was not tempted like Parker. One suspects that Parker knew as much also; for many were the times he made purely Transcendental utterances which he claimed were beyond proof. "Conscience transcends experience,"27 he said; but, as was his habit, he then began to verify it. "He was," as Parrington notes, "at once scientific and transcendental."28 The two were never wholly reconciled.

In 1831 as a young man of twenty, Parker left his father's farm in Lexington to teach at a private school in Boston. His monthly pay was a scanty fifteen dollars and board, but he managed to send eleven dollars to his father to pay for his hired substitute. He spent a year in Boston, making acquaintances mainly with books.29 More than anything he studied, and, according to his own testimony, he learned more in that year and the four that followed than at any time before or after.30 He was in the habit of sleeping less than six hours.

28 Parrington, p. 417.
29 Weiss, I, 57.
30 Ibid., p. 50.
a day, and that habit abetted the latent consumption which was destined to become manifest years later as a result of prolonged overwork.\textsuperscript{31} The next two years he taught at Watertown, a more pleasant experience than at Boston. Here he had relatives and made friends, notably Convers Francis and Lydia Cabot. He proposed marriage to the latter in 1833, beginning a four-year engagement. Between his courting and teaching—the class had grown to over fifty—he managed to study Hebrew and to translate Cicero, Tacitus, Herodotus, Thucydides, Pindar, Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, and Aeschylus.\textsuperscript{32} Most important to the development of his theology, he discovered the German religious criticism in Francis' library, and Cousin, Jouffroy, and Coleridge.\textsuperscript{33} By a congenial osmosis from close association, the Transcendental spirit was permeating his outlook. He began to find support for those notions which his mother had given him.

In 1834 his interest in religion found practical expression when he entered the Harvard Divinity School. He had managed to save enough for the tuition, and he earned some additional money by tutoring in Hebrew. His proficiency in that language was already such that Professor Palfrey asked him once to teach in his absence.\textsuperscript{34} He was known as an

\textsuperscript{31}Weiss, II, 245.

\textsuperscript{32}John White Chadwick, Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer (Boston, 1901), p. 32.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 44.
enthusiastic and diligent scholar. Graduating with the class of 1837, he married in April, and, after some itinerant preaching, he was ordained in June at the small Spring Street Church in West Roxbury, nine miles from Boston. There were famous people present at the ordination—Henry Ware, John Quincy Adams, Converse Francis, George Ripley, and John S. Dwight. The installation was a normal one, and no one suspected that the young preacher had already decided that the religious radicalism at Harvard was too conservative. Parker had disregarded the cautioning comments of Andrews Norton, Harvard's sage doctor of divinity, concerning the German scholars, and he had found Lyman Beecher too pessimistic; but such things were to be expected from divinity students. In any case the parochial demands of the small parish of sixty families were easily met, and Parker had much time to engage in his studies. He mused over Nature while burrowing deep into Kant, Schiller, Jacobi, Schleiermacher, Carlyle, Hegel, and Schelling. In parts they sounded much like Emerson. He was in the third year of a ten-year effort to translate DeWette's Einleitung in das Alte Testament. This work was indeed an "introduction,"

35 Parker, Autobiography, p. 309.
36 Weiss, I, 98ff.
38 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 63
because Davette made skeptical observations and provocative comments about the Old Testament which had never been voiced in America before. These studies strengthened Parker's academic background for the theological fray he would presently enter. His concept of God was mostly negative; he knew what he could not accept, but he was uncertain as to what he could accept. More and more he strayed from the traditional views, drifting toward the maelstrom of Transcendentalism.

It was in the early 1840s that Parker emerged as a public figure. Only occasionally before that time had people whispered that his liberal theology was tainted with Transcendentalism. Emerson's "Divinity School Address" in 1836 precipitated the controversy which Parker was soon to lead.39 Emerson denied most of what was considered Unitarianism, although the Unitarians were as unorthodox a religious sect as could be found. He impugned miracles,40 the divinity of Jesus, and the authority of the Bible, and suggested that man could communicate directly with God. If God acted and spoke through man, so much was man made God. Emerson had no

39 There is an abundance of literature on the Unitarian controversy. Chapters four and five (pp. 61-100) of Commager's Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader give a clear and precise account. In his bibliography for those chapters (pp. 319-320) Commager suggests the sources where the particulars may be found. See also Weiss, I, 113-199 passim, 248-281 passim; Frothingham, Theodore Parker, pp. 147-182; Sanborn, II, 542ff; Hutchison, The Transcendentalist Ministers, p. 98ff.

40 Hutchison, pp. 64-82.
more than descended the flight of stairs to the first floor, before cries of "infidel" and "blasphemer" were raised in Divinity Hall. Andrews Norton afterward called it "the latest form of infidelity,"\textsuperscript{41} and his clerical brethren uttered "Amen" and rushed to his aid. They rallied to meet Emerson on the battlefield, but he never showed up. Their sharp words cut the thin air and nothing more; for Emerson had retired from the controversy before it began. He had trusted himself, had said his mind according to the dictates of his conscience, and was now satisfied. If the Trinitarians and the Unitarians cared to argue with the Oversoul, they might do so without his interference.

Parker sat on the bench and watched the one-sided conflict materialize. It was too much; the David of Transcendentalism had his sack full of stones, the Lord's benediction, and was ready to face the Goliath of the "odium theologicum."\textsuperscript{42} Parker knew Emerson was right, and he could well nigh prove it. He had accumulated the facts and could destroy their false idols. Woe unto the Scribes and Pharisees. Under the pseudonym of "Levi Blodgett," a name which did not fool anybody for long, he penned a public letter, "The Previous

\textsuperscript{41}Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 68; Frothingham, Transcendentalism, p. 123; Hutchison, p. 82ff.

\textsuperscript{42}Weiss, I, 248.
Question Between Mr. Andrews Norton and His Alumni. The way the question was moved and handled in this reply, it was plain that Transcendentalism was coming to the foreground. "Levi Blodgett" was obviously more Transcendental than Unitarian, although, at first, there was a fine distinction between the two. Neither the Unitarians nor the Transcendentalists had a creed, but nobody was deceived long as to the difference. The time was approaching when the Unitarians would need a creed in order to determine who was and who was not a Unitarian Christian. But they had never had one before, and furthermore they cherished the idea of not having one, because the absence of a creed was their insurance of religious liberalism and free thought. Heretofore the clergy of the Unitarian Association had accepted brethren whose theological opinions stressed intuition as well as authority, but now, they thought, speculation had transgressed religious decency. The implications of Transcendentalism destroyed all the time-honored rituals of the old order and it was rejected. Channing and Emerson were passive, urbane, and inoffensive, but Parker was active, blunt, and aggressive. This nuance condemned him in a society which was

43 The entire letter is reprinted in Dirks' "Appendix," pp. 137-159. He considers it one of the three essential manifestoes which states Parker's early religious views, p. 72ff; Frothingham, Transcendentalism, p. 125ff.

44 Parker, Saint Bernard, p. 105.

45 Ibid., p. 102; Hutchison, pp. 120, 128-133.
excessive only in caution and which insisted that its clergymen have taste before piety.

The theological fracas was underway. In May of 1841, a year after "Levi Blodgett" had spoken the plain truth, Parker entered the lists again. He was asked to deliver the sermon at the ordination of Charles Shackford at the South Boston Church. He complied with his Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity, which sounded innocent at the moment. However, when the contents became known and clergymen considered what had been said, they discovered that the transient, otherwise known as orthodox religion, had been annihilated. The iconoclasm went hard with the traditionalists who were not quite ready for absolute religion without the trimmings. In bitter logic the "Discourse" acidly elaborated Emerson's "Divinity School Address" to the point of rejecting miracles, the divinity of Jesus, and the authority of the Bible and the Church. Emerson had discreetly suggested such heresies, but Parker boldly stated them. The furor which

46 Brooks, p. 42.

47 Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston, 1911), X, 345.

48 The text is reprinted in Miller's anthologies, The Transcendentalists, pp. 259-283, and The American Transcendentalists (Garden City, 1957), pp. 106-136. These books are almost identical except for some revisions and changes in editorial comment.

49 Weiss, I, 170.

50 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 76.

51 Hutchison, p. 110.
ensued was one of the bitterest in American religious history.\textsuperscript{52} Parker was ostracized in respectable Boston.\textsuperscript{53} He was practically excommunicated from the Unitarian Association and denied Christian fellowship. His best friends turned against him and retreated into the safety of conventionalism, and scarcely a minister would exchange pulpits with him. The acerbity was so profound that Parker wrote in his journal: "This is the nineteenth century! This is Boston! This among Unitarians!"\textsuperscript{54}

Parker capitalized on this initial antagonism to become, during the next decades, "the best-hated man in America."\textsuperscript{55} In 1845 a group of gentlemen\textsuperscript{56} in Boston, dissatisfied with the treatment Parker was receiving, resolved that he should have a chance to be heard in their city. They persuaded him to preach a series of sermons at the Melodeon, a stuffy entertainment hall. The engagement was so successful that at the year's end the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society was organized with Parker as the permanent minister. Even before the society was formed, the Sunday crowds were frequently larger than the accommodations. In 1852 they moved to the newly

\textsuperscript{52}Weiss, I, 169-172; Frothingham, Theodore Parker, pp. 152-59; Chadwick, pp. 96-104.

\textsuperscript{53}Miller, American Transcendentalists, p. 106.

\textsuperscript{54}Quoted in Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 259.

\textsuperscript{55}Weiss, I, 52.

\textsuperscript{56}Weiss, I, 176-77.
constructed Music Hall, which, with its 2700 seats, was inadequate. Long before the sermon started there remained standing room only. Men came for the sermon, not the scripture. His sermons, as Charles Wendte recalled, possessed "none of the graces of the so-called popular oratory." They were not eloquent, polished, and academic; but, like the man that delivered them, they were simple, earthy, and practical. His illustrations were drawn from familiar things, the parlor, the street, the kitchen, the school, and always the Bible. His theology was presented in everyday words which were Anglo-Saxon to the core. He captivated people by his confidence that what he was saying was the most important thing that could be said—the eternal holiness and love of a perfect God. That theme was either explicit or implied in every sermon he ever preached. Parker's life was in his sermons, and his excited or prayerful face reflected the fact. Large crowds thronged to see the man who so believed in what he said that he practiced what he preached.

57 Parker, Theism and Atheism, p. v.


59 Parker, Autobiography, p. 399.

60 Ibid., p. 408.

61 Ibid., p. 350.
Parker's truths, needless to say, were not at all acceptable with the more complaisant Unitarian ministers. He was hated as deeply as he was loved. His sermons, unlike those of his contemporaries, were not intended to be mild and polite, or to render the well-situated smugly content. They were designed to arouse, to prompt action. While Thoreau crowed as lustily as a chanticleer in seclusion at Walden Pond, Parker preached as vociferously as a zealot in public at the Music Hall. Parker, not Thoreau, woke his neighbors up, and, once aroused, they were slightly grumpy from having been disturbed. The more forgiving ones held prayer meetings on Parker's behalf. Others came directly to the point: "Hell never vomited forth a more wicked and blasphemous monster than Theodore Parker, and it is only the mercies of Jesus Christ which have kept him from eternal damnation already." Whether his critics were those condemning or forgiving, they all seemed to agree on one supplication: "We know that we cannot argue him down, but, O Lord, put a hook in his jaws so that he may not be able to speak." The Lord neglected to answer this plea, and Parker spoke right on. Indeed many were offended by his critical preaching, but thousands of

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62 These prayers and condemnations are reprinted in the "Notes" of Parker's Autobiography.
64 Ibid.
enthusiastic disciples accepted his doctrines as gospel. Commager, basing his statement on his knowledge of Parker's dynamic personality, says that his congregation "continued to hear Parker gladly--which was just as well, for Parker would have made himself heard in any event." 65

Parker continued to serve his fellow man in the position of conscience and prophet 66 until his health utterly failed him in 1858-59. The Unitarian controversy had subsided about 1853; 67 but, after that time, anywhere Parker was, there also was a controversy. To the chagrin of many prominent citizens, Parker was perennially attempting to reform political, social, economic, and religious institutions. He utilized and formed secular agencies to do his bidding, but the church was his main tool. He believed, as Commager says, that

. . . nothing was beyond the province of the church . . . . Its jurisdiction embraced the morals of the state as well as the morals of men . . . . There was no responsibility it could evade, no duty it could ignore. Every beggar, every pauper, was a reproach, every poorhouse, every jail, a disgrace, and it was hypocrisy to pretend to a religion of love and tolerate the injustices of man to man. 68

Benevolence, love, and other humanitarian concepts were certainly a part of the church's belief; but belief was one

65 Henry Steele Commager, "Tempest in a Boston Tea Cup," New England Quarterly, VI (December, 1933), 657.
66 Brigance, p. 100.
67 Hutchison, p. 128.
68 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 165.
thing, action another. Parker said that these aging beliefs should not be allowed to mildew in the bread box of inertia, but be broken and fed to the multitude. Emerson notes that "as a reformer, he insisted beyond all men in pulpits--I cannot think of one rival--that the essence of Christianity is its practical morals; it is there for use, or it is nothing."69 The church's "practical morals" offended the rum rummers and slave traders and all those who made profits from immoral trade. Parker made many enemies, just as he supposed he would. He never hesitated, because he considered that his enemies were God's enemies. He never held back the truth to appease either friend or foe. He once admitted: "I am not a timid man."70 No man ever accused him of it. Surprisingly though, it was his moral tone which was more detrimental to conventionalism than his methodical technical arguments.71 His righteous indignation stimulated men's conscience and made them, too, turn against the "opinion of the pavement."72

Parker was not alone in attacking the popular opinions of the day as expressed by the morally threadbare institutions.

69 Emerson, Works, XI, 289.

70 Theodore Parker, Discourses on Slavery (London, 1864), p. 117.

71 Weiss, I, 249-250.

72 Theodore Parker, Lessons From the World of Matter and the World of Man (Boston, 1907), p. 129.
To a large extent his propensity in that direction was indebted to the pervading climate of opinion in New England. The trend toward skepticism and investigation had emerged in the second decade of the 19th century when the Unitarians were becoming established as a religious sect. No account so captures the essence of the transition from 1820 as does Emerson's "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England:

The ancient manners were giving away . . . . 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 new race is stiff, heady and rebellious; they are fanatics in freedom . . . . They rebel against theological as political dogma . . . . In literature the effect appeared in the decided tendency of criticism . . . . Authority falls, in Church, College, Courts of Law, Faculties, Medicine. Experiment is credible; antiquity is grown ridiculous . . . . The young men were born with knives in their brain, a tendency to introversion, self-dissection, anatomizing of motives. The popular religion of our fathers had received many severe shocks from the new times.73

This transitional period was extraordinarily complex74 and was marked by an "innocent unconsciousness of precedent,"75 which became more conscious as time passed. And, as Emerson stated, nowhere was the transition more marked than in religion.

Religious opinion in 1800, despite some liberal trends, was firmly and uncompromisingly established. The dark clouds

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73 Emerson, Works, X, 325-30.
74 Goddard, p. 13.
75 Frothingham, Transcendentalism, p. 106.
of Calvinism had hung oppressively low over New England for two hundred years, and the essential dogma had changed little since the time of Jonathan Edwards. Certainly, there was religious speculation, but it was academic in nature and scrupulously avoided the major issues. The philosophically romantic Frenchmen were disclaimed as atheists, and their theology was avoided by anyone who wanted to protect his good name. However, French liberalism made headway because the excellence of human nature, in the long run, was a more appealing doctrine than total depravity. The Calvinists stoutly maintained that the faint, putrescent odor in the air was not coming from the corpse of their theology, but anyone endowed with the five senses knew better. A proper burial was in order, and after the interment men breathed more easily. Unlike liberalism, Calvinism contradicted experience and reason to the point of embarrassment, and with its poor logic it stumbled over illogical dogma more than most theologies. In 1842 pessimistic Calvinism still pervaded New England religious thought to the point where it provoked Parker to comment caustically that "the prevailing theology represents God as a being whom a good man must hate." The good of Calvinism must have been interred with its bones,

76 Parrington, p. 321.
77 Ibid., p. 323.
for the evil lived after it. Men have ever since been wary of any theology which was uncumbersome, reasonable, and optimistic. Parker dedicated his life to popularizing just such a philosophy.

In early 19th century New England, religious liberalism, thanks to the Unitarians, was becoming the vogue. Bostonians were, as they always had been, conservative and reactionary; but they were also cosmopolitan and learned. Their opinions were provincial, and they were pleasantly satisfied with the existing order. They compensated for their social and political bigotry with religious tolerance. The Cambridge and Boston people were confirmed Unitarians, and the vital principle of Unitarianism was the toleration of theological differences. Unitarianism had been actively disseminated throughout Massachusetts since 1805, when it seized Harvard College. Its fondness for reasoning found an agreeable audience with the Cambridge gentry who fell down and worshipped learning. Even the rural folk knew their Greek and Latin, and they considered themselves adequate rationalists. The ministers imitated Edward Everett and delivered eloquent

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79 Brooks, p. 16ff.
80 Ibid., p. 29.
81 Parrington, p. 327.
82 Ibid., p. 323.
and charming sermons, which were themselves sparkling essays full of academic matter. It was diletantism, in a sense, but nobody said as much. Everyone had a little learning, and it was considered anything but dangerous. The mind was of a philosophical yet practical bent, and the French philosophy seemed to commend itself to both of these traits. There was an unconscious yearning for a liberal theological system which extended beyond the strict confines of Calvinism. This "system" was Unitarianism.

In truth, however, Unitarianism never had a system or a creed. It was mainly a humanistic religion, stressing the rational and ethical in the individual and his society. It adored the Good and the True without ever defining them. It was less a system than an attitude of mind, and this attitude ran counter to Calvinism. Man was no longer a mean and debased creature trembling on the brink of eternal damnation before divine wrath; he was a dignified individual who harbored a loving God in his heart. Man became God's friend not his enemy, and, if one lived in Boston, so much the better. This new religion appealed to man's reason and his best sentiments. It inspired the search for truth in literature, life, nature, and self. Supernaturalism was no longer the sole criterion of morality, and logic replaced authority. As their

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83 Ibid., p. 327.
84 Addison, p. 123.
name implies, the Unitarians rejected the idea of the Trinity but upheld the divinity of Jesus. This discrepancy was one facet of Unitarianism which Parker delighted in attacking.

To all these new utterances Calvinism was speechless, because this "new creed lay outside its realm of thought." However, the Unitarian attack on Calvinism was more ethical than theological. The Unitarians expounded a new and rational ethics which were destined to replace the antediluvian creeds of the Calvinists; but they avoided spiritual despotism like the black plague because they had seen that it could kill a man just as quickly. This critical, yet tolerant and benign, atmosphere had a wholesome effect on New England thought. Authority, dogma, and creed vanished and were replaced by earnest and personal inquiry. With the advent of Unitarianism, the New England renaissance can be said to have begun.

The liberal attitude which was the crux of Unitarianism and the essence of the renaissance was responsible for the rise of Transcendentalism. Initially Transcendentalism was indebted to Unitarianism for its spirit, form and content. The Unitarian assertion of independence of thought prompted men to unrestrained speculation which ended up in Transcendentalism. Unitarian ministers were free to browse among the

85 Parrington, p. 326.
86 Ibid., p. 328.
87 Ibid.
French Utopians or German mystics, and the temper of their own environment made the ideas which they encountered exceptionally congenial. The French and German notions had for them the charm and audacity of newly discovered truths. The enthusiasm ushered in by these new ideas prompted men to action. The Yankees were practical men, and they demanded that their metaphysics be applicable to life. In France and Germany the Transcendental philosophy remained a philosophy. It was held by cultivated men, discussed by scholars, and taught to students, but, as Frothingham estimates, "it never affected society in its organized institutions or practical interests." In New England it went differently. The Transcendental dew settled softly on the budding mind and a new social order blossomed. The ancient manners, which had been sanctioned by the Puritans and left undisturbed by the Unitarians, were reviewed, found inadequate, and discarded by the Transcendentalists. For example, men no longer felt bound by the Bible or the Church, but they felt that they could rise above, or even do without, both. Laws, traditions, and institutions were made malleable to the needs of the individual. They were made for man, not man for them. The individual was of prime importance, and his peculiarities were accepted, even cherished.

Like the Unitarian revolt against Calvinism, the Transcendental revolt against Unitarianism was ethical and moral rather than theological. Parker complained that the Unitarian church was known as a liberal institution, the avant-garde of religion, but that it had mellowed with time, becoming complacent and fixed in its ways, and, at last, had denied the right to dissent. The loss of this right corresponded with the development of the Transcendental philosophy from liberal to radical. "Transcendentalism," according to Goddard, "was the product of the spirit of its age," but, he adds, that spirit was the result of many complex forces in a complex age. It was an outgrowth and expansion of Unitarianism, but it was also a product of foreign influences. The French Revolution, English literary romanticism, German philosophic idealism, as well as domestic and foreign scientific advances and social unrest all contributed to the formation and temperament of the viewpoint which was called Transcendentalism. It was related in varying degrees to the political, social, literary, scientific, theological, and philosophical movements of the day. Transcendentalism was involved with life.

89 Parker, *Saint Bernard*, pp. 102-103.
90 Goddard, p. 107.
91 Frothingham, *Transcendentalism*, Chapters, II, IV and V.
92 Goddard, p. 108.
Transcendentalism, then, was in the air in New England. Its spirit had been fomented in the days when Unitarianism was breaking with Calvinism. When Unitarianism gained the advantage, it upheld the concept of free inquiry which had been responsible for its growth. By 1825 the "radicalism" of the Unitarians was no longer thought of as radical. In another fifteen years it was no longer considered liberal, and many of its ministers were experiencing a stuffy intellectual claustrophobia. Men of the generation of 1840 were ill-disposed toward the prevailing system. Their restlessness and sensitivity made them introspective, impressionable, and imaginative. They began to turn from the material to the spiritual, exploring their feelings and inner convictions. They listened to their conscience. They read widely with eager and open minds and were not disappointed with what they found. When the Transcendental fruits of their studies and reflections became known, it was not a new thing to any informed person. The opinions advanced by such radical documents as "The Divinity School Address" and "A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity" were half entertained by most Unitarian ministers. Most clergymen had amateurishly dallied with them in their studies and had been

93 Brooks, p. 179ff.

impressed, although they said nothing. These fair-weather excursionists were the first to retreat before the storm.\textsuperscript{95} They retired back into the orthodoxy, abandoning their speculations; but Parker cherished his Transcendental truths and was prepared to defend them, because they were the essence of his religion.

\textsuperscript{95} Weiss, I, 170-71.
CHAPTER III

PARKER'S TRANSCENDENTALISM

New England Transcendentalism\(^1\) has never been adequately defined. H.C. Goddard begins his *Studies in New England Transcendentalism* with the acknowledgement that critics have never agreed as to the nature of the Transcendental movement.\(^2\) Even to suggest that Transcendentalism ever materialized into anything so organized as a "movement" is not a little deceiving, for Transcendentalism by its own logic was informal and unsystematic. Emerson, in his essay "The Transcendentalist," admits "that there is no such thing as a Transcendental party; that there is no pure Transcendentalist; that we know of none but prophets and heralds of such a philosophy."\(^3\) Transcendentalism was, from beginning to end, an amorphous attitude toward life rather than an ordered religious dogma. The Transcendentalists felt no compulsion to express their beliefs in any one unified creed or platform, because, in a sense,

\(^{1}\) O.B. Frothingham remarks in *New England Transcendentalism*, p. 105, that, strictly speaking, "there never was such a thing as Transcendentalism out of New England," because in Europe and England, unlike New England, it "left the daily existence of men and women untouched."

\(^{2}\) Goddard, pp. 1-12; Hutchison, p. 22ff.

\(^{3}\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1950), p. 92.
they were already united in their basic sentiments. The Transcendentalists were individualists who took pride in their individualism, and, while they might have shared many of the same feelings, they never organized in order to effectively present their ideas to the public. There were no pure Transcendentalists simply because there was no pure Transcendentalism. The movement knew only individual "prophets and heralds" who were united, as one critic puts it, in a "community of the heart."5

There were, however, at least three positive expressions of something approaching Transcendental unity during the years when enthusiasm ran the highest. As early as 1836 a group of learned men sought one another out to discuss their kindred thoughts.6 They continued to come together from time to time during the next few years until in 1840, nobody knows exactly when or who first designated them as such, these meetings had assumed the name the Transcendental Club;7 but the informal gatherings never really deserved the title of "club." Those present usually included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Henry Hedge, Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, James Freeman Clark,

4 Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 8.

5 Ibid.


Convers Frances, Margaret Fuller, William Henry Channing, and Theodore Parker. The organization was frequently referred to as the Hedge Club, because it convened whenever Frederick Henry Hedge traveled to Boston from his home in Bangor. The sundry "members" entertained a large variety of opinions, and, according to Emerson, "perhaps they only agreed in having fallen upon Coleridge and Wordsworth and Goethe, then on Carlyle, with pleasure and sympathy." The meetings had no minutes, officers, or by-laws, and, as far as one can tell, they were called solely for the purpose of exchanging ideas. The ideas exchanged and the rare intelligence of those present gave the organization lasting notoriety. The intellectual curiosity they awakened in New England prompted men to examine the variations of idealism which were then circulating. There grew an increasing tendency to stress intuitions, giving them authority over experience. The new ideas discussed at the Transcendental Club were reflective of the age—romantic, optimistic, and liberal.

A second, more tangible expression of Transcendental unity resulted from the desire of the apostles of the new ideas to have a literary outlet. In 1840 there appeared a

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8 Emerson, Works, X, 341; Goddard, pp. 35-36; Hutchison, p. 32; Swift, p. 7ff.
9 Hutchison, p. 29.
10 Emerson, Works, X, 342.
quarterly journal called The Dial, which was edited by Margaret Fuller. This magazine solicited unpaid contributions on provocative matters, especially theology and philosophy; but art, music, and literature were not neglected. Compared to the other publications of the day, The Dial was exceptional in its content and purpose; however, satisfying neither the general public nor the Transcendentalists as a whole, it failed after four years. Never a financial success, its existence was indebted to the devotion and sacrifice of both editor and contributors. Some few editions, containing contributions by Theodore Parker, enjoyed an exhaustive sale, but largely "its writers were its chief readers." ¹² When the writers began to disagree among themselves, some feeling that the format was too liberal, others that it was too conservative, it was not long before the magazine was discontinued. The short-lived Dial was an important organ in the development of New England cultural history, because it introduced a free, literate, and critical journal which explicated the precepts of Transcendentalism without dogma or creed. Capturing the spirit of inquiry of the times, The Dial presented, from many perspectives, ¹³ essays ranging in

¹¹Gohdes, Chapter II; Frederick Ives Carpenter, Emerson Handbook, (New York, 1953), pp. 133-134.
¹²Emerson, Works, X, 344.
scope from Oriental literature to German idealism. Journal-
istically and financially The Dial was a complete failure,
but its mere existence evidenced the fact that the mind in
America was broadening and becoming aware of itself.

Indirectly connected with the exponents of the Transcen-
dental Club and The Dial was the Brook Farm enterprise.\textsuperscript{14} This undertaking, in its attempt to organize individualists
into a unified society, was precarious from the outset. In
1841 a small society of members, headed by George Ripley,
bought a farm of about two hundred acres in West Roxbury,
very close to Parker's church.\textsuperscript{15} Most of the well-known
Transcendentalists were frequent guests rather than members,
but the farm never lacked illustrious society.\textsuperscript{16} Brook Farm
attempted to combine intellectual pursuit with manual labor,
improving a man's mind and body simultaneously. The living
was designed to be unconventional and inexpensive with little
of the humdrum of daily existence, making life as agreeable
as possible. "It was," as Emerson recalled with tongue in
cheek, "a perpetual picnic, a French Revolution in small, an
Age of Reason in a patty-pan."\textsuperscript{17} Although everyone who lived

\textsuperscript{14}Emerson, \textit{Works}, X, 359-370; Goddard, pp. 38-39; Swift,
pp. 15-53.

\textsuperscript{15}For Parker's association with Brook Farm, see Commager,
\textit{Yankee Crusader}, pp. 51-54.

\textsuperscript{16}Swift differentiates between "The Members" (Chapter IV)
and "The Visitors" (Chapter V).

\textsuperscript{17}Emerson, \textit{Works}, X, 364.
there found it a pleasant residence, there were some internal flaws which led to its dissolution. There was a tendency of the majority of the participants toward mental rather than physical labors. Unfortunately for production there was no head or foreman to relegate and oversee the necessary duties. After seven years the failing venture was abruptly ended by a fire which destroyed the new phalanx, or main building. Afterward Brook Farm was sold, all of the members taking a financial loss. Historically, however, Brook Farm was not a loss, because it reflected the symptoms of the times. The people who lived there were young, optimistic, and assured that a better life was possible. They wanted to live under the most ideal physical and spiritual conditions, and they probably accomplished the latter. For this reason Brook Farm may well have been a success for the individual member, although it was a failure for the community. Lindsay Swift considered Brook Farm "the most romantic incident of New England Transcendentalism," because its philosophical and speculative basis created enthusiasm concerning the potencies of social life.

The Transcendentalists, then, were never "organized", certainly not organized in this fashion or that; but they did, on occasion, share common interests and endeavors. They struggled in earnest with ideas, ideas which they gave to the

18 Swift, p. vi.
American tradition. Different backgrounds and individual temperament led the central figures of the movement to disagree on minor issues; but, in widely different ways, they all cherished and held an identical philosophy. The Transcendental movement never materialized into anything more definite than a faith, which, at its height, remained individualistic. In its broadest sense the name "Transcendentalist" was applied to anyone who essayed to venture beyond traditional opinion and practice; but, even in its narrowest sense, it did little more than designate a group of men and women who agreed in their common dissent and liberality. Although the Transcendentalists did not elucidate their beliefs, their essential tenets became obvious in the long run because of a certain, wry consistency in their conduct which resulted from these beliefs.

Emerson's Nature, the first significant document to express the Transcendental viewpoint, appeared in September of 1836 when the New England liberals were beginning to congregate. At the first meeting of the Transcendental Club, those present doubtless discussed the implications of Emerson's doctrine of correspondence between natural facts and spiritual facts. Emerson had been reading Plato, that was plain enough:

19 Goddard, p. 4; Hutchison, p. 30.
20 Dirks, p. 17.
21 Emerson, Selected Writings, pp. 14, 15.
but he took Plato one step farther. If man were conscious of the Universal Soul in his own being, one's reason and intellect were expressions of the Infinite. Man, according to Emerson, was a manifestation of the Universal Soul, for through him it expressed Truth, Beauty, Justice, and Love. In reality, everything belonged to the "Original Cause," since material objects represented spiritual truths. "A Fact," Emerson claimed, "is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world." The world was in God and God in the world. Since divinity was immanent in man, this view represented an assertion of the paramount worth of man, and "trust thyself" was a logical conclusion.

Philosophically, the term "Transcendental" had first been used by Immanuel Kant of Königsberg to reply to Locke's skeptical philosophy. Locke had insisted that knowledge was comprised solely of experiences derived from the senses; but Kant replied that some very important ideas are intuitions of the mind independent of experience. He called these ideas Transcendental because they transcended experience. The ideas of God, Immortality and Truth, were intuitions of human

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22 Ibid., p. 17.
23 Ibid., p. 19.
24 Ibid., p. 146.
25 Ibid., p. 93.
nature, and they have not only sentimental but real value. Upon this concept of innate ideas rested the whole Transcendental philosophy, which was primarily a doctrine explaining the methods of getting at knowledge. In 1842 Emerson, in his lecture "The Transcendentalist," considered Transcendentalism synonymous with idealism.  

What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final . . . . The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture . . . . The idealist, in speaking of events, sees them as spirits. He does not deny the sensuous fact: by no means; but he will not see that alone . . . . This manner of looking at things transfers every object in nature from an independent and anomalous position without there, into the consciousness. 

New England idealism in 1842, sounding much like Platonism in 342 B.C., held that the only real existence of a thing was its intellectual perception. Material creations were subsequent to mental conceptions. Ideas were creations of the mind, internal images of external objects, and nothing existed exclusive of the mind perceiving it. Descartes epitomized this philosophy in his cryptic saying: "I think, therefore I am."

26William Rogers, Transcendentalism Truly Remarkable (Boston, 1947), p. 11; Carpenter, p. 125.

27Emerson, Selected Writings, pp. 87-88.
Emerson is generally accepted as the spokesman for Transcendentalism, because, as Frederick Ives Carpenter notes, he best expressed the Transcendental ideals. He was always troubled with semantics, which, he maintained, were inadequate for expressing his spiritual ideas. In order to avoid the popular connotations associated with "God," he preferred such names as "Over-Soul."28 Perhaps the Hindu concept of the Over-Soul was not precisely the same as God, but it was Emerson's equivalent. It served essentially the same function in his philosophy as "God" in popular theology; it was the Absolute. The Over-Soul was the Universal Soul encompassing all things. The relation of the Over-Soul to the world is cited by Emerson's son in the notes to the complete works.

There is one soul.
It is related to the world.
Art is its action thereon.
Science finds its methods.
Literature is its record.
Religion is the emotion of reverence that it inspires.
Ethics is the soul illustrated in human life.
Society is the finding of this soul by individuals in each other.
Trades are the learning of the soul in nature by labor.
Politics is the activity of the soul illustrated in power.
Manners are silent and mediate expressions of soul.29

The implications of Transcendentalism gave men a feeling of tremendous scope and potentiality, since one's life was

28Ibid., pp. 261-278.
29Emerson, Works, III, 380.
intricately related to the Over-Soul. Faith in the Over-Soul charged the air with optimism, trust, creativeness, and, above all, a desire to live life. Emerson told his countrymen that they were wiser than they knew, and encouraged them to respect their own insights. Clarence Gohdes considers that an intense trust in the "infallibility of intuition" was the keynote of the era of Transcendentalism. The Sage of Concord was a living example of this philosophy; he revered his own soul, his own faith, never imitating or compromising. Emerson suggests that Transcendentalism often meant a "Saturnalia or excess of faith" in oneself, which was also a faith in God. The assured and metaphysical strain of Emerson's mind led him to solitude; for he was a devout individualist. He saw no reason why he should use, display, share, or elaborate his faith; he had it, he was personally convinced it was true, and that was enough for him. His optimism was confined to a personal feeling of satisfaction and confidence. In this respect he differed from Parker, who shared the same faith, but was determined to make something out of it. The practical and methodical bent of Parker's mind led him to formulate what he believed into definite action.

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30 Gohdes, pp. 10-11.
31 Emerson, Selected Writings, p. 92.
Parker was satisfied semantically with the name God, but he was nauseated philosophically with the popular theology concerning God. God was the perfect being he had worshiped ever since his mother had read to him from her Bible; however her God, which became Parker's God, was in many ways like Emerson's Over-Soul. Parker was as certain of God's existence as he was of his own. His belief in an infinitely perfect God was one of his three "great primal intuitions of human nature, which depend on no logical process of demonstration, but are rather facts of consciousness given by the instinctive action of human nature itself." He accepted irrevocably the existence of God, of no other fact was he more certain, and he was astonished and amazed by people who questioned it. In his Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion, Parker essayed that God's existence can be logically established by the a priori method and confirmed by the a posteriori method, but it is contingent on neither. It depends "not on reasoning but Reason." Hence, God is a necessary fact of the human constitution, innately felt in the consciousness. This feeling, Parker maintained, confirms, not originates, God's existence. In his essay "Transcendentalism" he simply says: "I am; therefore God is."

33 Parker, Discourse of Religion, p. 8.
34 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
35 Parker, Matter and Spirit, p. 33.
This cryptic little saying has a dialectical potential which Parker utilized, although he claimed that he was aware of Kant's proof of "the insufficiency of all the philosophical arguments for the existence of God." The religious consciousness, Parker claimed, awakened in man a "sense of dependence," resulting from his realization of human finiteness. The philosophical inference here is that a "sense of dependence" implies the thing depended upon. "A man forms a notion of his own existence. This notion involves that of dependence, which conducts him back to that on which dependence rests." This "argument by analogy" identifies man's consciousness of finitude with dependence on God, both of which lead to a consciousness of the infinite. Or, as Parker phrased it:

Consciousness of the infinite is the condition of the consciousness of the finite. I learn of a finite thing by sensation, I get an idea thereof; at the same time the idea of the infinite unfolds in me. I am not conscious of my own existence except as a finite existence, that is, as a dependent existence; and the idea of the infinite, of God on whom I depend, comes at the same time as the logical correlative of a knowledge of myself. So the existence of God is a certainty.

Elsewhere, however, he seems to be more aware of Kant's warning, for the essence of his religious belief always rested more on intuition than on rational thought. "The belief," he

36 Parker, Discourse of Religion, p. 12.
37 Ibid., p. 145.
38 Parker, Matter and Spirit, p. 33.
concedes, "always precedes the proof." His belief in God was a purely theistic faith, although he demonstrated it with logic. Parker's "spiritual philosophy," then, was arrived at by "truths of intuition" followed by "truths of demonstration." This philosophy of God was, of course, the foundation of his Transcendentalism.

To Parker God was perfect, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnificent. To stress this point, he was given to overusing the adjective "perfect" when alluding to the Deity, especially in the sermons in Theism, Atheism, and the Popular Theology. For example:

The Infinite God is perfect cause and perfect providence. He made the universe from a perfect motive, of perfect materials, for a perfect purpose, and as a perfect means thereto.

His language becomes redundant, but he makes his point: God is complete and perfect without limitation. Well might he say, concluding with his subtle satire, that "the Infinite Perfection of God--this is the cornerstone of my theological and religious teachings--the foundation, perhaps, of all that is peculiar in my system." The popular theology, Parker logically demonstrated, was based on an imperfect God, but his "system" grew naturally from God's perfection. God was

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39 Parker, Discourse of Religion, p. 12.
40 Parker, Theism and Atheism, p. 57.
in everything, man (spirit) and matter (world), but he
transcended both. Parker reasons thus:

If God be infinite, then he must be immanent,
perfectly and totally present, in nature and in
spirit. Thus there is no point of space, no atom
of matter, but God is there; no point of spirit,
and no atom of soul, but God is there.42

Obviously, Parker's God is every bit as immanent in
man and matter as is Emerson's Over-Soul. "Nature," Parker
maintained, "is an Apparition of the Deity, God in a mask."43
What more could Emerson say? Parker was not a pantheist,
and he believed that Emerson was not either. The pantheists,
as he understood them, sank God in nature and let him stay
there, thus limiting the Infinite. The Transcendental God
of Parker and Emerson was both in and out of nature. God
expressed his law in part through nature, and man might
commune with God if he would, as Herman Melville put it,
"strike through the mask."44 The Transcendentalist believed,
says Emerson, that "the world proceeds from the same spirit
as the body of man."45 Hence, nature, as well as man, ex-
presses the spirit of God, because God is everywhere.

Parker considered man a creature of God, who expressed
his will through man's conscience.46 In Parker's words:

42 Parker, Theism and Atheism, p. 197.
43 Parker, Discourse of Religion, p. 30.
44 Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York, 1930), p. 236.
45 Emerson, Works, I, 68.
46 Weiss, I, 355.
"Man's consciousness proclaims God's law." Conscience is the moral faculty in man which transfers Truth from God's mind to man's, and man is forever discovering God's eternal laws which are the spiritual part of the universe. "These laws," says Parker, "are not of man's making, but of his finding made." A religious experience begins with a feeling or intuition of these laws, proceeds to a thought, and is consummated by an action. This progression represents obedience to God as well as faithfulness to oneself. In a letter to E.J. Young in 1854, Parker recommends: "Only be faithful to yourself—then you are faithful to your God." If a man knows himself, he knows God. It is essential that one develop his conscience in order to be fully receptive to God's wishes. Emerson's mandate, "trust thyself," was a moral necessity to any Transcendentalist. When Parker was in the midst of malicious controversy, being scathed for his beliefs and actions, one is not surprised to find him saying with characteristic innocence: "They are not my truths." Indeed, he never considered them anything but God's truths,

47 Parker, Autobiography, p. 59.
48 Parker, Saint Bernard, p. 141.
49 Ibid., p. 143.
50 Weiss, I, 377.
51 Parker, Sermons of Religion, p. 289.
52 Parker, Autobiography, p. 393.
truths which he felt obligated to voice and practically execute. The reasoning which provoked Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" was that faith in oneself meant faith in God. Since man's conscience proclaims God's law, Parker underscored the importance of human nature, making it the basis of his theology. In fact, the "philosophical system" of Transcendentalism, according to Frothingham, stressed human nature. Speaking of Transcendentalism, he says:

Practically it was an assertion of the inalienable worth of man; theoretically it was an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct, the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind.

As Frothingham states, it is clear that Parker held Transcendentalism in theory, and, as will be illustrated in greater detail later, in practice.

The substance of Transcendentalism rested, essentially, in its explanation of the spiritual consanguinity of God and man. The assertion of such a relationship irritated the Unitarians more than either the Transcendentalist's view of man or his view of God. The Unitarians believed in the excellence of man's human nature and in the infinite perfection of God, but they rejected the notion that man could commune directly with God. This union was a perpetual delight to

53 Dirks, p. 134.
54 Frothingham, Transcendentalism, p. 136.
Parker, who elaborated the implications of the God-man relationship in almost every sermon he ever preached. Late in his life he wrote an account of his ministry in which he says:

My scheme of theology may be briefly told. There are three great doctrines in it, relating to the idea of God, the idea of man, and the connection or relation between God and man.55

It is hardly surprising that he rebelled against the popular theology, which, he believed, debased man, depreciated God, and made their relation a positive horror. One finds him saying:

The theological notion of God, man, and the relation between them seems to me the greatest speculative error mankind has fallen into.56

His remedy for "the greatest speculative error" was a Transcendental view of human nature, which he considered adequate for finding the laws of God. Inherent in human nature, he believed, was the intuitive faculty to perceive the Divine and His eternal truths. He used this intuitive method in arriving at almost all of his religious verities. Reflecting on his profoundest feelings, he states the fundamental principles of his religion:

I have found certain great primal intuitions of human nature, which depend on no logical process of demonstration, but are rather facts of consciousness given by the instinctive action of human nature itself. I will mention only the three most important which pertain to religion.

55 Parker, Autobiography, pp. 52-53.
56 Ibid., p. 381.
1. The instinctive intuition of the divine, the consciousness that there is a God.
2. The instinctive intuition of the just and right, a consciousness that there is a moral law, independent of our will, which we ought to keep.
3. The instinctive intuition of the immortal, a consciousness that the essential element of man, the principle of individuality, never dies. 57

Parker's position as a Transcendentalist becomes more firmly established when these three primary intuitions are analyzed. 58 "The instinctive intuition of the divine" is quite clearly rooted in man's nature. The universal idea of God, since it is an intuitive perception, is not indebted to the senses for its origin. It arises unconsciously and spontaneously in man by a law given in his very nature. To Parker "the ontology of man" implied the religious element; for "man is by nature a religious being, i.e., that he was made to be religious." 59 Since God's existence is a fact of human nature, it need not, and cannot, be discovered by a specific process of speculative or discursive reasoning. Deduction and induction are useless in arriving at the intuition of the divine, "a truth which comes to light as soon as self-consciousness begins." 60 Man is keenly aware of God's presence when he experiences the natural sentiment

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57 Ibid., pp. 301-302.
60 Ibid., p. 141.
of dependence. God, Parker concluded, is as natural a correspondence to man as light is to the eye, one presupposes the other, dependence implies the thing depended on. After the intuitive act, which acquaints man with God, has been performed, one can profitably utilize reasoning to formulate a specific idea of God.

"The instinctive intuition of the just and right" is an important function of human nature since it is the basis of one's conduct. Parker believed that man was endowed with an innate power which enabled him to distinguish between right and wrong. The moral faculty is as much a part of one's being as the moral law is a part of the universe. God's laws are "facts of consciousness" for man, who has a spontaneous awareness of them. Parker designated the faculty which perceived these laws as conscience, and he considered that "in morals conscience is complete and reliable." God's laws may be manifested in the existing phenomenal order or reflected in history; but these manifestations are indirect and somewhat limited.

Parker appealed to tradition, perhaps more than any other Transcendentalist; however he was always willing to discard it when it conflicted with his own Reason. He

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61 Parker, Matter and Spirit, p. 29.
62 As Parker generally employed the term, "Reason" is synomyous with intuition.
flatly rejected any so-called moral principle which he considered alien to the constitution of man. Morality, along with piety, comprised the whole of his religion. Piety is the internal love of God; morality is the external obedience to God's law, or practical holiness. Faith and duty are both results of intuitive perception. One is not, therefore, surprised to find Parker referred to as "the greatest moral crusader that America produced in the nineteenth century." He vigorously attacked slavery and poverty, because he felt immediately the conscious urge of divine law. With a disquieting iconoclasm he irreverently rejected the traditional appeals to religious and social precedent. The justification he offered for his actions was purely Transcendental: "To know what is right, I need not ask what is the current practice, what say the Revised Statutes, what said men of old, but what says conscience? What, God?" This moral intuition was his basis for all social improvement.

Parker's "instinctive intuition of the immortal" further reflects his Transcendental bent. Although his ultimate "proof" rested solely on his "instinctive intuition," he knew and used the speculative arguments for immortality. The credibility of immortality is strengthened by the fact that mankind has

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63 Smith, p. 631.
64 Parker, Matter and Spirit, p. 30.
65 Dirks, p. 125.
historically endorsed it. Likewise, if one assumes with Transcendental optimism that this life does not exhaust all the possibilities of human development, immortality seems logical enough. Thirdly, in the argument that Parker employed most often, immortality is the greatest gift from an infinitely perfect and loving God. However, impressed as he might have been with these arguments, they did not, as he admitted, constitute the basis of his belief.66 The religious consciousness tells man that immortality is a fact. According to Parker, "the idea of immortality, like the idea of God, in a certain sense, is born in us; and, fast as we come to consciousness of ourselves, we come to consciousness of God, and of ourselves as immortal."67 His boldness upon this assertion, as well as his other intuitions, issued from his absolute certainty of God's existence. His theological method, it may be seen, was to combine the rational and the intuitive approaches; but he always gave the intuitive precedence over the rational. A.S. Smith, in an article on Parker's Transcendentalism, concludes that "while his system represents this combination, the fact must not be obscured that he always restricts speculative reasoning to the phenomenal order, and assigns to intuitive reasoning the role of final religious proof."68

68 Smith, p. 362.
Parker grouped his instinctive intuitions of the soul under the title of "Absolute Religion." He intended with this religion

... to recall men from the transient form to the eternal substance; from outward and false belief to real and inward life; from this partial theology and its idols of human device, to that universal religion and its ever-living infinite God; from the temples of human folly and sin, which every day crumble and fall, to the inner sanctuary of the heart where the still small voice will never cease to speak. I would show men religion as she is--most fair of all God's fairest children.69

The theology of absolute religion was, as has been indicated, at wide variance with what Parker called the "popular theology." It is helpful in understanding Parker's views to examine his criticism of the popular theology; for his censure issued naturally from his Transcendental notions.

He violently opposed the popular theology, "the greatest speculative error mankind has fallen into," because it was a positive hindrance to the natural development of true religion in a man. It taught, Parker maintained, incongruous doctrines which estranged man from God. The retail dispensary for the popular theology was the Church, which had become a static institution. Men were better than their theology, which staggered the imagination and affections of "enlightened men."70

In the sermon "Of the Popular Theology of Christendom, Regarded as a Principle

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69 Parker, Discourse of Religion, pp. xx-xxi.

70 Parker, Theism and Atheism, p. 43.
of Ethics," he tells his congregation: "You and I, my friend, live in an age when mankind has outgrown the popular theology." This theology, Parker pointed out, did not stress the wonderful affinity between God and man, but their alienation, making God "the exploiter of the human race." Traditional ecclesiastical theology held a gloomy dogma which Parker thought was erroneous, unenlightened, and pathetically inhuman. His criticism of the popular theology, especially as reflected in Protestantism and Catholicism, is precise:

There are five doctrines common to theology, namely--the false idea of God, as imperfect in power, wisdom, justice, benevolence, and holiness; the false idea of man, as fallen, depraved, and by nature lost; the false idea of the relation between God and man, a relation of perpetual antagonism, man naturally hating God, and God hating 'fallen' and 'depraved' man; the false idea of inspiration, that it comes only by miracle on God's part, not by normal action on man's; and the false idea of salvation, that it is from the 'wrath of God,' who is 'a consuming fire' breaking out against 'poor human nature,' by the 'atoning blood of Christ,' that is by the death of Jesus of Nazareth, which appeased the 'wrath of God,' and on condition of belief in this popular theology, especially of the five false ideas.

Such a theology could not stand to be examined in the light of science or reason. When either was applied to miracles or damnation, there was an embarrassing contradiction.

71 Ibid., p. 189.  
72 Ibid., p. 144.  
73 Dirks, pp. 112-114.  
74 Theodore Parker, The Transient and Permanent in Christianity, edited by George Willis Cooke (Boston, 1907), pp. 303-304.
Parker thought that it was nothing short of ignorance to subordinate science or reason to the authority of the Bible or the Church. For his own part he could not see how educated men could commit such a gross mistake of the intellect and affections. He says:

The popular theology, with its idea of God and man, and of their relation, is the philosophy of unreason, of folly. How can you ask men of large reason, large conscience, large affections, large love for the good God, to believe any one of the numerous schemes of the Trinity, the miracles of the New or Old Testament; to believe in the existence of a devil whom God has made, seeking to devour mankind? How can you ask such men to believe in the existence of an angry God, jealous, capricious, selfish, and revengeful, who made an immeasurable hell under his feet, wherein he designs to crowd down ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every hundred thousand of his children? Will you ask Humboldt, the greatest of living philosophers, to believe that a wafer is 'the body of God,' as the Catholics say? or M. Comte, to believe that the Bible is 'the word of God,' as the Protestants say? Will you ask a man of great genius, of great culture, to lay his whole nature in the dust, and submit to some little man, with no genius, who only reads to him a catechism which was dreamed by some celibate monks in the dark ages of human history?75

Parker's denunciation of the popular theology quite clearly stems from his Transcendental conception of the excellence of human nature. One might say that, as a general rule, Parker rejected any doctrine which conflicted with the insights of perceptive intuition. The popular theology did just that. Parker's theology, in all phases of its development, was in harmony with human nature, because the divinity of human nature was the cornerstone of his religion. Hence,

75 Parker, Theism and Atheism, pp. 159-160.
his attack on popular theology was chiefly one against its unnatural and inhuman aspects. Men should, Parker thought, come willingly and spontaneously to religion, not have it imposed upon them in a distorted form. He thought they would welcome an educated and intensely human religion. In this assumption his own immense popularity proved that he was correct.

After Parker rejected the popular theology, he constructed his own theology of "Absolute Religion," a theology which was remarkable for "its adaptation to every department and phase of human life." Philosophically, Absolute Religion was a religious theory about God, not, like the popular theology, a secular theory about the Church or of the Bible. As has been stated, this theology has three stages of development. The initial religious experience consists in the awakening of self-consciousness. As the self becomes aware of itself, it also experiences the "idea" of God. When this idea is later developed and expanded by the Reason, one realizes that there is a profound love in the relationship of God and man. In his sermon "The Natural and Philosophic Idea of God," Parker claims that his philosophic idea of an infinite God of love is natural because it is derived by the rational method; hence it corresponds both to external Nature and human reason. If the intuitive

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76 Rufus Leighton, in Parker's Autobiography, "Preface."
77 Parker, Matter and Spirit, p. 155.
process is diligently followed, one will naturally experience, so Parker believed, the sentiment of Absolute Religion, or the "desire to be in harmony with the infinitely perfect God."\textsuperscript{78} This harmony implies a mortal trust in the Immortal. "Trust in God demands that we apply God's means, in God's way, for God's ends. That is what we are here for."\textsuperscript{79} Hence, this trust, which puts one in harmony with God, is the basis of ethics and morality. The implications and intuitions of Absolute Religion provide man with a way of acting in accordance with the wishes of the infinite God. Here again piety and morality complement one another, because, if one loves God completely, it follows that he will live in conformity with the demands of that love. Absolute Religion progresses from a "sense of dependence," to a love of God, to a manner of acting—from the metaphysical to the practical.

Theology is "the intellectual part of religion"\textsuperscript{80} and is subject to progressive change as one encounters new truths. It is important to note that Parker believed only in the progress of theology and not in the progress of God. God is perfect; man, perfectible. The most striking contrast in Parker's theology is between man's finitude and God's infinitude. Dirks asserts that Parker "believed that only true religion--the love of the infinite and perfect God, and

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 329.

\textsuperscript{79} Parker, \textit{Man and Matter}, p. 345.

\textsuperscript{80} Dirks, p. 120.
the love of infinitely perfectible man—is absolute, and that no theology is absolute." Religion and theology are, as Parker repeatedly said, two different things. Ideally, theology truly represents the religious sentiment, but Parker felt that, at least in his own day, it failed to do so. Religion is permanent, for it represents God; theology is transient, for it represents only the current mode of looking at God. Corrupt and erroneous theology is a serious detriment to theological progress. As one would expect, Parker unremittingly criticized the ridiculous frivolities of the popular theology, but he devoutly adhered to the ultimate Christian assertions, which he termed "essential Christianity." His Absolute Religion, then, was primarily a Transcendental idea of God. His theology was his reasoning from this idea.

This theology was as close to "natural" religion as Parker could make it; that is, it was unencumbered by illogical and outworn dogma. He welcomed questions and contrary philosophy, for his theology was conditioned to weather the most turbulent skeptical storm. He discarded all the unnecessary theological paraphernalia of the popular theology, making his concept of religion logically stable. Since eternal truths are forever fresh, his religion was modern and contemporary. The popular theology had a prelapsarian

\[81^{\text{Ibid.}}, \text{ p. 129.}\]

\[82^{\text{Theodore Parker, Social Classes in a Republic, edited by Samuel A. Eliot (Boston, 1907), p. 232.}}\]
orientation which lagged far behind the progress in theological evolution. Parker, the Transcendentalist, discovered new truths almost every day by thinking for himself and examining natural history. He revered the past, but he did not fall down and worship it as was the custom. Uncertain tradition was an unsubstantial basis for religion, because it perpetuated untold errors. A man needed, Parker thought, to distinguish between the transient and the permanent. The transient was the whim of man; the permanent was the abiding law of God.

Transient religion was institutionalized caprice. Parker claimed that it was impossible to follow the laws of God as prescribed by commercial Christianity. He prefaced his famous Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity with a quotation from Luke XXI:33: "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away." These words of Jesus indicated to Parker that the eternal substance of religion would last forever, because "what is of God cannot fail." The eternal substance of religion, as expressed by Jesus, is the law of God, and it is the same thing in every century, never changing its meaning or value. However, actual Christianity, that which is preached and lived, varies from century to century. Fleeting theological notions represent the transient in Christianity. Parker says:

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83 Parker, Transient and Permanent, p. 2.
It must be confessed, though with sorrow, that transient things form a great part of what is commonly taught as religion. 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. Religious forms may be useful and beautiful. They are so, whenever they speak to the soul, and answer a want thereof. In our present state some forms are perhaps necessary. But they are only the accident of Christianity, not its substance.\textsuperscript{84}

Believing the truth of God had become so confused with the word of man that God was obscured, almost obliterated, by theological fancy, Parker set about to reinstate God in theology. He discarded most of the traditional "forms and doctrines," leaving only the refined quintessence of Christianity. He thought the Bible, Jesus, theology, and church credo were mistaken for religion, becoming a substitute for God. They could be, certainly, indispensable aids in religion, but only so far as they reflected God's law. Parker's studies had convinced him that religious history was a "tale of confusion,"\textsuperscript{85} contingent on the whims of man. As times and opinions change, "men are burned for professing what men are burned for denying."\textsuperscript{86} For this reason Parker thought that the accidental accessories attached to the living faith could profitably be dispensed with. He rejected the notions of the devil, a wrathful God, hell, divine election,

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid., p. 6.

\textsuperscript{85}Parker, \textit{Discourse of Religion}, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{86}Parker, \textit{Transient and Permanent}, p. 10.
the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the supernatural authority of the scripture, and damnation because he thought they were human creations based on a false idea of God. He was an iconoclast by necessity, admitting "I know what I say is a great heresy." Although he took no delight in controversy, he would suffer any injustice and incite anyone's temper in order to show men that God was not dead; that He had not been buried after the ascension of Jesus; that eternal truths were still true.

Parker's interpretation of the Bible and its contents reflects his theological iconoclasm. His estimation of that honored volume created deep resentment among the orthodox. First, he denied that the Bible was written with the aid of supernatural guidance, at least, with no more inspiration than is available to any man at any time. The Bible, he maintained, was written by devout and religious men; but one should not forget that they are men, subject to human error. Hence, he felt that the Bible was not infallible. The authors of the scriptures did not claim perfection for themselves, and any religion founded on their special revelation would be untenable. Parker found errors and contradictions, which, in the light of educated criticism, made

87 Parker, Man and Matter, p. 310.
88 Parker, Theism and Atheism, p. 12.
bibliolatry absurd. The Bible should be taken for what it is worth, which is, Parker thought, considerable. His comments on the authorship of the scriptures indicates his overall feeling:

That we know so little of the authorship of the biblical books is fatal to their authority as a standard of faith, but it does not in the smallest degree affect their value as religious documents. Biblical truths, then, are no more indebted to the authority of their author than mathematical axioms are to the authority of Euclid. They are true simply because they are true, which means, at least to Parker, that they conform to the intuitive insights of human nature.

Addressing the Groton Convention at the height of the Unitarian controversy, Parker stated succinctly his position:

Christ said 'Search the Scriptures.' Paul recommends them as profitable reading. But that either tells you to believe the scriptures against reason, I have yet to learn. The Bible was made for man, not man for the Bible; but men's minds have been forced into bondage to its letter.

In a letter to Convers Francis he declares that the Transcendentalists place the soul above the Bible, not the Bible above the soul. This distinction is important because it illustrates the Transcendentalist's point of emphasis, truth before tradition. Biblical "truths" must be rejected if they

89 Parker, Matter and Spirit, p. 103.
90 Parker, cited in Weiss, I, 132.
91 Dirks, p. 164.
contradict intuitions. The Bible for Parker was a secondary source of divine knowledge; intuition, a primary source.

Intuitive truths were the substance of the permanent in religion because they represent God's truth. So believed Parker and the Transcendentalists. What Parker labeled Absolute Religion might properly be called Transcendentalism; for both shared a reverence for the intuitions of human nature. Absolute Religion called for a profound love and trust of God, a feeling of piety, and a sense of morality. Parker sums it up thus:

It is absolute, pure morality; absolute, pure religion—the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance. The only creed it lays down is the great truth which springs up spontaneous in the holy heart—there is a God. Its watchword is, Be perfect as your Father in heaven. The only form it demands is a divine life—doing the best thing in the best way, from the highest motives; perfect obedience to the great law of God. Its sanction is the voice of God in your heart; the perpetual presence of him who made us and the stars over our head; Christ and the Father abiding within us. All this is very simple—a little child can understand it; very beautiful—the loftiest mind can find nothing so lovely. Try it by reason, conscience, and faith—things highest in man's nature—we see no redundance, we feel no deficiency . . . . Christianity is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method of attaining oneness with God.92

Such a faith is Transcendentalism expressed as a religion. Transcendentalism had a religious orientation, developing as it did out of New England Unitarianism, and Parker proposed that it should keep its religious aspects. Referring to his

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92 Parker, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," in Miller's The American Transcendentalists, pp. 128-129.
Transcendental theology, he says: "I think it a Christian theology, and a true one." Christianity to him was a life, not a sterile belief, so he elaborated his idealism in detail, embellishing it with his vast erudition, and applied it to conventional society as reform.

The spirit of reform was in the air during the years when Transcendentalism was cresting. It was no accident that there was a close relationship between Transcendentalism and the reform movements, because both were related manifestations of the intellectual temperament of the times. The title of Henry Steele Commager's small book, The Era of Reform, 1830-1860, indicates that those thirty years were marked by rapid social transition. Ideals permeated the New England mind, and conscientious men began to look for something better from society. There was a restlessness among even the conservatives, who were ordinarily contented to abide by the existing order. The squalor of the past contrasted sharply with the possibilities of the future, creating an earnest dissatisfaction with the present. An ever-increasing awareness of humanity was expressed as the desire for improvement, for reform. The old manners, as Emerson noted, were giving way; everything was called into account. The tenor of the universal reforms of the middle nineteenth century was different in kind from most other reform movements. It was neither political nor

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93 Parker, cited in Weiss, I, 299.
94 Commager, An Anthology, p. 2; Parker, Autobiography, p. 93.
constitutional, but fundamentally moral, operating from a fixed set of principles. Commager underscores this point in his "Introduction:"

This reform movement was, to an astonishing degree, the product of philosophy—or at least of a dominant and pervasive view of the nature of Man and the relation of Man to Nature and to God. That philosophy we call Transcendentalism. It assumed that there were great moral truths that are a priori, and that transcend mere sensational proof. The most important of these—if there can be a hierarchy of truth—were that God is benevolent, Nature beneficent, and Man divine. These were not new ideas—after all they had been widely accepted during the Enlightenment; what was new was their subjective and a priori authentication. And if these moral principles were, in reality, true, then it followed that any secular departure from them was contrary to God's purpose with man.95

A good man must necessarily set himself to the task of removing the shackles from the fettered limbs of the slave, of educating the untutored mind of the ignorant, and of rehabilitating the strayed soul of the wicked. The progress of man should not be hindered by the impediments of evil, and in order to insure his infinite worthiness, one must undertake reform. As Emerson aptly expresses it:

What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all . . . . Let him renounce everything which is not true to him, and put all his practices back on their first thoughts, and do nothing for which he has not the whole world for his reason.96

96 Emerson, Works, I, 248.
The reformer of the "Middle Period" designed his philanthropy to harmonize with the moral law as he saw it. He created a moral impetus which resembled a religious crusade. Naturally, many of the participants had been ministers at one time or another: Emerson, Channing, Parker, Ripley, Pierpont, Hedge, Higginson, Brownson, Clark, and many others. Their clerical orientation often lent a pious air to the already moral crusade.

The reform movement in America was greatly affected by romanticism. Reform is not the necessary outgrowth of romanticism, but in New England it took that form. In the American South, in Germany, and in England, romanticism was known without reform. The practical Yankee, however, drew upon his resourcefulness and saw utilitarianism as the object of romanticism. He transformed the abstract into the concrete, philosophy into life. This propensity was in keeping with the times, when everything and everybody had to have their credentials in order. Another "aspect of romanticism" was Transcendentalism, which was, indeed, a product of the same climate of opinion. Transcendentalism was firmly based on the romantic doctrine of "individual truth and individual salvation." Romanticism "found expression in a sentimental, and philosophical, attitude toward Nature," which called for a "new humanitarianism." Both reform and Transcendentalism

97 Commager, Era, p. 9.  
98 Ibid., p. 16.  
99 Ibid.  
100 Ibid.
applied the new humanitarianism to the problems of the age, and both movements were motivated by essentially the same moral optimism. Mystical Transcendentalism had its practical side reflected by the various attempts of its exponents to create a better world. Brook Farm, as well as Walden, was a manifestation of the romantic Transcendental spirit. Some individualists came together in various clubs like Bronson Alcott's "Club for the Study and Diffusion of Ideas and Tendencies Proper to the Nineteenth Century," or Robert Owen's "World Convention to Emancipate the Human Race from Ignorance, Poverty, Division, and Misery," or Parker's council which discussed "The General Principles of Reform." There were countless conventions on anti-slavery, woman's rights, peace, and temperance. Commager has good reason to say that "American Utilitarianism was called Transcendentalism."\(^\text{101}\)

This evaluation is supported by both Frothingham and Emerson, who exclaimed in 1844: "What a fertility of projects for the salvation of the world!"\(^\text{102}\) The Transcendentalist was spurred by his "Saturnalia" of faith to pursue reform, which was directed primarily at regenerating the human spirit. The optimistic philosophy of Transcendentalism kindled enthusiasm and hope. Frothingham claims in a chapter on Transcendentalism entitled "Practical Tendencies:

\(^\text{101}\)Ibid., p. 9.
\(^\text{102}\)Emerson, Works, III, 252.
The Transcendentalist was by nature a reformer. He could not be satisfied with men as they were. His doctrine of the capacities of men, even in its most modest statement, kindled to enthusiasm his hope of change.103

Among the Transcendentalists there was a veritable host of reformers, all sharing the belief in the perfectibility of man. These reformers could not be easily dismissed as mere fanatics, for the old and revered families were richly represented, the Quincys, the Higginsons, and the Channings. One had to listen if they chose to speak on controversial subjects like pantheism, abolitionism, or Transcendentalism. The reformers found their stronghold in Boston, the city which could, it was generally thought, be transformed into the City of God. In any case there was a good deal of effort to make it better. Wendell Phillips championed the Woman's Movement and penal reform. Orestes Brownson inaugurated a Society for Christian Progress, and Robert Rantoul and Seth Parker petitioned for the ten-hour day. John Allen, a Brook Farmer, formed the New England Workingmen's Association at the same time Channing was espousing socialism in the pulpit. John Pierpont attacked the rum-runners, and Neal Dow worked for prohibition. Dorothea Dix campaigned for improved conditions for the insane; Samuel Gridley Howe, for the blind. Emerson, William Lloyd Garrison, and even Thoreau spoke

103Frothingham, Transcendentalism, p. 153.
against slavery. And Theodore Parker found himself involved in one way or another with each of these reformers and his cause.104

Practically, Parker's Absolute Religion was the theology of progress. Endorsing the tenets of Transcendentalism, he was, as Frothingham says, "by nature a reformer." He epitomized the New England reformer because of his universal scope and spiritual approach.105 His approach, like that of the other Transcendentalists, was basically spiritual, ethical, and moral. Reform was an integral and necessary part of his religion. As Charles Wendte recalls: "His religion was intensely human and practical."106 He expressed his piety as philanthropy, attacking intemperance, covetousness, moral laxity, poor education, capital punishment, the condition of women, corrupt politics, prostitution, war, poverty, and, above all, slavery. The scope of Parker's undertakings may seem staggering, as indeed it was; but all the reformers were engaged in multifarious undertakings. One reform seemed to call for another, and with all the various reforms, says Commager

\[ \ldots \text{there was, inevitably, an interlocking directorate of reformers. One good cause always led to} \]

\begin{itemize}
\item[104] Commager, *Yankee Crusader*, Chapter VIII.
\item[105] Commager, *Era*, p. 32.
\item[106] Charles Wendte, in "Preface" of Parker's *Theism and Atheism*, p. iii.
\end{itemize}
another, and each of the reformers had to help out all the others if he expected their help in his particular crusade. Besides, all the reforms were interrelated, all a part of a larger moral pattern; neither salvation nor divinity was divisible.107

This "larger moral pattern" was substantially the same thing as Transcendentalism, because it included the same principles and beliefs. Transcendentalism was related to New England reform, as has been said, by the pervading spirit of the times which prompted men to charitable action. Parker was both Transcendentalist and reformer, as were many others. He came to Boston as a spiritual preacher, not as a social reformer. But when his Transcendental religion came into close contact with the city's crime, misery, and vice, his natural instincts pushed him into reform. His religious liberalism called for social liberalism. In the traditional spirit of romanticism, he was an optimist. Yet in the true spirit of a reformer, he was not disposed to sit idly by and watch Providence work out all things for the best. In a letter to S.J. May, Parker asks: "Who knows what is possible for man?"108 He dedicated his efforts to finding out the answer by listening to "the voice of God within."109 The practical common sense of his nature converted the metaphysics of Transcendentalism into actual reform; for his particular

107 Commager, Era, p. 11.
109 Parker, Man and Matter, p. 128.
genius lay in agitation and application. His role as a reformer was unique. Commager comments thus:

Among all the Boston clergy Parker was the only one to associate on equal terms with the lay reformers, with Garrison and Mann, Phillips and Howe. And among all the reformers, he was the only one who found it possible to remain in the Church and to use the pulpit as the vantage ground from which to direct the attack.110

Parker demanded that the Church abandon its abstract moral sentiments and get to the work at hand. The Twenty-eighth Congregational Church would be no such useless institution, resting on its laurels of taste, scripture, and doctrine. Parker's church utilized its Articles of Faith in the Sacrament of Works.111

Shortly after Parker arrived in Boston, his invitation to the "Council of Reformers" was answered. Emerson, Alcott, Garrison, Phillips, Charles Sumner, Chevalier Howe, Sam Jo May, Edmund Quincy, James Freeman Clarke, and Caleb Stetson all came to discuss, for six hours at a time, what Garrison termed, "All the Holy Principles of Reform." With a romantic faith they assumed that when the proper means were discovered, the ends could be achieved. If they could discover the truth, they thought that they could rout any evil. Following Parker's council, there eventually appeared larger conventions. The

110 Commager, Yankee Crusader, pp. 164-165.
111 Commager, Yankee Crusader, Chapter IX.
Anti-Sabbath Convention in 1848, directed mainly by Parker and Garrison, was important for little else than its championing the conscience of men as opposed to the authority of the state. Then, there was the Anti-Capital Punishment Convention which was, in Parker's estimation, a sign of the times, although it likewise accomplished virtually nothing. For the first time since any man living could remember, there was an honest inquiry into the problem of crime and punishment. Even while in Divinity School, Parker had preached to the convicts in the Charleston prison, and afterward he never lost an opportunity to gather statistics of crime and facts of prison conditions. The laws and system of punishment neither prevented crime nor reformed criminals, because, as the Transcendentalists avowed, the whole system was based upon an erroneous conception of man. The penal system reflected the hate and fear of the popular theology, not the respect and dignity of Absolute Religion. The jail and the gallows could not cure a man, only effect a reprisal in the name of society. When the Reverend George B. Cheever defended capital punishment with Biblical sanctions, there were those, notably Phillips, who were willing to contest his interpretation with different Biblical sanctions. Parker abstained from so doing. He said that if the Bible sanctioned such injustices, it was wrong. The Bible was made for man, and, when it conflicted with conscience, Parker rejected it.
Simple intuition told one that there was no way to justify such "atrocious acts." The only way to reform the offender was to reform the jail, making it a moral hospital. And to keep people out of jail, it was necessary to give them proper moral instruction at home. Clearly, the Transcendentalist's method of reform, and Parker's method in particular, was moral and individual. Even Emerson, who criticized the "foolish philanthropist," suggested ethical reform for the individual.

When Parker fixed the responsibility for any social evil, whether intemperance, prostitution, or poverty, he was led to criticize the institutions which rendered evils unavoidable. The Transcendentalists knew that in a sense everyone was to blame, and this knowledge necessitated universal reform. Both Church and State stood accused: Clergymen, judges, lawyers, bankers, merchants, and businessmen were called upon to show themselves the friends, not the foes, of society. It would be of only limited benefit to rehearse Parker's collaboration in reform with such men as Howe, Phillips, Pierpont, Higginson, and Mann. He knew them all well and worked with them on a dozen projects, labor, war, women's rights, temperance, and education. They were all moving in the same direction, motivated by the same philosophy. Yet, before one can conclude an evaluation of Parker's reforms, some mention must be made of his anti-slavery endeavors.
The institution of human slavery so completely agitated Parker that he lost his equilibrium whenever he encountered the issue, and his uncontrollable indignation was equalled only by his harsh invective. He attacked it more vigorously and more often than any other evil. He says:

I have spoken against slavery more than any concrete wrong, because it is the greatest of all, 'the sum of all villainies,' and the most popular, the wanton darling of the Government.\textsuperscript{112}

Slavery was the most inhuman of institutions, and it would have been impossible for Parker with his humanistic religion to ignore it. In 1845, the year the "slave power" entered national politics, Parker began his most vehement attack on slavery. That year he began actively to search into the history of slavery, amassing a mountain of facts and statistics. At the time Parker began to oppose slavery, everybody, it seemed, save the small group of liberals and Transcendentalists, was pro-slavery. Men of wealth, of social eminence, of political fame, and of intellectual and religious culture were on the side of slavery. New England, the birthplace of American liberty, sanctioned slavery, and Massachusetts, the state in which Parker's grandfather had fought for liberty and freedom, boasted Daniel Webster, who spoke so eloquently in favor of the Fugitive Slave Bill. Closer to home, Boston, following her Eliots, Winthrops, and Appletons, applauded and saluted Senator Webster's action.

\textsuperscript{112}Parker, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 377.
The merchants of State Street, fifteen hundred of them, consented to send Thomas Sims back to slavery in Georgia. The Press congratulated them on their conduct, while the readers mumbled their praise. And, worst of all, the influential pulpits gave the benediction of God to the whole affair. At such infamy, such hypocrisy, such back-sliding, Parker was horrified, appalled by that which he could not understand. Speaking of Anthony Burns, another returned fugitive slave, Parker says:

I can understand how a man commits a crime of passion, or covetousness, or rage,--nay, of revenge, or of ambition. But for a man in Boston, with no passion, no covetousness, no rage, with no ambition or revenge, to steal a poor negro, to send him into bondage,—I cannot comprehend the fact.113

Parker set out practically as a "majority of one" (a typical position for a Transcendentalist, this) to rectify the abominable wrong of slavery.

Parker attacked slavery as he did any other wrong: he substantiated his intuitive truths with demonstrable facts. For fifteen years Parker actively assailed slavery by word and deed. In keeping with his epistemological policy, he traced the history of slavery from the days of Alexander the Great, through the Eastern and Western worlds, and into modern times. So detailed and minute was his investigation that Phillips and Sumner, two exceptional scholars in their own

right, were astonished by the depth and scope of his facts. He knew how many slaves were in every state, and what country they were imported from. He talked at length with hundreds of fugitive slaves and many slave owners. He knew all the Negroes in Boston; some were his parishioners, others were personal friends. He regularly received the Richmond Examiner, with its pro-slavery editorials and advertisements for runaway slaves. He read all the books published on the subject, most of which were in his library. He delved into the philosophy of slavery, analytically reading Calhoun's popular tractates. The supposed Biblical sanctions for slavery he knew by heart and in several languages. He lamented that the "blessed Bible seemed to have become a treatise in favor of man-stealing. Kidnapping arguments were strewn all the way through from Genesis to Revelation." He knew the laws and customs, economy and sociology of slavery everywhere. These were his massive statistics that were so often crammed into his sermons, lectures, and pamphlets. And they all pointed, he felt, to the same conclusion.

In spite of all his facts Parker's greatest contribution to the anti-slavery crusade did not rest in his technical or logical arguments. Although it was impossible to best him in a debate, all the facts, at his or anybody's disposal, were, in reality, irrelevant. Parker was chiefly a moral

\[114\] Ibid., pp. 65-66.
agitator, a minister who applied God's law to the question of slavery. Abolitionism in his hands assumed the character of a religious duty. As a Transcendental idealist he reminded men that God knows no favorites, all men have equal access to divinity. As a minister of Absolute Religion he preached what his mother had taught him, "no man may put off the law of God," and the law of God forbade slavery. He invoked the Higher Law of God, not the statutes of men, as a test for slavery. "Unquestioning submission to the constitution" was no virtue if the constitution were in error. Like Emerson and Thoreau he recommended that a man disobey unjust laws. Sermons like "The Function of Conscience in Relation to the Laws of Men," and "The Laws of God and the Statutes of Men" were ethical and moral discourses, emphasizing the "eminent domain" of the laws of God. To disobey the Higher Law was, Parker thought, real infidelity, atheism in practice. Commager considers that in essence the Higher Law "was idealism applied to politics, intuition in the realm of social ethics." As a moral agitator Parker's position was impregnable, because he referred everything to God. His program of abolition, then, reflected his Transcendental philosophy of freedom. This philosophy was based on the intuitive truth that all men should be free. It was God's

115 Ibid., p. 129.

verdict on the subject; consequently slavery could be morally condemned. When Parker utilized facts and statistics, he did so only after his intuition had convinced him that he was right. This was all any Transcendentalist could do.

In actuality the Transcendentalists endorsed the same philosophy about God, man, and their relationship. However there was much speculation about the practical meaning of their philosophy, and, since the Transcendentalists were devout individualists, there was little agreement in practice. In the application of the particular ideas to life, the Transcendentalists, consistent with the precepts of their philosophy, cherished the variety. The type of profession or trade was inconsequential as long as one remained what Emerson called "man thinking." Thoreau, meditating on one of his long walks through the Concord woods, was as much "man thinking" as Parker, sifting some dusty and obscure volume, written in an equally obscure tongue, for material for the Sunday discourse. Transcendentalism did not require that one do or think as others did or thought, but that one do and think as the spirit moved him.

It was Parker's particular calling to take Transcendentalism into the pulpit, then into the street where he acted upon what he believed. Emerson called him Transcendentalism's Savonarola. Indeed, he was. Urging and defending the worthy causes of mankind, Parker dedicated every day and hour of his short life to the keeping of God's law.
Absolute Religion in theory was love of God, or piety; in reality it was practical morality. Parker's truths always seemed to fit some concrete situation; for he knew no abstract truths. His hard practicality makes his Transcendentalism appear dubious; but he never undertook any action without the confirmation of a Transcendental or intuitive truth. His logical mind, which had a special genius for organization and classification, molded his Transcendentalism into a life of practical action. Had he been more metaphysical, he would have appeared more Transcendental. However, in his own person and in his works, Parker was the practical expression of Transcendentalism.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

After 1855 Parker approached the apex of his popularity. His reputation as a scholar, a preacher, and a reformer was established both nationally and internationally. He received so many offers to lecture that he had to turn down two out of three. The slavery issue had come to the national conscience, and the masses of men in the North rallied to Parker's support. The citizens of Boston were ashamed of their part in the incidents which sent Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims back into slavery. Parker, who had reproached them at a time when it was unpopular to do so, now found himself representing the majority rather than the minority. As a non-political reformer, he had created sentiment, advanced ideas, and suggested modes of action in abolishing slavery.¹ He was surprised at the magnitude of the results of his labors, especially in such a short span of years.² Speaking of his audiences, he said: "I left them other than I found them."³ His righteous indignation, expressed in the frankest way, had stirred up the sentiment, and his ideas were circulating freely throughout

¹Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 261.
²Parker, Autobiography, pp. 278-279.
³Ibid., p. 351.
New England. Politicians had been reluctant to accept his recommendations of agitation for Negro freedom; for that meant war. But they had been lectured so often on the moral shortcomings of the policies of expediency and compromise that they were moved to action. Parker's Higher Law seemed to sanction war in the pursuit of liberty.

Being popular was hard work for Parker, harder than he could stand. He was always a spendthrift of his energies, and, unlike Thoreau, it was difficult for him to say no. When he was called upon to serve, he always felt the necessity to give something, his time, his knowledge, his money, or, usually, his efforts. Answering his large correspondence alone was a full-time job, but Parker managed to keep it in the periphery of his activities. He always wrote new sermons for the Sunday discourse, and he tried to do the same thing for his weekly lectures. With the demands increasing every year, he traveled much throughout New England, enduring many bitter cold and dank wintry nights. His radicalism dented the orthodoxy of respectable churches, and people no longer feared to mention his name in public. In 1856 he was invited to preach at an independent church in Watertown, the town of his youth. This invitation he could not refuse; so he preached twice every Sunday for a year, shuttling back and forth between Watertown and Boston. About the same time the Progressive Friends invited him to deliver a series of lectures in beautiful Chester County, Pennsylvania.
It meant extra preparation, travel, and work, but he accepted. According to Commager, "The Friends liked Parker; Transcendentalism was nothing new to them, it was the Quaker doctrine of the inner light, with a fancy name." The Progressive Friends were not the only ones who found Parker's theology attractive; large audiences and tens of thousands of eager readers followed the gospel according to Parker, who was inspired to write and preach more than ever. Parkerism in all its forms was spreading over the country. The congregation at his church and the audiences at his lectures were so large that seats were always a luxury when he spoke. The common man gave his vote of approval to Transcendental religion. The politicians, whom Parker always harangued with endless letters of advice and consent, began to accept his point of view. All types of reformers from Dorothea Dix to William Lloyd Garrison found it eventually necessary to consult with Parker or solicit his aid. And, in the greatest triumph of all, the Churches seriously considered his theology. Young men, Parker's disciples, preached his truths in every part of New England. No doubt about it, New England life in the late 1850s was approaching the Age of Parker.

However, this age was destined never to be, because its spokesman was a dying man. Parker never husbanded his health,

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4Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 267.
5Ibid., p. 267ff.
and, even before his fortieth year, the strain of excessive overwork was beginning to tell on him. The long hours of sleepless study, the frequent trips through the most wretched conditions, the improper diet, and the total lack of recreation combined to exhaust his small, stout frame. Whenever he had a sufferable illness, which was frequent, he never let it interfere with his work. Annually the deacons who represented the congregation insisted that he take a long vacation, but he never managed to stay away for more than two weeks at a time. Consumption, which had killed most of his close family, finally overtook him in January of 1859, forcing him to leave his beloved pulpit. On January 2nd, to begin the new year, he preached on an old topic that was forever a favorite with him, "What Religion May Do for a Man." With difficulty he finished, promising to preach a sermon on "The Religion of Jesus and the Christianity of Churches" the following Sunday. But he had preached his last sermon at the Music Hall; for on the second Sunday in January his congregation waited in vain for him to appear. After a long while, Deacon Manley announced that Parker had suffered a hemorrhage of the lungs the previous night and would be unable to preach to them. This time the disease was in earnest. His wife, the doctors, and countless friends persuaded him to rest, to seek his health in a warmer clime. Reluctantly, he sailed for the West Indies, thence to Switzerland and Rome; but it
was for naught. As he traveled, he continued to write, mainly correspondence, and to study, both of which became chores. He sent his church a lengthy letter, containing his "Experiences as a Minister," a philosophical and biographical account of his life. It contained a brief autobiography which, in its simplicity, sincerity, and optimism, was remarkable, because it was almost wholly unaffected by his illness. His search for health and new life was too late, and on May 10, 1860, he died in Florence after several days of excessive weakness. He was buried at the foot of a cypress tree in a little Protestant cemetery just outside the city walls. The epitaph was later changed to read: "The Great American Preacher."

Parker lived the life of a Transcendental Savonarola, bluntly speaking his mind on religious matters. Action was his solution to every problem, he held nothing back, saved nothing. Like Virgil's Acestes, who aimed his arrow at the stars, Parker attempted what no mortal could accomplish. He must never have considered that his ends were impossible, for there was never a want of strength or effort. His vigorous reforming in both the secular and the religious fields was met with an equally vigorous rebuff by those who were satisfied with the existing manners. Edwin Mead estimates that "no man ever . . . was the object of bitterer malice, misrepresentation,

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6 Weiss, I, 288.

7 Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 289.
and execration in his life than he."\(^8\) The Unitarian Church, the very organization he loved, shunned him almost to the point of excommunication. His personality was vivid, robust, and gallant, knowing no compromise. So bald and direct was his way, that one never mistook his sympathies from his antipathies. In his sermons, which reminded one of Jonathan Edwards' in their piety and imagery, he declared that church creeds were ephemeral. Borrowing colors and brush from Emerson, Parker painted his sermons in bold Transcendental hues. The finished picture was more daring and avant-garde than Emerson's, because Parker's imagination and execution were less restrained; but both artists drew from the same basic materials. Emerson, in a sense, represented the New England intelligentsia; Parker represented the masses of men, especially the growing middle class. "Not as an individual," says Commager, "but as a spokesman, he was to be the conscience of his generation."\(^9\) The etymological meaning of the name Parker was "keeper" or "shepherd," which, indeed, Parker was.\(^10\)

The Transcendentalists were a curious mixture of people, all idealists, some more rational than others.\(^11\) The precepts and ramifications of their philosophy were "differently

\(^8\) Mead, p. 121.
\(^9\) Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 118.
\(^10\) Weiss, I, 1.
\(^11\) Commager, Yankee Crusader, p. 153.
emphasized and variously blended." 12 Theodore Parker emphasized intuition and blended it with demonstration. He mixed his love of speculation with his passion for facts, making him a practical mystic. 13 His mind was two-sided, Yankee and Puritan at the same time, fact-loving and methodical, yet idealistic and deeply religious. 14 He was an agitator who attacked concrete evils, but he was equally a preacher who abounded in pure faith, the "embodiment of Christian Transcendentalism." 15 Combining "Transcendentalist idealism and secular practicality," 16 he expressed his other-worldly faith in this-worldly terms. He knew that the soul was in the flesh. There was a definitely humanistic tenor to his theology, which was designed to make men better. 17 Believing that "Christianity is humanity," 18 he let anthropology substantiate his philosophy. He was a practical man, preferring Benjamin Franklin to Michelangelo. 19 Nothing in the world was so dear to him as man, his wants, his hopes. 20

12 Goddard, p. 5.
14 Parrington, II, 414.
16 Commager, Era, p. 100.
17 Parker, Theism and Atheism, p. 146.
With his rational and mystical predilections, he was the spokesman for Transcendentalists as well as for common men.

Parker concluded his life with the same philosophy that Thoreau concluded his stay at Walden. Thoreau learned by his experiment "that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."²¹ Parker had lived such a life, and, a year before his death, he confirmed what Thoreau had asserted. He never forsook his dreams in the face of all the malice which society could offer. He said: "I knew all this would come. It has come from my religion; and I would not forego that religion for all that this world can give."²² He sacrificed everything to fidelity to God; integrity was a virtue which cost him much in terms of this world. Nothing, he thought, could annihilate his eternal truths from God, and it was well that Parker died believing in the philosophy he preached and lived. In the last words of the last sermon he ever preached, he prayed: "Let you and me not be disobedient unto that heavenly vision."²³ That Transcendental vision had been his life.

²² Theodore Parker, quoted in Mead, p. 126.
²³ Parker, Sins and Safeguards, p. 373.
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