



American Scholars: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joseph Smith, John Brown, and the Springs of Intellectual Schism

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Every man, woman, and child was more or less a theologian.
—Harriet Beecher Stowe

THE literary intellectual, the Christian evangelical, and the political radical are, according to our contemporary civic understanding, denizens of distinctly separate spheres, spheres bounded and policed, to the extent that they come into contact at all, by mutual distrust or disdain. I propose to advance a counter-claim (for which I will begin to muster evidence and assess implications): to wit, that the seemingly divergent cultural icons of the American scholar, prophet, and revolutionary in fact share a common milieu and moment of origin in the social, spiritual, and epistemological ferment of the early nineteenth century. Thus, I contend, the icons’ apparently incommensurable vocations and commitments are better viewed as variations on the volatile “American synthesis” of scriptural, rational, and ideological authority that historian of religion Mark Noll describes in his magisterial *America’s God* or, rather, as schismatic expressions of what political scientist Hugh Hecllo calls the “mutual and tensioned embrace between the democratic and Christian faiths.”¹

¹Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 9; Hugh Hecllo, *Christianity and American Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 5.

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Within the limited space afforded here, I will pursue my argument about the entanglements and interdependencies of intellectual, religious, and political vocation in the United States by means of a comparative examination of the careers and legacies of three pioneers of these callings: poet, philosopher, and professional lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson; Mormon prophet and revelator Joseph Smith; and militant abolitionist and anti-racist John Brown. Born within five years (1800–1805) and one hundred seventy miles of one another, into old New England families with strong Congregationalist and Revolutionary credentials, Emerson, Smith, and Brown all profoundly internalized the leading cognitive and affective challenges of their time and place and fashioned visionary responses to them—responses that some combination of personal ambition, popular appeal, rhetorical genius, and historical happenstance rendered nationally consequential. Attracting both disciples and equally passionate detractors, each man was and remains controversial. The radicalism of their demands on and performance of their respective roles of thinker, believer, and activist, moreover, opens all three to charges of marginality or eccentricity. Yet their very radicalism, in the sense of a claim to the vocation's root function or uncompromised expression, is also (along with their cultural institutionalization and continuing currency) the basis of their case for representative status.



Emerson's, Smith's, and Brown's paternal grandfathers all served in the Continental Army during the War of Independence. Reverend William Emerson, chaplain to the Northern Division, and Captain John Brown both died of fevers contracted in camp. Asael Smith, having survived that conflict only to be dispossessed as a second son, set his family on a course of geographical migration, socioeconomic instability, and auto-didactic learning that rendered its members particularly and acutely susceptible to the full array of religious, political, and cultural positions that vied for primacy in the new nation. These ideas, like the populace, were heterogeneous, contentious,

international in origin, and wrenched free of established traditional and institutional structures of authority. As colonial historian and Joseph Smith biographer Richard Bushman remarks, thinking Americans in this era of acute social and intellectual promise and upheaval were exposed “to a conglomeration of doctrines and attitudes, some imported from Europe, others springing up in New England, none sorted or ranked by recognized authority, all available for adoption as personal whim or circumstances dictated.”²

The doctrines and attitudes that Asael Smith adopted—as evidenced by a 1796 and a 1799 letter, the only two pieces of his correspondence that survive—include abolitionism; universal salvation; hope for the establishment of an “empire of reason” in worldly affairs; conviction of this empire’s compatibility with the providential governance of “the Supreme Ruler of universal nature,” whose direction of the recent “glorious revolution” presaged the imminent demise of “all monarchial and ecclesiastical tyranny”; indifference to “any particular form” of religious worship in favor of the freedom and duty of individuals to “satisfy [their] own consciences” in the matter; and confidence that each of the foregoing beliefs was consistent with and supported by the only two universal arbiters—“the two that God hath appointed, viz., scripture and sound reason.” Asael was reported to have been an admirer of Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*, at least until, a few months before his death in 1830, he perused the new scripture that had been revealed to and translated by his grandson, after which he remarked that “he had always expected that something would appear to make known the true gospel.”³

America’s God offers the most finely drawn account I have encountered of the origins, affinities, polarities, and amalgamations of the multitude of dogmas and viewpoints available

²Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 26.

³Smith’s letters are reproduced and his remarks to family members quoted in Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New England Heritage: Influences of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1971). Passages quoted here appear on pp. 104, 125, 119 (2), 125, 126, 125, and 112.

for popular consumption in the period specified by the book's subtitle, "from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln." Noll finds the interrelations of these articles of belief somewhat less chaotic and their grounds for adoption less arbitrary than Bushman's terms "conglomeration" and "personal whim" would suggest, yet his work confirms the prominence and pervasiveness of the questions of epistemology and authority that Bushman highlights. The "accelerating pace of exchange between the language of hereditary Protestantism and the languages of civic and intellectual culture that earlier had been antagonistic to orthodox belief," Noll argues, lent urgency to such questions at the same time as it provided conceptual resources to address them. Noll affixes the label "the American synthesis" to the particular constellation or cluster of languages and values that, he avers, appeared uniquely in the United States and "defined the boundaries for a vast quantity of American thought" between the Revolution and the mid-nineteenth century. This synthesis, "a compound of evangelical Protestant religion, republican political ideology, and commonsense moral reasoning," was both potent and unstable, and a wellspring of both its potency and its instability was the "epistemological self-assertion" with which each of the three ideological components propounded their convictions.⁴

Steeped in Reformation teachings about the priesthood of all believers and Enlightenment notions of equal rights and access to reason, and emboldened by their national independence and rhetoric of democracy, the citizenry of the new United States expected truth to be self-evident and evident to selves. Yet the underside of epistemological self-assertion is epistemological anxiety, especially where the stakes of knowing truth are high,

⁴Noll, *America's God*, pp. 31, 9, 12. Noll lays greater stress on the potency than on the instability of "the American synthesis." Its "Crisis," the title of the fifth and final section of the book, is associated principally with the 1850s sectional and scriptural debate about slavery's compatibility with Christianity. I see the inter- and intradenominational debate about slavery's Christian sanction or lack of it—which Noll brilliantly rehearses and examines (pp. 367–421)—as one arena in which the inherent instability of the synthesis is exposed, an instability that derives principally from the supercharged culture of epistemological demand and epistemological competition that the synthesis at once responds to and represents.

where the methodologies of knowing (some traditional, some novel, some hybrid) are various, where competing truths are claimed, and where claimants' authority is not easily degraded or elevated by appeals to established hierarchies. Anxiety is especially prevalent, too, in the arena of religion, where the democratization, diversification, and personalization of Christian theology—encouraged by legal protections and accelerated by population growth and mobility—allowed sectarian thought and practice to proliferate wildly. Given such circumstances, for more than one fretful seeker American Christianity was “not the *house of God*, while thus divided against itself—and is not the *body of Christ* which cannot be divided.”⁵

In the United States of the early nineteenth century, the impact of Western philosophy's “epistemological turn”—initiated by Descartes and variously engaged, extended, reoriented, and assimilated by Locke, Hume, Kant, and their popularizers—was not felt by the intellectual elite alone. Nor were meditations on first philosophy, inquiries into human understanding, or critiques of reason available only in scholarly treatises. Epistemological theories and concerns informed the sermons and discourses on theology that occasioned most public gatherings and much private reading. And such theories and concerns were dramatically tested in the “experimental” spiritual exercises of religious revivals and in folk beliefs and practices (alchemy, astrology, treasure divining) that derived from a pre-modern hermetic or magical heritage but that remained vibrant among rural and frontier populations.⁶ In a range of different idioms, venues, and constituencies, then, Americans confronted the

⁵George Burnham, the author of this statement, is quoted in Richard T. Hughes, “Soaring with the Gods: Early Mormons and the Eclipse of Religious Pluralism,” in *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion*, ed. Eric A. Eliason (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

⁶On evangelical pietism and the pursuit of “experiential certainty,” see Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 1–22. On the abiding presence of hermetic thought and “the magic world view” in the colonial period and early national U.S., especially as contributors to the origins and development of Mormonism, see John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Michael D. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

sorts of epistemological questions and, of necessity, assumed the intellectual self-consciousness that Frederic Henri Hedge pronounced “one of the characteristics of the present age.” This was a moment in history, Hedge wrote in 1833, “when, passing from a state of spontaneous production to a state of reflection, mankind are particularly disposed to inquire concerning themselves and their destination, the nature of their being, the evidence of their knowledge, and the grounds of their faith.”⁷ Hedge was a leading Unitarian minister and a scholar of German language and literature, but the preoccupations he enumerated were by no means alien to his humbler countrymen, especially fellow New Englanders. As Harriet Beecher Stowe remarked some years later: “Nowhere in the world, unless perhaps in Scotland, have merely speculative questions excited the strong and engrossing interest among the common people that they have in New England.”⁸

Perhaps the most vigorous contemporary prosecutor of such questions, and the most widely discussed among elites and non-elites alike, was Tom Paine. The self-educated son of a corset maker, Paine achieved fame with the 1776 publication of his brief for American independence, *Common Sense*, and infamy with his 1794 attack on organized or revealed religion, *Age of Reason*. In *Common Sense* Paine, concealing for the moment his disdain for the Bible, applies the language of evangelical Protestantism to the republican cause when he cites chapter and verse from the “anti-monarchical parts of Scripture” to show that “the Almighty, ever jealous of his honor, [must] disapprove a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of heaven.”⁹ In *Age of Reason*, however, he drops the pretense of deference to scriptural authority in favor of remaining “mentally faithful to himself.” Preemptively rebutting the charge that outraged readers would hurl at him, he

⁷Quoted in Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), p. 31.

⁸Harriet Beecher Stowe, “New England Ministers,” vol. 14 of *The Writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1896), p. 222.

⁹Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Basic Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York: Willey Book Company, 1942), pp. 10–11.

continues, “Infidelity does not consist in believing or disbelieving; it consists of professing to believe what [one] does not believe.” Paine, who set the gold standard for epistemological self-assertion, defiantly declares, “My own mind is my own church,” and he counts on Americans to join in his repudiation of external religious creeds and institutions in light of what he considers “the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion.” That repudiation rests on three major tenets, each of which resonates with founding American political assumptions and sensibilities: that scriptural or revealed religion entails an authoritarianism and a thrall to the past inconsistent with personal spiritual freedom; that the doctrine of redemption from sin by divine mediation undermines the moral dignity, autonomy, and responsibility of individuals; and that religion’s traffic in mystery and miracle is an affront to human reason and to the integrity and wonder of the natural laws of Creation, the scientific study of which alone “reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God.”¹⁰

All of these assumptions, and particularly the last, are based in empiricist principles established by John Locke and David Hume. Second-hand truth claims, as well as claims that are by their nature insusceptible to experimental verification, are not to be trusted. Indeed, for Paine, Christianity offends most grievously insofar as it is “repugnant to [the faculty of] human comprehension”; in that instance, it “despises the choicest gift of God to man,” which requires him to “force upon himself the belief of a system against which reason revolts.” The primary and appropriate objects of this rational revulsion are putative religious miracles, which, far from being admitted “as evidences of any system of religion being true,” Paine remarks, “ought to be considered as symptoms of its being fabulous.” Closely following Hume’s argument in his 1748 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Paine points out that to believe in a miracle one has not personally witnessed is not to credit the event itself, which by definition defies plausibility, but to

¹⁰Paine, *Age of Reason*, in *Basic Writings*, pp. 6–7, 40.

credit the reliability of the reporter. Yet, given our experience of natural laws and of human behavior, he asks, “is it more probable that nature should go out of her course, or that a man should tell a lie?”¹¹

Rational inquiry, personally undertaken, thus clears the field of all other modes of worship: “That which is now called natural philosophy, embracing the whole circle of science, of which astronomy occupies the chief place, is the study of the works of God, and of the power and wisdom of God in his works, and is the true theology.”¹² Yet, in grounding his theology in first-hand experience and in empirical evidence, Paine opens a door to seekers who perceive manifestations of divine power and wisdom beyond those ever dreamt of in his philosophy. Indeed, as his book circulated at century’s end among families like the Smiths, ever-growing numbers of Americans were beginning to court a direct experiential understanding of God, often out of doors amidst the wonders of Creation. And when evidence of His presence was discerned, as Stephen Marini notes, “it was not through a new spiritual faculty but precisely through the natural sensory and intellectual capacities of human beings [in which] the spirit performed its sanctifying work.”¹³

Even more problematic is the conflicted or inconsistent status of reason itself in Paine’s argument. At times, reason appears as an instrument expressly designed for apprehending “the true theology,” or “all that is necessary for man to know of God.” At others, it marks the narrow limits of human knowledge, both of God, to whose name the only idea reason can affix “is that of a *first cause*,” and of nature, whose every feature is “a miracle when compared to our power and to our comprehension,” which, ignorant of “the whole extent of [nature’s] laws,” cannot definitively judge whether or not a given phenomenon “is something contrary to the operation and effect of those laws.” At still other moments in *Age of Reason*, despite such concessions as the foregoing, reason is cast as the measure

¹¹Paine, *Age of Reason*, pp. 81, 37, 88, 86.

¹²Paine, *Age of Reason*, p. 46

¹³Marini, *Radical Sects*, p. 13.

of the allowable operations of the universe, and God himself is held obligated—lest he affront “human understanding,” or appear in the “degrading . . . character of a showman,” or work in a manner that invites misinterpretation—to conform to its capacities.¹⁴

In light of the tensions or paradoxes in Paine’s account of reason’s properties, it is no wonder that some found his approach to truth at one and the same time too uncertain and too arrogant. Parley Pratt, a preacher in the Disciples of Christ movement, which aimed to restore the principles and practices of apostolic Christianity, and an early Mormon convert, was among those who sought something more than Paine’s vision, or version, of the present age had to offer. “Witness the ancients,” Pratt observed, “conversing with the Great Jehovah, learning lessons from the angels, and receiving instruction by the Holy Ghost, in dreams by night, and visions by day, until at length the veil is taken off. . . . Compare this intelligence, with the low smatterings of education and worldly wisdom, which seem to satisfy the narrow mind of man in our generation.”¹⁵ Of course, Paine—along with most twenty-first-century academics—would likely dismiss as the height of anti-intellectualism such backward-focused revelatory yearning as Pratt’s. Pratt, they would argue, exemplifies the enthusiast of Locke’s description, who demands “illumination without search, . . . certainty without proof.”¹⁶ But such a summary judgment misses the interest in the scene, vehicles, and temporal process of instruction—and not simply in the instant truth revealed—that Pratt evinces. It misses, too, the variant conception of human dignity and distinction (a difference linked to social-class affiliation and sensibility) that underlies Pratt’s ideal of religious education.

For Paine, the fittest arena of human prestige is scientific inquiry. Accordingly, man’s proper edification in and elevation by “the power and wisdom of God in his works” requires a universe

¹⁴Paine, *Age of Reason*, pp. 41, 82, 85.

¹⁵Quoted in Hughes, “Soaring with the Gods,” p. 29.

¹⁶Quoted in Packer, *The Transcendentalists*, p. 8.

whose design we are left to discover by our own ratiocinative faculties and an impersonal creator, an “Almighty Lecturer,” who “invite[s] man to study” by communicating in the “universal language” of nature alone.¹⁷ Paine’s Lecturer, however, distributes no syllabus, holds no office hours, takes no interest in the special needs or struggles of particular students, and gives no indication of what’s on the final exam, or even whether there will be one. For some, human dignity would be heightened if instruction were more intimate and dialogical. And for most, of course, the study of nature does not yield “all that is necessary” for them to know of God. Leaving teleological and soteriological questions aside, a God revealed only as nature’s first cause conveys no moral guidance or authority (Paine’s occasional platitudinous gestures to the contrary notwithstanding), affords no motive to religious community or access to religious communion, and neither acts nor calls for the performance of particular actions in the world. Almost all nineteenth-century Americans, Daniel Walker Howe observes, shared Paine’s belief in “intelligent design,”¹⁸ but it was the questions natural philosophy could not satisfactorily answer or would not pose that gave rise to the most distinctive and influential American cultures of intellectual life and to competing—yet indissociable, schismatic—avatars of the American scholar.

I take the term “cultures of intellectual life” from the opening essay of Thomas Bender’s *Intellect and Public Life*; there he defines the term as the social matrices and “communities of discourse” that afford men and women of ideas “the collective concepts, the vocabulary of motives, and the key questions that give shape to their work . . . and give institutional force to the paradigms that guide [them].” Subsequent essays principally concern the progressive differentiation of disciplinary domains and of academic from civic intellectual life over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But in prior decades, as Bender notes, American intellectual life

¹⁷Paine, *Age of Reason*, pp. 52, 40.

¹⁸Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 464.

accommodated a more promiscuous and amalgamated array of discourses, purposes, and constituencies, all broadly addressed to “society’s need for general explanatory ideas” and most expressed “in forms and practices [not far] removed from direct human experience.”¹⁹ A central feature of this amalgamated intellectual culture was its tendency to align rather than divorce scientific and religious inquiry. Indeed, Noll describes the presumption that “truths about consciousness, the physical world, and religion” would ultimately prove compatible and that all “could be authoritatively built by strict induction from the irreducible facts of experience” as the “methodological common sense” of the antebellum era. At the same time, this empiricist and implicitly individualistic epistemology did not supplant scripture or reduce its scope as a source of practical as well as metaphysical knowledge; on the contrary, “amid America’s post-Revolutionary tide of antiformalism, antitraditionalism, democratization, and decentralization, trust in the Bible did not weaken but became immeasurably stronger.”²⁰

Emerson’s “The American Scholar” has commonly been characterized as a counterthrust against the Jacksonian era’s marginalization of “the literary class” and instrumentalization of intellect in the service of “the exertions of mechanical skill,” a characterization the essay explicitly invites. But it is perhaps more urgently an expression of and brief for synthesis in an intellectual culture that has been strained, or already riven, by external and internal threats. Hence the fable of the “One Man” with which Emerson begins and his injunction that the scholar, if he is to fulfill his proper function as Man Thinking, “embrace all the other laborers,” be “priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier.”²¹ Emerson’s essay proceeds, accordingly, to specify and examine three capacious arenas of influence—nature, books, and action—that

¹⁹Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 3, 4, 5, 13.

²⁰Noll, *America’s God*, pp. 234, 371.

²¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 68, 53, 54.

accommodate such disparate forms of knowledge work and that the scholar must heed. The remainder of my essay deploys “The American Scholar” as a keystone of the cultural formation that I have begun to articulate, one in which the religious evangelical, the political radical, and the literary intellectual—as represented here by Smith, Brown, and Emerson himself—stand in “mutual and tensioned embrace.”



Having lost his young wife, Ellen, to tuberculosis after little more than a year of marriage and having resigned his pastorate at Boston’s Second Church, Emerson sailed for Europe late in 1832 seeking renewal and redirection. In July 1833, a visit to the Cabinet of Natural History in the Jardin des Plantes yielded a long and rhapsodic journal entry that concluded: “I am moved by strange sympathies, I say continually ‘I will be a naturalist.’” “The American Scholar” lists nature as “first in importance” among influences on the scholar, and Emerson’s account of the challenge it poses follows from his reflection at the Parisian exhibit that “[t]he Universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms . . . & the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient in the very rock aping organized forms.”²² The scholar strives to solve this puzzle by “a constant accumulation and classifying of facts,” by “tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground, whereby contrary and remote things cohere,” an activity that Emerson here designates as the essential pursuit of science: “The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts.”²³

Of course, for Emerson the lesson and purpose of this activity is not merely taxonomic or diagnostic. He presses the Kantian

²²Joel Porte, *Emerson in His Journals* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 111.

²³Emerson, “The American Scholar,” p. 55.

idea that objects of knowledge are grounded in structures of consciousness—"what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also the law of the human mind?"—into the service of his metaphysical intuition that the "identity" discovered by man's analogizing process is his own and that the "principle of life" revealed therein is an integrated divine design, "this web of God."²⁴ In Emerson's naturalistic epistemology, then, as Ronald Bosco observes, "everything from the order of the universe to the evolution of personal and cultural ethics could be discovered through the close study of nature broadly construed."²⁵ Or, as Emerson puts it in the concluding paragraph of his discussion of nature in "The American Scholar," the precept "Study nature" becomes "at last one maxim" with the precept "Know thyself," and both are modes of "worship."²⁶

"We see God face to face every hour," Emerson writes in a late essay, but this rousing declaration indicates the limitation as well as the power, the poverty that is the underside of the plenitude, of his analogical method. For the logic and character of his epistemology, as acknowledged even in "The American Scholar," is such that "[t]here is never a beginning, there is never an end" of knowing, only "inexplicable continuity" and "circular power returning unto itself." In an eponymous lecture delivered four years after the Phi Beta Kappa address, on a similar occasion at Waterville College, Emerson confessed that "The Method of Nature" refuses, or at least is incapable of approaching, a telos. "[S]eekest thou in nature the cause?" Emerson asks. "This refers to that, and that to the next, and the next to the third, and everything refers." In such an endless circuit of referentiality, of troping and substitution, there can be no master trope—no God term or, to put it another way, only God terms. Far from shrinking from this implication,

²⁴Emerson, "The American Scholar," p. 55.

²⁵Ronald A. Bosco, "Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803–1882: A Brief Biography," in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 22–23.

²⁶Emerson, "The American Scholar," p. 56.

Emerson embraces it: “Every earnest glance we give to the realities around us, with intent to learn, proceeds from a holy impulse, and is really songs of praise. What difference can it make whether it take the shape of exhortation, or of passionate exclamation, or of scientific statement? These are forms merely.”²⁷ The indifference to, and convertibility of, particular forms of thinking that Emerson here asserts presages his own polymorphous representation in modern scholarship as moralist, as poet, as scientific or social scientific inquirer, as spiritual guide and secular humanist, as reformer and booster, and—by the method of nature’s inferential “assertion of every individual’s infinitude,” in political theorist George Kateb’s phrase—as founding philosopher of democracy.²⁸

“The end of being is to know,” Emerson wrote, as he took up his career as a naturalist upon his return from Europe in 1833.²⁹ Yet, as biographer Lawrence Buell argues, the terms of his vocation oriented him less toward the discovery or assessment of truths than toward the exploration of “styles of intellectual vitality,” toward “fascination with mental processes,” and toward “replication in language of the motions of the mind as it thinks through how much, and how, it can know anything.”³⁰ This is the intellectual profile that has made Emerson’s work and example most fruitful for modern and postmodern aesthetic practices and cultural concerns—and for those social constituencies best positioned to pursue them.



Emerson begins his exposition of the second major influence on the scholar by declaring that “[t]he theory of books is noble,”

²⁷Emerson, “The Conduct of Life,” in *Essays and Lectures*, p. 1123, “The American Scholar,” p. 55, and “The Method of Nature,” in *Essays and Lectures*, pp. 119–20, 118.

²⁸George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 27.

²⁹Emerson, quoted in Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 153.

³⁰Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 210, 213, 215.

but he then quickly proceeds to caution against texts' inherent susceptibility to corruption. The problem, he explains, in a now familiar aphorism, is that "[g]enius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence." The "past utterance of genius" is canonized, and institutions arise to ensure that the "sacredness which attaches to the act of creation . . . is transferred to the record" and to pronounce, "let us hold by this." At this point, Emerson insists, "the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant"; yet he soon softens this harsh judgment, acknowledging that, "when the intervals of darkness come, as they must,—when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining,—we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. We hear, that we may speak."³¹

Almost two decades before Emerson wrote these words, the teenaged Joseph Smith had enacted them. In both Smith's 1832 and his 1838 accounts of his First Vision, the founding event of the Mormon Restoration, intervals of darkness prompt an urgent and intensive reading of the Bible, which leads in turn to personal revelation and, ultimately, to the act of creation that results in *The Book of Mormon*. In the 1832 narrative, a conviction of his sinfulness and a period of "[pondering] many things in my heart concerning . . . the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind" induces him to begin "searching the scriptures[,] believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God." In the 1838 version, Smith's "darkness and confusion" are products of the "strife among the different denominations" that "used all their powers of either reason or sophistry" to prove their exclusive access to religious truth, thus rendering it "impossible for a person . . . to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong." Laboring under this difficulty, Smith writes, he came upon verse 5 of the first chapter of the Epistle of James: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him." Taking the verse literally and as applying to him personally, Smith retires to the woods and

³¹Emerson, "The American Scholar," pp. 56, 57–58.

submits his request. A pillar of light dispels the gloom, and, presently, the figures of God and Jesus emerge from it and communicate to him that the professors of the extant sects all “teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof.” Later, Smith learns that the two canonical testaments are themselves partial and corrupt and that, by his agency, the world would receive “the fullness of the everlasting Gospel.”³² In this manner, Smith proleptically answers Emerson’s call for the stern subordination of even “the best books” to “the seer’s hour of vision”: “When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings.”³³

In his late essay “Worship,” Emerson cites “the maundering of Mormons” as one item in an acidic catalog of contemporary offenses against rational faith; others include “the periodic ‘revivals,’ the Millennium mathematics, the peacock ritualism, the retrogression to Popery, . . . thumps in table-drawers” that slavishly “ape our ancestors” and “stagger backward to the mummeries of the dark ages.”³⁴ Early “textual Mormonism,”³⁵ however, does not so much retreat from the intellectual and spiritual challenges set forth in “The American Scholar” as respond to them, often in ways that closely match Emerson’s own. In particular, Mormonism’s origins exemplify the agonistic engagement with “the mind of the Past” that Emerson describes in his essay’s discussion of the generative and deadly power of books.

Early Mormonism, Stephen Prothero flatly asserts, “is a story about books—an old book that cannot answer the most vexing religious question of the day, and a new one that can.”³⁶ But this formulation is too static, too unidirectional. The story is not

³²*The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1984), pp. 4–5, 198–99, 200, 203.

³³Emerson, “The American Scholar,” pp. 58–59.

³⁴Emerson, “Worship,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 1059.

³⁵Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), p. 173.

³⁶Prothero, *American Jesus*, p. 172.

about textual substitution or supercession but about recovery and renovation; it is about intertextuality and about iteration as at once restorative and transformational. In this regard, it involves what Emerson calls “creative reading,” which entails the deployment of inspiration or revelation to realize the incomplete achievement, correct the flawed instantiation, or adjudicate the uncertain authority of an ostensibly oracular source. Emerson does not mention the Bible when he observes in “The American Scholar” that no writer can “entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book,” that, indeed, “as the seer’s hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months, so is its record, perchance, the least part of his volume.” But these passages are surely informed by the questions recent exponents of the Higher Criticism had raised about the Bible’s authorship, its inconsistencies, its canonization process, its historical and linguistic corruptions. Such adulterations of “the pure efflux of the Deity” dictated that “[t]he discerning” attempt to “read . . . only the authentic utterances of the oracle;—all the rest he rejects.”³⁷ But how was one to discern the authentically oracular? *The Evening and Morning Star*, the newspaper established in Missouri at Smith’s direction and edited by Mormon high priest William Phelps, had addressed this problem in July 1833: “As to the errors in the bible, any man possessed of common understanding, knows, that both the old and new testaments are filled with errors, obscurities, italics and contradictions, which must be the work of men. . . . With the old copy full of errors; with Dickinson’s and Webster’s polite translation, with Campbell’s improved, and many more from different persuasions, how will a person of common understanding know which is right without the gift of the Holy Spirit?”³⁸

When Parley Pratt chanced upon a copy of *The Book of Mormon* in the summer of 1830, it was by virtue of this

³⁷Emerson, “The American Scholar,” pp. 59, 56, 59, 58, 59.

³⁸Phelps, quoted in Ronald V. Huggins, “Joseph Smith’s ‘Inspired Translation’ of Romans 7,” in *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith*, ed. Bryan Waterman (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), pp. 263–64.

spiritual gift, according to his account, that he discerned the text's authenticity. "As I read, the spirit of the Lord was upon me, and I knew and comprehended that the book was true, as plainly and manifestly as a man comprehends and knows that he exists."³⁹ Some months later, when Pratt and three other early Mormon missionaries evangelized among the Disciples of Christ in northeastern Ohio, effecting the massive conversion (by the standards of the time) that gave the faith its first institutional foundation, the manifest physical fact of the new scripture—which no other contender for sectarian authority could supply—was their most persuasive argument. But the grounds of that argument's appeal were more complex than may be apparent. The authority of the *The Book of Mormon* depended, in part, on popular veneration of Hebrew and Christian scriptures, whose cadences it echoed even when not reproducing, often verbatim, large swatches of those canonic texts. Smith and his disciples also adduced biblical passages in such a way that they bespeak later revelations or herald the appearance of a new community of saints. Most notable among these was John 10:16, in which Jesus tells the Pharisees: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice." But beyond the auratic authority it borrowed from scripture, or the textual authority it claimed in the course of interpreting established testaments, *The Book of Mormon* staked its case for legitimacy on the logic (irrefutable in principle for a Christian, or an Emersonian) of the spirit's superiority to and independence from any bounded letter, any formal instantiation in "the work of men." If God is ever and unchanging, and if He has spoken directly to men for the purpose of enlightening and redirecting humankind at earlier critical junctures in human history, how can one deny His capacity to do so again? "Revelation is not closed and sealed, but times of refreshment and words of power are evermore coming, . . . [and] Creation is an endless miracle as new at this hour as when Adam awoke in the garden": this was the

³⁹*Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), p. 20.

essence of the Mormon appeal in the 1830s, but the words are Emerson's.⁴⁰

In its epistemological orientation, then, Mormonism does not merely “ape [its] ancestors” but instead holds textual precedents to be at once sacred and provisional, susceptible to and sometimes in need of refreshing. Indeed, subsequent to his initial visions, Joseph Smith's sense of the transactions by means of which he received and recorded divine intelligence may more accurately be conveyed by the term “inspired translation” than by the more commonly used word “revelation.” As he represented it, Smith's role in the production of *The Book of Mormon*, the lost books of Moses and Abraham, and the continuing explanatory and instructional communications from God canonized as the *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church* was that of a subordinate but nonetheless active collaborator in divinity.⁴¹ Moreover, that role required intellectual preparation and effort. The 1829 revelation transmitted through Smith to Oliver Cowdery, one of the amanuenses of *The Book of Mormon*, specifically cites Cowdery's misunderstanding of the cognitive coagency of the recipient of inspired communication as the reason for his inability to translate as effectively as did Smith: “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed

⁴⁰Emerson, quoted in Bosco, “Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803–1882,” p. 44. Tours of the Mormon historical and religious sites in and around Nauvoo, Illinois—where the early Mormon church under Joseph Smith's leadership attained its greatest power and fullest religious expression and where Smith was assassinated—begin with a slickly produced sixty-eight-minute film about the Mormon experience from the prophet's first vision to the community's forced exodus from the United States. The film, shown on a Cineplex-size screen in one of the auditoria at the church's Historic Nauvoo Visitor's Center, begins with the following inscription on a blank screen: “Today more than ever, a true prophet must communicate not that God spake but that He speaketh”—Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

⁴¹In *The Refiner's Fire*, Brooke explores the hermetic influences on Mormon theology that were expressed most fully in some of Smith's later revelations and in the temple rituals initiated in Nauvoo, Illinois, in the early 1840s. Nauvoo theology, Brooke writes, “cast the Mormon faithful not in traditional Christian terms, supplicating divine favor, nor in the role of magicians, manipulating and coercing supernatural forces. Rather, Mormons were to expect, as hermetic perfectionists, to be co-participants in divinity” (p. xiv). However prominent a place hermeticism holds among the sources of Mormon thought and practice, coparticipation in divinity seems to me an apt description of Mormon revelators' own understanding of their activity even before the late doctrines concerning man's original and destined coequality with God were announced.

that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought, save it was to ask me; But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you.”⁴²

A skeptic might read Smith’s declaration as a means of precluding enthusiastic disciples and prospective competitors from infringing upon his exclusive franchise as God’s interpreter. Yet its injunction to study is reiterated—and extended to include reading and other instructional activities beyond private meditation—in numerous documents that postdate, and do not serve to consolidate, Smith’s personal authority. Smith’s diary entries for 21 and 22 December 1835, for example, include the following declarations: “Spent this [day] in endeavoring to treasure up know[ledge] for the be[n]efit of my Calling.” And: “Continued my studys. O may God give me learning even Languages and indo[w] me with qualificatons to magnify his name while I live.”⁴³ To enhance the qualifications of the entire priesthood, which comprised a significant proportion of the male Mormon population in the church’s early years, Smith established the School of the Prophets shortly after he arrived in Kirtland, Ohio. Meeting first in the attic of disciple Newel Whitney’s general store and later in a dedicated classroom on the third floor of the Kirtland Temple, the elders educated one another as their attainments allowed and sometimes hired tutors to instruct them in history, mathematics, languages, and English grammar. Combining this secular curriculum with an examination of the Bible and the inspired writings of their leader, Smith and his colleagues sought to follow the instruction of an 1832 revelation to “seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom: seek learning even by study, and also by faith.”⁴⁴

⁴²Joseph Smith Jr., *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Printers and Publishers, 1908; facsimile reprint Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, 2009), p. 96.

⁴³*An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, ed. Scott H. Faulring (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), pp. 90, 91.

⁴⁴Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants*, p. 318.

Mormon theology, David Brion Davis has noted, “was not against scholarship or a learned ministry. Indeed, it embodied part of the awe and reverence which unschooled Americans have always had for Education.”⁴⁵ The special character of early Mormon biblicism and bibliophilia is informed partly by such reverence and partly by an equally class-inflected suspicion of institutionalized forms, hegemonic interpretations, and elite interpreters of God’s Word or of the larger record of human knowledge. Accordingly, Mormons shared the “literal hermeneutic”⁴⁶ of other evangelicals and the majority of nineteenth-century American Christians, but with Joseph Smith’s distinctive caveat that the Bible was the simple truth of God only insofar as it was accurately translated. And this was a task to which the learned, from antiquity to the present, had proved unequal, as the prominence of the eleventh and twelfth verses of Isaiah 29 in Mormon scripture and in Smith’s self-understanding attests. In the King James version, Isaiah states: “And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot, for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.” In Second Nephi, a record of early Nephite settlement in the New World, ostensibly composed more than five hundred years before the birth of Jesus and eight hundred before the birth of the last Nephite military commander, Mormon, these verses are cited as an element in a prophetic vision of the last days. In these latter days, the sealed book of which Isaiah prophesizes is revealed to be *The Book of Mormon*, unsealed by an unlearned man to whose confession of ignorance the Lord will respond, “The learned shall not read [the book and the words thereof], for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I

⁴⁵David Brion Davis, “The New England Origins of Mormonism,” in *Mormonism and American Culture*, ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 20.

⁴⁶Noll, *America’s God*, p. 381.

shall give unto thee.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, then, the Mormon invocation of the authority of books “pointed . . . to the power behind all books.”⁴⁸ In this regard, Smith’s epistemology resembled Emerson’s, though the two differed in their understanding of the nature of that power, the mode of its access, and the purposes it was meant to serve.



Books are dangerous, Emerson warns in the section of “The American Scholar” that treats their influence, because—as an established source, form, or product of knowledge—they have the potential to coerce or restrict the play of intellect. “[D]ead fact” threatens to preempt “quick thought”; the detritus of material life and material history clogs the “perfect vacuum” of truth’s “distillation”; and the scholar, his inner light eclipsed by the glare of an alien moon, is at risk of being “warped by its attraction clean out of [his] own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system.” Images of abstract thinking and visionary perception abound, and they carry positive (if ethereal) freight in these pages; but, at the outset of the essay’s subsequent section on action, the same rarefied occupations convict the scholar of insularity, feebleness, or worse. “There goes in the world a notion,” Emerson begins, “that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian,—as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an axe.” He continues in this merciless, declarative fashion: scholars are “addressed as women[,] . . . often virtually disenfranchised; and, indeed, there are advocates for their celibacy.” To be sure, his disparagement proceeds from the general population’s ill-considered prejudice against thinkers—“as if, because they speculate or *see*, they could do nothing.” Still, Emerson’s rebuttal is less than categorical, and his anxiety is palpable when, after reciting the litany of charges of scholarly impotence, he responds: “As far as this is true of

⁴⁷*The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition*, ed. Grant Hardy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 126.

⁴⁸Hughes, “Soaring with the Gods,” p. 30.

the studious classes, it is not just and wise. Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet a man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth.”⁴⁹

Metaphors of germination and fructification here ballast, though they do not replace, the figures of distillation or sublimation that predominated in the earlier discussion of books. Similarly, Emerson’s emphasis on the ecology of Creation—“the inexplicable continuity of this web of God”—in the essay’s section on the influence of nature gives way here to examples of nature’s generativity. Ever vigilant against thought’s instrumentalization, however, Emerson denies action its conventional status as the terminus or ultimate object of thinking and renders it, instead, as a mediatory stage or growth agent of truth’s ripening or as “raw material” for the production of a new fruit of the mind: “The new deed is yet a part of life,—and remains for a time immersed in our unconscious life. In some contemplative hour, it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind.” Yet, the fruit’s detachment from its vital source once again renders Emerson’s characterization of scholarly vocation vulnerable to charges of abstraction and inconsequentiality. So, a few lines later, he reverses figure and ground: “Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. . . . A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think. Does he lack the organ or medium to impart his truths? He can still fall back on this elemental force of living them. This is a total act. Thinking is a partial act.” Thought and action finally are sketched as a circuitry of reversible and convertible currents that activate one another: “The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other.”⁵⁰

Twenty years after he delivered his lecture about the scholar to a Cambridge audience, Emerson attended a speech by Kansas freedom fighter John Brown in Concord. For liberal intellectuals in the North, the persistence and expansion of slavery, despite decades of abolitionist prose and oratory, had

⁴⁹Emerson, “The American Scholar,” pp. 56–57, 59–60.

⁵⁰Emerson, “The American Scholar,” pp. 60–61, 62.

effectively broken the circuit—or at least encumbered faith in any natural circuitry—of thought and action. Brown was embraced at Concord in part because he seemed to vindicate the Emersonian principles (and figure) of the American scholar, principles intellectuals later echoed in their celebration of the elemental force and imparted truth of his effort at Harpers Ferry. In his eulogy for Brown, Emerson described the galvanic effect of Brown's raid and execution on Northern opposition to slavery as "the natural recoil which the laws of the universe provide to protect mankind from destruction by savage passions."⁵¹ And even before Brown's death, Thoreau proclaimed him "a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles . . . [n]ot yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life." Continuing, in language that might have been drawn from the topological storehouse of "The American Scholar" or the parables of Jesus, Thoreau remarked that worldly men "do not know that like the seed is the fruit, and that, in the moral world, when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating. . . . This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate."⁵²

Long before he became transcendentalism's radical redeemer, however, Brown fashioned an epistemological orientation for himself that might well be described as a version of Emerson's Man Thinking, with its circuitry of the influences of learning, action, and a divinely ordered natural world. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, as a young tannery operator in a freshly hewn western Pennsylvania settlement, Brown also collaborated with a neighbor to establish a children's school, organized a new Congregational Society (which held services in the tannery attic) when the local church proved unwelcoming to blacks, and, when the occasion arose, helped conduct escaping slaves further north. As each new settler arrived in

⁵¹Emerson, quoted in *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story*, ed. Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer (Maplecrest, N.Y.: Brandywine Press, 2004), p. 223.

⁵²Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," quoted in *Meteor of War*, pp. 226–27.

the township, one of Brown's tannery employees reported, "[Brown's] first enquiry of him was whether he was an observer of the Sabbath, opposed to Slavery and a supporter of the Gospel and common Schools."⁵³ The singular inquiry recalled here by James Foreman aptly conveys Brown's view of the convertibility of these commitments, as if, in Emerson's terms, each naturally referred to the others, their differences "forms merely."

Brown's antislavery discourse and practice consistently exhibit the Emersonian circuit of referentiality. His earliest stated abolitionist intention, an 1834 letter to his brother Frederick, proposes that they join together to found a school for young blacks—"with me a favorite theme of reflection for years." The curriculum Brown envisions includes the basics of "a good English education." Students would learn "about the history of the world, about business, about general subjects, and, above all, . . . the fear of God." But the real fruit of such learning would be not aptitude but volcanic social upheaval—as well as the pious advancement of a stalled providential design. Arguing his case, Brown writes: "Perhaps we might, under God, in that way do more towards breaking their yoke effectually than in any other. If the young blacks of our country could once become enlightened, it would most assuredly operate on slavery like firing powder confined in rock, and all slaveholders know it well. Witness their heaven-daring laws against teaching blacks."⁵⁴ If Brown here envisions scholarship as a mode of revolutionary activism, in later Brown family communications revolutionary activism is coded as scholarship. In an 1858 letter to his wife and children, written from the home of Frederick Douglass, Brown asks his eldest daughter Ruth to support the Virginia operation by lending her avid husband Henry Thompson to the cause, as she had done during the Kansas campaign three years before: "O my daughter Ruth! Could any plan be devised whereby you could let Henry go 'to school' (as you expressed

⁵³Louis Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1959), p. 167.

⁵⁴Brown, quoted in *Meteor of War*, pp. 42–43.

it in your letter to him while in Kansas), I would rather now have him 'for another term' than to have a hundred average scholars."⁵⁵

Questions of knowledge, action, and Creation's moral design also interconnect in Brown's famous narrative of his traumatic adolescent encounter with racial violence and injustice, which he says "led him to declare, *or Swear: Eternal war with Slavery.*" The formative encounter, the central episode of a parable-style, third-person autobiographical narrative he composed in 1857 at the request of the twelve-year old son of his chief funder, occurred when Brown himself was twelve or thirteen. Still mourning the mother he had lost four years earlier and resenting his father's prompt remarriage and the attentions he was lavishing on his new wife and children, Brown had cultivated a defiant façade of emotional imperviousness and physical self-sufficiency. When, during the War of 1812, his father won a contract to supply beef to American troops fighting along the Great Lakes, Brown leapt at the opportunity to demonstrate his independence and precocity (as well as, doubtless, his filial indispensability) by driving cattle from his home southeast of Cleveland to distant points on the supply line. On one such solitary occasion:

He was staying for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord since a United States Marshall who held a slave boy near his own age very active, intelligent [*sic*], and good feeling; & to whom John was under considerable obligation for numerous little acts of kindness. *The Master* made a great pet of John: brought him to table with his first company; & friends; called their attention to every little smart thing he *said or did*: & to the fact of his being more than a hundred miles from home with a company of cattle alone; while the *negro boy* (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed; & *lodged in cold weather*; & beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or anything that came first to hand. That brought John to reflect on the wretched, hopeless condition, of *Fatherless & Motherless slave children*: for such children have neither Fathers or Mothers to protect

⁵⁵Brown, quoted in F. B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), p. 441.

& provide for them. He sometimes would raise the question *is God their Father?*⁵⁶ At the age of Ten years, an old friend induced him to read a little history, & offered him the free use of a good library.⁵⁶

The absence of a paragraph break or verbal marker in the transition from the slavery incident to Brown's self-education may reflect nothing more than the vagaries of Brown's memory chain or compositional practice. But it is clear that profound issues of knowledge and self-knowledge, along with matters of physical and moral agency and of Brown's relation to God as well as that of his abused friend, are at stake in the passage. Brown's implied failure to speak and his inability to act on behalf of the black boy highlight his own servile dependence on the "Master" who makes such a pet of him. The boy's superior intelligence and generosity expose Brown's pleasure in being praised for "every little smart thing he said or did" as vain and unmerited, while the slave's orphanhood convicts Brown of ingratitude for the paternal protection and provision he himself receives.

The theodicean question—"is God their Father"?—that Brown confronts in the wake of this experience in fact led him to much more diligent and engaged historical and scriptural reading in his early teenage years than he had cared to undertake previously, and, upon his successful religious examination shortly before his sixteenth birthday, he was admitted to membership in the Calvinistic Congregational Church of Hudson. For a time, he hoped to study for the ministry. But, when his finances and frontier education proved inadequate to any prospect of matriculation at Yale, he sought other professional alternatives, settling at last on "practical shepherd"—a designation that it amused Brown to adopt because of its double reference to his expertise as a breeder of sheep and dealer in wool and to his vocation as a conductor of slaves, who sometimes hid in wagons beneath the fleeces of his other trade, to freedom. Eventually, worship and antislavery activism would become virtually synonymous

⁵⁶Brown, quoted in *Meteor of War*, p. 39.

for Brown, so much so that his wife Mary once wrote to him to inquire whether he thought it was wrong for the family to attend church services at the local Presbyterian meetinghouse since abolition was only occasionally the sermon's theme.

The equation of faith and activism was not entirely idiosyncratic, but Brown was not secularizing religious commitments nor substituting social beneficence for the drama of the soul's salvation, as liberal Christian reformers were wont to do. Some of the earliest revivals of the Second Great Awakening occurred in and around Brown's birthplace in Litchfield County, Connecticut, and were led by Calvinist clergymen for whom personal and national redemption had become closely tied to abolition's progress. Jonathan Edwards's brother-in-law Samuel Hopkins and son Jonathan Edwards Jr., both of whom wrote influential antislavery pamphlets, were among the leaders of this movement in orthodox New England theology—one that not only stressed theological grounds for abolishing slavery but implicitly aligned the vindication of God's moral governance and the preparation of individual souls for grace with anti-slavery activism.⁵⁷ Of course, notwithstanding subtle points of doctrinal ambiguity and controversy, the region's scholastic Calvinist tradition still held firm to the tenet that human beings had been originally and universally depraved, and deprived of moral agency, through Adam's Fall. But in the mid-eighteenth century, under the pressure of Arminians and liberals, who challenged the justice of man's divine punishment for inherited or irresistible sin, Congregationalist doctrine had begun to shift. The shift culminated in the New Divinity theology, articulated most fully by Hopkins, which held that through Christ's atonement and with God's active assistance a human actor becomes capable of choosing the good.

⁵⁷John Brown's father, Owen, traced his strong abolitionist sentiments to 1791 when he read a copy of Jonathan Edwards Jr.'s sermon "The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade and of the Slavery of the Africans" at the home of his local minister, Jeremiah Hallock. Hallock had received his copy from Samuel Hopkins.

Brown, whose most cherished books included the complete sermons of Jonathan Edwards, was a student of the debates within the reformed tradition and embraced the mediatory New Divinity understanding of human moral agency that Edwards, however preliminarily and inconsistently, had helped frame.⁵⁸ In this view, as Douglas Sweeney summarizes it, “God’s grace redirects our desire and grants it a new telos or final end. It infuses our souls with the very ‘superior principles’ (donum superadditum) lost to us in Adam’s Fall, reordering our natural appetites and reenabling us to love God truly.”⁵⁹ In the active acceptance of this redirection, then, and perhaps in this alone, God is known and truly loved. Accordingly, at moments when “natural appetites”—for material success, for physical comfort, even for time with his family—obscured or diverted that new telos, that superior path, Brown felt “justly condemned,” as if, he writes in 1846, he had “fled to go down to Tarshish.”⁶⁰



The early 1830s, when Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joseph Smith, and John Brown all came into their full maturity, were a high water mark in the forty- to fifty-year tsunami of evangelical zeal and pietistic revival that has come to be known as the Second Great Awakening. Charles Grandison Finney, soon to become professor of theology at Oberlin College (whose founders included John Brown’s father), declared in New York that the awakening of 1831 was “the greatest work of God, and the greatest revival of religion, that the world has ever seen.” From his pulpit in Boston, in the same year, Lyman Beecher

⁵⁸This understanding was prefigured, moreover, in the heterodox seventeenth-century theology of English Puritan divine Richard Baxter, whose 1652 *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest; or A Treatise on the Blessed State of the Saints in Heaven*, reprinted in Philadelphia in 1847 by the Presbyterian Board of Publication, was Brown’s single favorite theological volume.

⁵⁹Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 116.

⁶⁰*Life and Letters of John Brown*, p. 22.

offered a similarly dramatic assessment.⁶¹ In 1831, too, Alexis de Tocqueville commenced the eleven-month investigative tour of the United States that would provide the data for his classic two-volume sociological portrait, *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville noted, even highlighted, Americans' curious blend of commitments—to democratic ideology, to practical intelligence and personal judgment, and to religion and religious institutions—but he was hard pressed to wrap his mind around that amalgam. Brilliant as he was, the French observer could never quite reconcile the categories of his understanding with the evidence of his senses. And this is no surprise, for, as Hecló points out, “any sophisticated European intellectual would know that these two characteristics—democratic liberty and religious authority—did not go together.”⁶²

Tocqueville labored conscientiously to register the contradiction he could not resolve. He acknowledged that “Christianity has . . . retained a powerful hold on the American mind” even as he insisted on Americans’ “almost insuperable distaste for the supernatural” and on the seemingly logical general proposition that “[m]en who live in ages of equality are therefore not inclined to locate the intellectual authority to which they submit outside and above mankind.” As Tocqueville traveled in the vicinity, Ohio farmers and shopkeepers were trekking miles by foot and wagon on reports of Joseph Smith’s “Golden Bible” and the reopening of the heavens in the latter days, and Virginia slaves were revolting under the charismatic leadership of the mystic Nat Turner. Yet, Tocqueville confidently asserted, “We may anticipate that democratic peoples will not find it easy to believe in divine missions, that they will be quick to mock new prophets, and that they will locate the principal arbiter of their beliefs within the limits of mankind and not beyond.” Also in 1831, William Lloyd Garrison launched the *Liberator* and a massive movement for immediate abolition

⁶¹Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 5 (Finney quotation) and 109.

⁶²Hecló, *Christianity and American Democracy*, p. 7.

inspired, in large measure, by “immediatist” evangelical theology. Yet, Tocqueville totted up the skeptical, materialistic, and antiauthoritarian sentiments he had heard Americans articulate—without taking equal account of the opposing ones with which they were locked in dialogue—and pronounced, “Henceforth men are united only by interests and not by ideas.”⁶³

One did not have to be French to oversimplify the character and the course of a culture of intellectual life so compounded and volatile, particularly in its pledged allegiance to both divine and human intelligence, “scripture and sound reason.” Thomas Jefferson was no more prescient when he remarked in 1820 that “there is not a young man now living in the U.S. who will not die an Unitarian.”⁶⁴

Orestes Brownson was perhaps the sort of young man Jefferson had in mind—a forward-looking child of the new century, committed to intellectual independence and human progress and therefore destined to throw off the shackles of outworn beliefs and traditions. Born in 1803, like Emerson, in a small Vermont town not far from the Smiths, Brownson was raised by severe Calvinist foster parents whose doctrines he rejected in late adolescence in favor of what he would later call “the free exercise of his own understanding” that Calvinism, in his view, prohibited.⁶⁵ Exercising his freedom, Brownson was ordained as a Universalist minister and fervently embraced a radical social gospel whose precepts he practiced as a labor activist and public educator on the global conflict “between the many and the few, the privileged and the underprivileged.”⁶⁶ Encountering William Ellery Channing’s sermon “Likeness to God,” Brownson subsequently became a Unitarian, the denomination most fully committed to Christianity’s “great doctrine,” as he put it in his 1836 book *New Views of Christianity, Society, and*

⁶³Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), pp. 486, 484, 490 (2), 487.

⁶⁴Jefferson, quoted in Prothero, *American Jesus*, p. 31.

⁶⁵Orestes A. Brownson, *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1836), p. 75.

⁶⁶Brownson, quoted in Packer, *The Transcendentalists*, pp. 52–53.

the Church, “that there is no essential, no original antithesis between God and man.” Although he joined other Unitarians and free thinkers as an original member of Emerson’s Transcendental Club, Brownson never felt at home among them, suspecting that Unitarianism saves the Son of man at the expense of the Son of God⁶⁷ and at one point publicly excoriating Emerson, “Are all things in the universe to be held subordinate to the individual soul? Shall a man take himself as the center of the universe?”⁶⁸ By the 1840s, he recalled in an 1857 autobiography, he was “weary of doubt, uncertainty, disunion, individualism, and crying out . . . for faith, for love, for union.”⁶⁹ In 1844, he converted to Catholicism. At the same time—and “for the same reason” (as the Brownsons communicated in an exchange of letters on their respective intellectual and spiritual odysseys), Orestes’s brother Oran became a Mormon.⁷⁰

Cultures of intellectual life, as Bender observes, broadly address “society’s need for general explanatory ideas.” Here, Bender recalls the work of Max Weber, perhaps the preeminent theorist of modern social thought, who argued that the “[challenge] to produce somehow a ‘meaningful,’ ordered totality” in the face of empirical limits, resistances, and obscurities defined the intellectual’s vocation. The particular vocation at issue in this passage from *The Sociology of Religion* was that of the prophet, yet Weber promptly appended the following to his account about the challenge of religious thought: “To be sure, this problem is by no means dealt with by prophecy alone. Both priestly wisdom and all completely nonsacerdotal philosophy, the intellectualist as well as popular varieties, are somehow concerned with it.”⁷¹ Among the three American scholars I have placed in conversation in this essay, only Emerson customarily

⁶⁷Brownson, *New Views*, pp. 15, 79.

⁶⁸Brownson, quoted in Packer, *The Transcendentalists*, p. 55.

⁶⁹Excerpted in *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. 41.

⁷⁰Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim’s Progress* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), p. 187.

⁷¹Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 267.

is regarded as an intellectual (and there are some who would contest even his claim). In part, this restriction reflects the continuing influence of the secularization thesis—the presumption that religious belief and other traditional forms of cognitive authority would vanish before the irresistible advance of instrumental rationality—that some of Weber’s own writings promote. Yet, neither the springs nor the contemporary contours of intellectual vocation in the United States—nor, for that matter, Weber’s best dialectical thought—bear that thesis out. Emerson, Smith, and Brown each spoke powerfully to their society’s need for general explanatory ideas. Locked in a “tensioned embrace,” the methods they advanced for discovering, authorizing, and enacting such ideas continue to define our nation’s common intellectual culture as well as some of its deepest social, affective, and ideological fractures.

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