

Memoranda and Documents

“A CREDO”: MARGARET FULLER AND THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS

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MARGARET Fuller’s essay-letter to William Henry Channing in the summer of 1842, “A Credo,” is her most forthright expression of radical Transcendentalism, affirming an evolutionary process of nature and spirit in both metaphysical principle and Biblical symbolism. Fuller directs her well-established understanding of world religions to comparison with Christianity, and she at least implies the possibility of new roles for women in the world’s future. In both respects “A Credo” anticipates her major work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.¹ More immediately, however, she offers her testimony at a moment when competing ideas of Jesus stand at the forefront of the Transcendentalist movement and its related network of Unitarian churches. Fuller’s statement of natural religion finds private expression but speaks powerfully within a collective history.

Though occasionally excerpted in collections of her writing and commented upon by scholars, “A Credo” has lacked a critical text to stand among her works. This documentary project aims to provide Fuller’s complete statement as well as position it within the Transcendentalist movement. The manuscript of “A Credo” has been overlooked largely through circumstances of transmission. Channing included a selection in *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1852), while also censoring its content. However, by 1883 he valued this statement enough to send it to

¹Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley and McElrath, 1845).

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, then working on his biography of Fuller, as a central expression of her “Prophetic Spirituality & Conscious Communion with the Divine Influential Life.”² Higginson’s more secular study found no place for “A Credo,” though he preserved it among the Fuller papers he eventually donated to the Boston Public Library. Soon a scholar of German Romanticism, Frederick Augustus Braun, transcribed the text as an appendix to his book on Fuller and Goethe; however, he used it only to argue for Fuller as a disciple of the German Romantic writer, “not a Transcendentalist at all.”³ With the recovery of Fuller’s work since the 1960s, “A Credo” has been excerpted and commented upon several times, whether from manuscript or from Braun. Always its participation in Transcendentalist discourse is assumed. Most recently, a study of Fuller’s religious skepticism in this essay has focused on the constraints preventing a woman writer from publishing such views in 1842.⁴ None of the recent scholarship, however, proposes publication of “A Credo” for current readers.

Fuller’s testimony is capacious in scale and perspective, open to examination in more than one way. It offers an important sign of Fuller’s growing religious feminism by attributing cosmic origins to a “spirit” that is also “angel mother,” later referred to again as “she.” At the same time, Fuller

²Margaret Fuller, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, eds. R. W. Emerson, J. F. Clarke, and W. H. Channing (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Co., 1852) 2, 88–92; Channing to Higginson, November 1, 1883, Folders 189 and 190, Fuller Papers, 1837–1884, Boston Public Library.

³Frederick Augustus Braun, *Margaret Fuller and Goethe: The Development of a Remarkable Personality, Her Religion and Philosophy, and Her Relation to Emerson, James Freeman Clarke, and Transcendentalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1910), 73, 89.

⁴Excerpts from “A Credo” appear in Bell Gale Chevigny, ed., *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller’s Life and Writing* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1976), 169–71, and in Jeffrey Steele, ed., *The Essential Margaret Fuller* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992), 21–22. Recent commentators include Jeffrey Steele, *Transfiguring America: Myth, Ideology, and Mourning in Margaret Fuller’s Writing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 102–4; Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller, An American Romantic Life: The Public Years* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 83–86; Ariel Clark Silver, *The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature* (Lanham, Delaware: Lexington Books, 2018), 2–3; and Caitlin Smith, “Margaret Fuller, Faithful Female Sceptic: The Politics of (Not) Publishing the 1842 ‘A Credo,’” *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 68 (2022), 383–420.

speaks in primarily masculine terms, even while naming deities and prophets, as she addresses the Transcendentalists through Channing. The shifting narrative perspective of “A Credo” allows these concerns to emerge together. First, she tells in abstract terms of creation, its future unknown to “this being who now writes.” As she envisions it, the human race has no binary separation from either nature or spirit, participating in one pantheistic entirety. Nor is gender a significant internal division; soon she speaks as “we,” the collective humanity that, like the spirit, breaks through obstruction and achieves knowledge. But then an individual, intensely devotional but self-affirming “I” emerges in her account of Jesus: one who has “no objection to the miracles, except where they do not happen to please me,” who finally believes in Christ “because I can do without him.” Fuller implicitly acknowledges this first-person voice as a woman’s when she specifies the Biblical text for a sermon “[i]f I were to preach on this subject.” She has no opportunity to preach, but “A Credo” is her laywoman’s sermon by letter.

All of the issues evoked in this statement—the miracles of Jesus, the status of the Bible, the power of nature and intuition—had defined the Transcendentalist controversy since 1838, when Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” characterized the church’s “noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus” as “Monster” rather than “Miracle.” In response, conservative Unitarian Andrews Norton blasted Emerson’s words as the “latest form of infidelity,” going on to argue for the Bible’s verifiable history of Jesus as the only ground for faith. Emerson made no direct response, but colleagues sprang to his defense by affirming truth as perceived by the individual mind. In “A Credo” Fuller was offering her own perspective on the miracles controversy. Earlier she had reported to Emerson on Norton’s latest publications as well as describing the “paper-pellet” aimed by a younger critic at “that peculiarly nervous sect styled Transcendentalists.”⁵ Now, as she wrote to Channing, she

⁵Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” in *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 235–36. The ensuing controversy is described in Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens, GA: University of

composed “A Credo” because a friend had asked specifically for her views of Jesus.⁶ Fuller’s own “infidelity” joined with Emerson and his allies, even as she went beyond them in directly presenting her cosmology of past and future.

A long process of self-expression and interchange with others led to her testimony, extending from years before Emerson’s manifesto to the moment of writing in 1842. Fuller held a position of quasi-clerical authority among Transcendentalists by this time. The third season of her *Conversations with women* had just concluded: since 1839 she had been leading path-breaking discussions of the truths suggested by Greek mythology and the fine arts, with frequent cross-reference to the Bible. She had described her first session’s theme as a “genealogy of heaven and earth.”⁷ In the same period that such ruminations on divinity and humanity grew, furthermore, Fuller was serving as editor of the movement’s *Dial* magazine, soliciting and judging work on religious and philosophical subjects from both men and women. All of those to be named in this essay had contributed to it. As editor, she reached out widely to the community of progressive belief. In “A Credo” she quoted a sentiment without identifying its author: “The soul must do its own immortal work.” Such words might have been Emerson’s, but instead they were from a poem by Eliza Thayer Clapp, a woman outside Fuller’s immediate circle, as published in the *Dial* a year before.⁸

“A Credo” epitomizes Fuller’s vision during this time of double cultural leadership; moreover, it embodies the personal transformation that she claimed amidst such work. At the

Georgia Press, 2007), Ch. 5, and Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), Ch. 4. See also David Faflick, *Transcendental Heresies: Harvard and the Modern American Practice of Unbelief* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020) for the culture around this dispute. *Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983–94) 2: 129.

⁶This letter appears only in *Memoirs* (2: 88) and does not name the friend.

⁷*Letters* 2:102.

⁸Joel Myerson, *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial: A History of the Magazine and Its Contributors* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1980), 125–26.

opening of the second season of *Conversations*, in autumn 1840, Fuller wrote to Channing that she had found a warm reception from the group after telling of her “great changes,” recent experiences of mystical identification with the divine. In the same letter she also reported on her own writing experiments, “The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain” and “Yuca Filamentosa,” which would soon be published anonymously, with her as editor, in the *Dial*. Along with “Leila,” a third piece of experimental fiction, these appeared throughout the months between Fuller’s “great changes” and the beginning of 1842, the year of “A Credo.” In them she affirmed the power of female forms in the natural and spiritual worlds: woman-identified flowers bursting into bloom under the moon’s influence; a grand tree, “Queen of the South,” singing to herself in solitary power; the goddess “Leila,” her wild hair blowing in the wind, who embodied the Holy Ghost’s descent into matter. And the personal immersion in divine nature that Fuller expressed in such work was confirmed by a contemporary journal entry remembering her earlier self-consecration, when after exiting from church she had found illumination in the sun’s glory and vowed to sow “new and immortal plants in the garden of God.”⁹ The revelations of 1840 and their expression in fictional and autobiographical form offer a direct prelude to her apparently spontaneous essay-letter of 1842.

Significantly, Fuller wrote her creedal statement as a letter rather than in published form, even though the *Dial* had already offered her the possibilities of anonymous authorship. Any statement that directly claimed kinship with divinity apart from Christ and the church was a scandal, all the more, as Caitlin Smith notes, from a woman.¹⁰ But in addition, Fuller was prompted to write “A Credo” by particular friends, both the person who initially asked about Jesus and the letter’s recipient, Channing, amidst an ongoing dialogue with him.

⁹*Letters* 2:183–84. Her *Dial* fictions are “The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain” (January 1, 1841, 299–305), “Leila” (April 1, 1841, 462–67), and “Yuca Filamentosa” (January 2, 1842, 286–88). This often-quoted journal entry appeared first in *Memoirs* 1:139–42; it is dated 1840 by Steele (*Essential Margaret Fuller*, 10).

¹⁰Smith, “Margaret Fuller,” 385–6.

Letters underlay all of the Transcendentalist movement, as texts with a life of their own. Later writing tearfully from Rome, Fuller told Caroline Sturgis of her need to continue “friendships I had paid for with so much heart’s blood,” admitting that without letters from her and from Channing, “so many thoughts in the long past seemed to flee from me.”¹¹ “A Credo” lies within that body of thought and feeling. Here I will suggest how four epistolary exchanges anticipate its voice and theological ideas: first those with James Freeman Clarke and Emerson, then those with her even more memorable partners, Sturgis and Channing.

From the early 1830s, James Freeman Clarke supported her growth in new German learning, later a strong foundation for “A Credo.” With him she waxed eloquent about Goethe and asked, of this friend trained to the ministry, about the philosophers who informed the poet. An extended history lay behind his creative output: “Tell me *exactly* [what is] meant by *Transcendental*,” and how Reinhold, Schelling, and Fichte had modified Kant. Meanwhile Fuller also reported to Clarke and Frederick Henry Hedge on her year-long immersion in Biblical studies under the guidance of German Higher Critic Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. She thought of creating fictions from its narratives, expressed deep interest in Old Testament history, and found pleasure in “creating a new world” to replace former misconceptions.¹² Both her Germanic exchanges and her Biblical immersion are directly felt in “A Credo.” Fuller’s affirmation of a universe in motion, as both Capper and Steele have commented, derives in particular from Friedrich Schelling, who had argued for the evolution of nature and humanity out of “Absolute Spirit.”¹³ Biblical references, furthermore, contribute vitally to “A Credo,” even as she, like Eichhorn, puts in doubt the literal truth of scripture.

¹¹Letters 5:41.

¹²Letters 6:281, 1: 223, 226, 229.

¹³Steele, *Transfiguring America*, 102–3, and Capper, 83; Schelling in *The Rise of Modern Mythology*, ed. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 315–27.

Fuller's alliance with Emerson was both deepened and resisted through their long correspondence. In 1840 she acknowledged the power of his great work *Nature*. Having first heard him read it aloud in manuscript, four years later she studied it from the printed page: "I was pleased to feel how much more truly I understood it now than at first. Then I caught the melody now I recognize the harmony. The years do not pass in vain." If "A Credo" was Germanic in its affirmation of nature's divinity, it was also Emersonian. Understanding did not mean agreeing fully with him, however, and especially after the "great changes" later in 1840, she resisted his coolness toward her claims of mystical influence: "All things have I given up to the central power, myself, you also." If she needed to hide her thoughts, she wrote bluntly, "then you are not the friend I seek."¹⁴ Early the same year that she composed "A Credo," in his lecture "The Transcendentalist," Emerson famously called the movement around him "Idealism as it appears in 1842." Whether or not she wrote in conscious response to him, her essay found a significantly different position by insisting on the vitality of material forms, not their opposition to the ideal. And where Emerson characterized the Transcendentalist as one who withdrew from the world, waiting for it to offer work worthy of response, Fuller saw both nature and humanity in present and unavoidable engagement. As she had previously written to Caroline Sturgis, she admired "the Realist" rather than the "mere Idealist," who seemed "never to have lived."¹⁵ She embraced mystic influence, but also activism.

Sturgis, originally Fuller's student, became a friend with whom she could share both kinds of affirmation. From the beginning Fuller's letters expressed an eclectic romanticism, expanding upon Greek and Asian mythology even while agreeing as well about the value of Jesus as a friend and "Man of Sorrows." She quoted Goethe's "Prometheus" about the hero

¹⁴*Letters* 2:128, 159–60.

¹⁵"The Transcendentalist," in *Transcendentalism*, ed. Myerson, 367, 376; *Letters* 2: 40.

turning his eye directly to the sun rather than the gods who demanded worship: "I honor Thee, Zeus!—Why?" She was a "Realist" in these letters by assuming the need for struggle and conflict, whether with Zeus or with nature, "its sounding cataract, its lava rush, its whirlwind, its rivers generating the lotus and the crocodile." Human growth would likewise progress only amid setback, she declared: "We do not soar up direct like the lark! But our advance is always in the undulating line." Fuller chose this friend as the first to hear of her "great changes" in September, 1840: "I live, I am—*The carbuncle is found* [...] And at present the mere sight of my talisman is enough. . . . There can be no 'stern holding back' but all the pure in heart must be seeing God."¹⁶ Instead of silence from Emerson, she found confirmation with Sturgis. In both their metaphysics and their expression of religious vocation, Fuller's letters to her directly anticipate the affirmations of "A Credo," where she begins by characterizing "accomplishment" as an overcoming of "obstruction" within the creative spirit and concludes by addressing the spirit's future.

Sturgis's partner in hearing Fuller's thoughts, however, was the friend who directly received "A Credo." Her correspondence with William Henry Channing grew out of *Dial* business, when Fuller solicited contributions from the young clergyman: "I want to know what part you propose to take in the grand symphony," she wrote. "At Newport you prophesied [sic] a new literature; shall it dawn on 1840 [?]" But their relationship deepened as Channing's contribution to the magazine failed after only two issues; grand visions, their letters conceded, were difficult to fulfill. Fuller lamented her own lack of genius and reluctance to publish in the *Dial*, before sharing with Channing both the composition of her fictions and the "great changes" in her life. Having first claimed her "position as a woman" as an impediment to deep thinking, she burst out in frustration after comparing her personal limitations with the follies of male peers: "I wish I were a man, and then there would be *one*. I weary in this play-ground of boys. . . . Divine Spirit, I pray thee,

¹⁶*Letters* 1:331; 2:47, 40, 34, 157–58.

grow out into our age before I leave it. I pray, I prophesy, I trust, yet I pine.”¹⁷ More was at stake for her than finding a way to authority as a woman, as she merged that question with hope for the earth’s fulfillment.

With particular urgency, her prayer to Divine Spirit anticipated the language and millennial prediction that she would soon advance more systematically in “A Credo.” With an emphasis quite different from her romantic prose to Sturgis, she grounded her own prospects and those of Channing in the present state of the Unitarian church. Having listened to a sermon that reduced the new liberalism to an exercise of reason and will, Fuller defended the evangelicals’ spirit-based beliefs instead as fuel for vision—and proposed herself to speak for it: “I would now preach the Holy Ghost as zealously as [the Unitarians] have been preaching Man, and faith instead of the understanding and mysticism instead &c.” Fuller was conditionally proposing her own religious vocation apart from any actual church or pulpit.¹⁸

The events of 1841, however, did not encourage Fuller’s search for such a vocation. Her best friends among the clergy claimed beliefs closer to the Unitarian mainstream than what she had envisioned. James Clarke signed a covenant for the new, Christ-affirming Church of the Disciples;¹⁹ thereafter he and Fuller shared mutual respect but not close confidentiality. And Channing, up to this moment (in his biographer O. B. Frothingham’s words) an “extreme unbeliever,” newly focused on the intense love of humanity manifest in Christ’s miraculous deeds. Declaring Christ “the perfect man,” he claimed a free humanistic religion that would inspire social transformation. “Yes, this is the Christian era,” he wrote to his colleague Clarke.²⁰

¹⁷*Letters* 2:111, 131, 183–84, 109; 6:330.

¹⁸*Letters* 2:172–73.

¹⁹On this founding, see John A. Buehrens, *Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 103–5.

²⁰Octavius B. Frothingham, *Memoir of William Henry Channing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 171, 172, letter to Clarke 176.

Meanwhile another preacher of Transcendentalist affiliation, Theodore Parker, emerged on the Boston scene that year to further energize the conversation about Jesus. He and Fuller had shared no probing correspondence; indeed, as Caroline Dall later commented, an “intense subtle antagonism” ran between them.²¹ Nonetheless, Fuller told Channing in April 1841 how much she admired Parker’s “grand” sermon “Idolatries,” which “wound up with the Idolatry of Jesus.” Soon Parker expanded such ideas in “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” which amounted to a theological manifesto and resulted in his exclusion from the Unitarian circuit of pulpit exchange. Paring away the institutional and scriptural authority claimed by Christian churches, Parker called merely “transient” their insistence on Jesus’ miracles as proof of his divinity. But he celebrated as “permanent” the “absolute, pure morality” of Jesus’ teachings, his simple doctrines of love and forgiveness.²² Neither Clarke nor Channing joined in the condemnation of Parker; Fuller, while certainly sharing their toleration of his views in the new chapter of controversy, also held reservations of her own.

“A Credo” might be considered Fuller’s statement of belief to Channing in light of Parker, whose “permanent” Christ had seemed at first a possible resource for change. In early June of 1842, Channing wrote to Parker supporting his proposal of an “Absolute Religion” for all humanity. At the same time, however, he favored a broader reinterpretation of Christianity, claiming Jesus as representative of the “accumulated river of life” in history. And though his postscript backed off from such enthusiasm, his letter first proposed a new “order of the Sons of God,” stepping beyond Unitarianism so as to “send forth a spark which shall awake the sleepers, if not stir the dead.” Fuller knew of this communication and soon asked Channing

²¹Quoted in Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 110.

²²*Letters* 2:206; Theodore Parker, “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in *Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, 341, 358; Grodzins, 240–46.

to “write how Mr. Parker answered to your proposition.” At the same time she challenged him as directly as he had just challenged Parker. The previous Sunday she had been surprised to hear him speak “as if the extent of the Christian triumph proved its superiority.”²³ As “A Credo” would assert, the “accumulated river of life” that she affirmed had avatars beyond Jesus, both through the ages and toward the future.

Her essay also addressed Parker both directly and indirectly. He was the one contemporary she actually named in it, responding to his argument in “Transient and Permanent” against taking figures from the Old Testament as “types” of the new. Parker had claimed that an “oriental story” like that of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son—a thought at which “the flesh creeps with horror”—epitomized the imperfection of ancient traditions.²⁴ In “A Credo,” Fuller reclaimed both Abraham and his “prefiguring” of Christ’s death, emphasizing her reverence for Jewish history. But this point arose just after she had affirmed belief in the Bible even if it was “a poem,” symbolic rather than literal. While Parker upheld the permanence of Jesus’ morality, Fuller construed his life as part of a mythic legacy. She opposed Parker’s placement of Jesus at the center of an “Absolute Religion” by naming Confucius, Moses, Brahma, Apollo, and Osiris before even considering the Christian messiah. Then finally, in seeking to be “freed” from Jesus and discover further prophets, her evolutionary argument admitted nothing as “Absolute.” Each form was material for future manifestation. At the end of “A Credo,” the sermon that she proposed to preach might have been addressed to both Channing and Parker, as she offered as its text Jesus’ farewell to his disciples. “It is expedient for you that I go away,” he assured them, so that the holy spirit could return newly.

In her journal from the Emerson house that August, Fuller wrote in effect an epilogue to “A Credo.” Walking with

²³Channing quoted in Frothingham, 173–76: *Letters* 3:67–8.

²⁴“Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in *Transcendentalism*, ed. Myerson, 349.

Emerson, rereading a summer's worth of letters from Channing, she defended herself to both friends: "I must take my own path. . . Thou, Oh Spirit, hast no regard to aught but the seeking heart. Waldo must not shake me in my worldliness, nor William in the fine motion that . . . has given me what I have of life."²⁵ Unlike Channing, she insisted, she did not need the church. "What is done here at home in my heart is my religion, . . . to see, to think, a faithful sceptic, to reject nothing but accept nothing till it is affirmed in the order of mine own nature. . . . God and the soul and nature are all my creed. . . . I have my church where I am by turns priest and lay man."²⁶ Fuller was drawing conclusions from the summer's earlier statement as it had articulated both the forms of revelation and her own role within it. In vision and dissent, "A Credo" is Fuller's most extended testimony about "God and the soul and nature," articulated by a "faithful sceptic" and self-ordained priest in response to exchanges within the Transcendentalist circle.

²⁵"Margaret Fuller's 1842 Journal: At Concord with the Emersons," ed. Joel Myerson, *Harvard Library Bulletin* 21 (1973), 323–24, 326, 329–30.

²⁶"Margaret Fuller's 1842 Journal," 336.

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A Credo²⁷

Margaret Fuller

There is a spirit uncontainable and uncontained.—Within it all manifestation is contained, whether of good (accomplishment) or evil (obstruction)[.] To itself its depths are unknown. By living it seeks to know itself. Thus evolving plants, animals, men, suns, stars, angels, and, it is to be presumed an infinity of forms not yet visible in the horizon of this being who now writes.

Its modes of operation are twofold. First as genius inspires genius,—love love,—angel mother brings forth angel-child. This is the uninterrupted generation or publication of spirit taking upon itself congenial forms.

—Second

Conquering obstruction, finding the like in the unlike. This is a secondary generation, a new dynasty, as virtue for simplicity, faith for oneness, charity for pure love.

Then begins the genesis of Man, as through his consciousness he attests [2] the laws which regulated the divine genesis. The Father is justified in the Son.

The mind of man asks “why was this second development?—Why seeks the divine to exchange best for better, bliss for hope, domesticity for knowledge?” We reject the plan in the universe which the Spirit permitted as the condition of conscious life.

We reject it in the childhood of the soul’s life.—The cry of infancy is why should we seek God when he is always there, why seek what is ours as soul’s through indefinite pilgrimages, and burdensome cultures.

²⁷Margaret Fuller Papers, 1837–1884, Boston Public Library, Ms. Am. 1450 (97). The present text follows Fuller’s manuscript literally, including her characteristic punctuation, indentation, and occasional misspellings. But Fuller’s end-punctuation is often the same for commas and periods, so where followed by a capital letter and a complete sentence, the mark is construed as a period. The manuscript of “A Credo” includes corrections in other hands which are disregarded, except for page numbers within the text, which are retained for clarity. Brackets fill in words or letters omitted only if needed for coherence.

The intellect has no answer to this question, yet as we through faith and purity of deed enter into the nature of the Divine it is answered from our own experience. We understand though we cannot explain the mystery of something gained where all already is.

[3] God we say is Love, if we believe this we must trust him.²⁸ Whatever has been permitted by the law of being must be *for* good and only *in time not good*. We do trust him and are led forward by experience. Sight gives experience of outward life, faith of inward. We then discover however faintly the necessary harmony of the two lives. The moment we have broken through an obstruction, not accidentally but by the aid of Faith we begin to realize why any was permitted. We begin to interpret the Universe and deeper depths are opened with each soul that is convinced. For it would seem that the Divine expressed his meaning to himself more distinctly in man than in the other forms of our sphere, and through him uttered distinctly the Hallelujah which his other forms of nature only intimate.

Wherever man remains imbedded in nature, whether from sensuality [4] or because he is not yet awakened to consciousness, the purpose of the whole remains unfulfilled, hence our displeasure when man is not, in a sense, *above* nature. Yet when he is not so closely bound with all other manifestations, as duly to express their spirit, we are also displeased. He must be at once the highest form of nature and conscious of the meaning she has been striving successively to unfold through those below him.

Centuries pass,—whole races of men are expended in the effort to produce one that shall realize this idea and publish spirit in the human form. But here and there there is a degree of success. Life enough is lived through a man to justify the great difficulties and obstruction attendant on the existence of mankind.

²⁸I John 4:16 (King James Bible, here and in all subsequent scriptural references.)

Then through all the realms of thought [5] vibrates the affirmation "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased" and many souls encouraged and instructed offer themselves to the baptism, whether of water, whether of fire.²⁹

I do not mean to lay an undue stress upon the position and office of man, merely because I am of his race, and understand best the scope of his destiny. The history of the earth, the motions of the heavenly bodies suggest already modes of being higher than his, and which fulfil more deeply this office of interpretation. But I do suppose his life to be the rivet in one series of links in the great chain, and that all these higher existences are analogous to his. Music suggests them, and when carried on these strong wings through realms which on the ground we discern but dimly, we foresee how the next step in the soul's upward course shall interpret man to the universe as he now [6] interprets these forms beneath himself. For there is ever evolving a consciousness of consciousness, and a soul of the soul. To know is to bring to light somewhat yet to be known. And as we elucidate the previous workings of spirit, we ourselves become a new material for its development.

Man is himself one tree in the garden of the spirit. From his trunk grow many branches, social contracts, art literature, religion &c. The trunk gives the history of the human race, it has grown up higher into the heavens, but its several acorns, though each expressed the all, did not ripen beyond certain contours and a certain size.

In the history of matter, however, laws have been more and more clearly discerned, and so in the history of spirit. Many features of the God Man have put forth, several limbs disengaged themselves. One is what men call revelation, different from other kinds only in being made through the acts and words [7] of men.

²⁹The divine affirmation of Jesus after his baptism (Matthew 3:17). Beforehand, John the Baptist declares that Jesus will follow him by baptizing "with the Holy Ghost, and with fire" (Matthew 3:11).

Its law is identical whether displaying itself as genius or piety, but its modes of expression are distinct dialects though of similar structure.

The way it is done is this. As the oak desires to plant its acorns, so do souls to become the father of souls. Some do this through the body, others through the intellect. The first class are citizens;—the second artists, philosophers, law givers, poets, saints.—All these are Anointed, all Emmanuel, all Messiah, so far as they are true to the law of their incorruptible existence, brutes and devils so far as they are subjected to that of their corruptible existence.

But yet further, as wherever there is a tendency, a form is gradually evolved as its type, as the rose represents the flower-world and is its queen, as the lion and eagle compress within themselves the noblest that is expressed in the animal kingdom, as the [8] telescope and microscope express the high and searching desires of man, and the organ and orrery his completeness, so has each tribe of thoughts and lives its law upon it to produce a king, a form which shall stand before it a visible representation of the aim of its striving. It gave laws with Confucius and Moses, it tried them with Brahma, it lived its life of eloquence in the Apollo, it wandered with Osiris. It lived one life as Plato, another as Michel Angelo or Luther. It has made gods, it has developed men. Seeking, making[,] it produced ideals of the developments of which humanity is capable, and one of the highest, nay in some respects [9] the very highest it has yet known was the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

I suppose few are so much believer in his history as myself. I believe, (*in my own way*) in the long preparation of ages and the truth of prophecy. I see a necessity in the character of Jesus why Abraham should be the founder of his nation, Moses its lawgiver, and David its king and poet. I believe in the genesis, as given in the Old Testament. I believe in the prophets, and that they foreknew not only what their nation required, but what the development of universal man required, a Redeemer, an atoner, one to make voluntarily at the due crisis the sacrifice Abraham would have made of the child of his old age, a lamb

of God taking away the sins of the world.³⁰ I believe that Jesus came when the time was ripe, that he was peculiarly a messenger and son of God. I have nothing to say in denial [10] [of] the story of his birth, whatever the true circumstances were *in time* he was born of a virgin, and the tale expresses a truth of the soul. I have no objection to the miracles, except where they do not happen to please me, why should not a soul so consecrate and intent develop new laws, and make matter plastic. I can imagine him walking the waves and raising the dead without any violation of my usual habits of thought. He could not remain in the tomb, they say, surely not, death is impossible to such a being. He remained upon earth and all who have met him since *on the way* have felt their souls burn within them. He ascended to Heaven, surely, it could not be otherwise.³¹

But when I say to you, also, that though I think all this really happened, it is of no consequence to me whether it did or not, that the ideal truth such illus[11]trations present to me, is enough, and that if the mind of St John, for instance, had conceived the whole and offered it to us as a poem, to me, as far as I know, it would be just as real, you see how wide the gulf that separates me from the Christian church.³²

Yet you also see that I believe in the history of the Jewish nation and its denouement in Christ, as presenting one great type of spiritual existence. It is very dear to me and occupies a large portion of my thoughts. I have no trouble. So far from the sacrifice required of Abraham, for instance, striking me as it does Mr Parker I accept it as prefiguring a thought to be fully expressed by the death of Christ, (yet forget not that they who passed their children through the fire to Moloch were pious

³⁰Genesis 22:1–2 (Abraham), John 1:29 (lamb of God).

³¹The central miracles that Fuller lists are narrated in variant forms throughout the Gospels, e.g. Matthew 14:25–27 (walking the waves), John 11:38–44 (raising the dead), Mark 16:4–6 (rising from the tomb), Luke 24:28–32 (disciples met him, souls burned), John 20:17 and Luke 24:51 (ascended).

³²Author of the fourth gospel, to which Fuller is especially attuned both in its sense of a divine creative Word incarnated in Jesus (John 1:14) and in Jesus' departure so as to prepare for the coming of a "Comforter" or Holy Spirit (16:7).

also, and not more superstitious than an *exclusive* devotion to Christ has made many of his followers.)³³

[12] “Do you not place Christ then in a higher place than Socrates, for instance or Michel Angelo?”

Yes! because if his life was not truer, it was deeper, and he is a representative of the ages. But then I consider the Greek Apollo as one also!

[“]Have men erred in following Christ as a leader.[”]

Perhaps rarely. So great a soul must make its mark for many centuries. Yet only when men are freed from him, and interpret him by the freedom of their own souls, open to visits of the Great Spirit from every side can he be known as he is.

“With your view do you not think he placed undue emphasis on his own position”?

In expression he did so, but this is not in my way either. I should [13] like to treat of this separately in another letter.

Where he was human, not humanly-divine, and where men so received him, there was failure, and is mist and sect,—but never where he brought them to the Father.

But they knew not what they did with him then, and do not now.

For myself I believe in Christ because I can do without him; because the truth he announces I see elsewhere intimated; because it is foreshadowed in the very nature of my own being. But I do not wish to do without him. He is constantly aiding and answering me. Only I will not lay any undue and exclusive emphasis on him. When he comes to me I will receive him; when I feel inclined to go by myself, I will. I do not reject the church either:—let men who can with sincerity [14] live in it. I could not—for I believe far more widely than any body of men

³³Parker, “A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in *Transcendentalism*, ed. Myerson, 349. The story of Abraham and Isaac is told in Genesis 22; the sacrifice of children to Moloch is forbidden in Leviticus 18:21.

I know. And as nowhere I worship less than in the places set apart for that purpose,—I will not seem to do so. The blue sky seen above the opposite roof preaches better than my brother, because, at present, a freer, simpler medium of religion. When great souls arise again that dare to be entirely free, yet are humble gentle and patient, I will listen, if they wish to speak. But that time is not nigh;—these I see around me, here & in Europe, are mostly weak and young.

Would I could myself say with some depth what I feel as to religion in my very soul. It would be a clear note of calm security. But for the present I think you will see how it is with me as to Christ. I [15] am grateful here, as every where, where spirit bears fruit in fulness. It attests the justice of my desires; it kindles my faith; it rebukes my sloth; it enlightens my resolve. But so does the Apollo, and a beautiful infant, and the summer's earliest rose. It is only one modification of the same harmony. Jesus breaks through the soil of the world's life, like some great river through the else inaccessible plains & valleys. I bless its course. I follow it. But it is a part of the All. There is nothing peculiar about it, but its form.

I will not loathe sects, persuasions, systems, though I cannot abide in them one moment. I see most men are still in need of them. To them their banners, their tents; let them be Platonists, Fire worshippers, Christians; let them live in the shadow of past revelations. But I, oh Father of our Souls—*The One*—seek thee. I seek thee in these [16] forms; and in proportion as they reveal thee more, they lead me beyond themselves. I would learn from them all, looking to thee. I set no limits from the past to my own soul or any soul. Countless ages may not produce another worthy to loose the shoes of Jesus of Nazareth; yet there will surely come another manifestation of that Word, that was in the beginning.³⁴ For it is not dead, but sleepeth; and if it lives, must declare itself.³⁵

³⁴Words of John the Baptist in prophesying Jesus, Mark 1:7; John 1:1.

³⁵Matthew 9:24.

All future manifestations will come, like this,—not to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfil.³⁶ But as an Abraham called for a Moses, & a Moses for a David, so does Christ for another ideal. [2 ½ lines heavily cancelled, illegible] We want a life more complete and various than that of Christ, we have had the Messiah to teach and reconcile; let us have a Man to live out all the symbolical forms of human life with the calm beauty and physical fulness of a Greek God, with the deep consciousness of a Moses, with the holy love & purity of Jesus.

Amen.

[18] Addenda.

I have not shown with any distinctness how the very greatness of the manifestation in Jesus calls for a greater. But this as the extreme emphasis given by himself to his office, should be treated of separately in a letter or essay on the process of Genius in declaring itself.

I have not shown my deep feeling of his life as a genuine growth, so that his words are all living & they come exactly to memory with all the tone and gesture of the moment, true runes of a divine oracle. It is the same with Shakspeare, and in a less degree with Dante.

I have not spoken of men clinging to him, from the same weakness that makes them so dependent on a priesthood, or make idols of the objects of affection. In him hearts seek *the* Friend. Minds *the* Guide. But this is weakness in religion, [19] as elsewhere. No prop will do

“The Soul must do its own immortal work.”³⁷

and books, lovers, friends, mediators fly from us only to return, when we can do without them. But when we can use and learn from them, yet feel able to do without them they will depart

³⁶Jesus' words about himself, Matthew 5:17.

³⁷Eliza Thayer Clapp, “Two Hymns,” *Dial* 2, 1 (July 1841): 42. For identification of the author, see Myerson, *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial*, 125–26, 293, 304; for the career of Clapp, see Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 189–93.

no more. If I were to preach on this subject I would take for a text the words of Jesus, “*Nevertheless* I tell you the truth—It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”³⁸

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³⁸John 16:7.

³⁹Dating in Fuller’s hand, vertical at foot of page. A second date in another hand, “Summer of 1842,” is inserted just below the text.