

Article

'Partakers of the Divine Nature': Ripley's *Discourses* and the Transcendental *Annus Mirabilis*

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Abstract: In declaring 1836 the “*Annus Mirabilis*” of Transcendentalism, Perry Miller captured the emerging vitality of a new religious movement, described by Convers Francis as “the spiritual philosophy.” Francis first listed George Ripley’s *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion* (1836) as a sign of the new movement. Ripley’s book, strongly influenced by William Ellery Channing’s sermon “Likeness to God” (1828), captured the metamorphosis of Transcendentalism from its Unitarian theological roots, and sheds light on the Transcendentalists’ theory of religious experience. Ripley presented Transcendentalism as the purist form of Christian theology. This new religious awareness enabled a realization of the divine “inner nature,” and described a religious life dedicated to the practice of spiritual self-cultivation. This new awareness brought with it “universal love,” and a vision of what it meant to partake of divinity.

Keywords: Transcendentalism; Unitarianism; spiritualism; self-culture; soul; Christian theology; George Ripley; William Ellery Channing; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Perry Miller; F. O. Matthiessen

1. Perry Miller and the *Annus Mirabilis*

In declaring 1836 the “*Annus Mirabilis*” of Transcendentalism, Perry Miller captured the emerging vitality of a new religious movement, yet to be named, but described by Convers Francis as “the spiritual philosophy” (Miller 1950, p. 106). Francis, a prominent Unitarian minister and a participant in the movement, had recognized the significance of the nearly simultaneous publication of several significant theological works that year. He first mentioned George Ripley’s *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion*, and continued to list books by Orestes Brownson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and William Henry Furness, each of which he took as a sign of the emerging new views. Ripley had been a particularly notable advocate for the spiritual philosophy that year, publishing two significant essays in addition to the *Discourses*. As Francis went on to predict, in part of the statement not quoted by Miller, the spiritual philosophers “have the most of truth; but it will take them some time to ripen, and meanwhile they will be laughed at, perhaps for things that will appear visionary and crude. But the great cause of spiritual truth will gain far more by them than by the others” (Weiss 1863, pp. 28–29). Curiously, Francis did not mention Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature* (Emerson [1836] 1971), a work that eventually became the signature book of the Transcendentalist emergence. Miller understood the importance of *Nature*, and apologized for the spatial limits that prevented him from including it in his *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, a work of enduring importance in American literary and religious history. As Miller explained, Emerson’s *Nature* “gathered up and organized the various theses” of the spiritual philosophy (Miller 1950, p. 107).

Ripley has remained a prominent figure in the historiography of Transcendentalism for his spirited theological sparring with Andrews Norton and his central role in the founding of Brook

Farm. His *Discourses*, however, has been overlooked.¹ Ripley's book captures the metamorphosis of Transcendentalism from its Unitarian theological roots, and sheds light on the Transcendentalists' theory of the roots of religious experience. "The Transcendental movement is most accurately to be defined as a religious demonstration," Miller insisted (Miller 1950, p. 8). While Emerson transcribed the tenets of the movement into a stylistically innovative form of philosophical poetry, Ripley presented Transcendentalism as the purist form of Christian theology. His *Discourses* support Miller's "religious demonstration" thesis, and in so doing take on wider significance within the context of mid-century American literary and cultural history, a field dominated by Miller and his Harvard colleague and adversary, F. O. Matthiessen. As Kenneth S. Lynn has written, Miller had admired the "literary sensitivity" of Matthiessen's masterly *American Renaissance* (Matthiessen 1941), but had also "deplored its lack of historical consciousness." He vowed to Matthiessen "to write a proper book about the age of Emerson and Whitman" (Lynn 1983, p. 221).

Miller's anthology, published the year of Matthiessen's death, was to become his only response, and Miller recognized its limitations. He had attempted "to construct a *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out." Bowing to the anthology's spatial limitations meant that "I have sacrificed Emerson and Thoreau to make room for Brownson and Ripley" (Miller 1950, p. 4). We can now see that Miller had made the right decision. Bringing to light the lesser known but revealing texts of the theological and politically inclined Transcendentalists has been far more valuable for students and scholars than reprinting the widely accessible works of Emerson and Thoreau. These lesser-known texts by writers often referred to as "minor Transcendentalists" do support Miller's religious view of Transcendentalism. The anthology also allowed Miller to situate the movement as an errant child of its Puritan ancestors. Such a connection was difficult to argue because Transcendentalism was, theologically speaking, the absolute disavowal of Puritan Calvinism. Miller, however, offered the spiritual philosophy to his readers, as "a protest of the human spirit against emotional starvation" (Miller 1950, p. 8), portraying a dry rationalist conformity of the Boston Unitarian as the adversary the Transcendentalists confronted.

This conflict had importance not only in the 1830s but also in the 1950s, Miller argued. The Transcendentalists were "caught up in a crisis of the spirit and of the nation, a crisis that carries immense implications for the American predicament not only in their time but also in ours" (Miller 1950, p. 7). Their movement was "nothing less than the first of a succession of revolts by the youth of America against American Philistinism" (Miller 1950, p. 8). Miller could endorse Transcendentalism as a form of cultural resistance to a conformist and spiritually deadened society, but as his anthology shows, he could not endorse the Transcendentalists as social visionaries or political leaders. He emphasized Ripley's courageous frankness in confronting the miracles question directly during the religious controversy among the Unitarians, but could only shake his head at the politicized Ripley of Brook Farm. "Nobody knows what went on in Ripley's mind as he consented, by January 18, 1844, to change Brook Farm from a Transcendentalist picnic into a regimented Phalanx," Miller scoffed. It was, he believed, "a line of Transcendentalist thinking" that led to "a socialistic and totalitarian conclusion" (Miller 1950, p. 469).

In considering the mid-century context of Miller's anthology, it becomes clear that the tone of his "*Annus Mirabilis*" chapter title was not wholly celebratory. He did commend the rebellious attitude of Emerson, Ripley, Parker and others, especially since they directed their critique at the settled Unitarians that he loathed. He valued Ripley for confronting Andrews Norton in his 1836 essay "Martineau's Rationale" (Ripley 1836b), seeing this essay as a confirmation that the Unitarians could not consistently assert human capability over Calvinist depravity if they continued to insist on the importance of the New Testament miracles. However, when it came to Ripley's detailed theological case for human

¹ For the most comprehensive assessment of scholarship on Ripley through 1981, see Crowe 1984. For studies of Ripley's role in the miracles controversy, see (Crowe 1967, pp. 97–123; Silver 2004; Gura 2007, pp. 79–84; Hurth 2007, pp. 31–51; Packer 2007, pp. 52–55). For studies of Ripley and Brook Farm, see (Delano 2004; Francis 2007; Gura 2017, pp. 19–56).

spiritual potential in the *Discourses*, Miller seemed indifferent, overlooking a more ambitious and expressive work than he realized.

2. The “Spiritual Philosophy”

Miller’s sense of the Biblical miracles as the central issue in the Transcendentalist controversy is the key structuring concept of much of his anthology. To reject the miracles was to reject Christianity itself, as Andrews Norton and other moderate Unitarians believed, so the doctrine stood as the boundary between faith and skepticism, tradition and modernity, Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Ripley’s *Discourses* take the spiritual philosophy deeper, presenting it as the fulfillment of the Christian gospel. He began the *Discourses* some two years before the Martineau essay as sermons for his Purchase Street Church, and retained their sermon form in his published volume. His subtitle, “Addressed to Doubters Who Wish to Believe,” indicated Ripley’s desire to present himself as a proponent of the faith rather than its rebellious critic. Ripley declared his belief in “the reality of the Christian miracles” early in the book, and then laid out six tightly interwoven sermons that are the basis of “an intelligent and vigorous faith” (Ripley 1836a, p. iv). His opening made it clear that he had not argued against the truth of the miracles in his controversy with Norton, but had rejected the idea that the miracles guaranteed the authenticity of Jesus as the son of God. Faith arose intuitively from the inner spiritual consciousness of the individual. The *Discourses* were intended to explain those sources, and in so doing to establish something akin to a systematic theology of Transcendentalism.

While Ripley does not address the controversy over the miracles directly, he does focus on the philosophical question underlying it, the nature of perception itself. Perception, Ripley argues, is not restricted to what we ordinarily call “the senses.” Human perception extends beyond the sensuous, and the human capacity to recognize the unseen or unheard enables religious belief itself. “There is nothing which so strongly marks the believer in religious truth,” he maintained, “than his strong conviction of the reality of a vast range of subjects, which do not come under the cognizance of any of the senses” (Ripley 1836a, p. 9). Citing *Hebrews* 11:27, “For he endured, as seeing him who is invisible,” Ripley described “an invisible God” (Ripley 1836a, p. 13) as a given fact in Christianity. This claim undermined the idea that Christian belief rested on historically reliable ocular witnesses to the miracles of Jesus. Whether Ripley knew, when he published his *Discourses* in 1836, that Norton would bring out the first volume his magnum opus, *The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* (Norton 1837–1844), the next year is hard to determine. Certainly though, Ripley had refuted Norton’s thesis before it went to press.

Ripley described the “truly religious” individual as one with “a firm conviction of the reality of a vast range of subjects, which do not come under the cognizance of any of the senses.” He pointed instead to the awareness of “an inward nature, which is the source of more important and comprehensive ideas, than any which the external sense suggest” (Ripley 1836a, p. 9). The inner, or intuitive, awareness of divinity was the core of the “spiritual philosophy.” Ripley presented it not as a departure from the Christian faith, but the way to deeper understanding of that faith. This inner awareness was connected with the “invisible God,” the same “Mighty Being, upon whom [the Christian] depends and whom he worships.” This God is “infinite, and of course, incomprehensible. He, who sees all things, is himself unseen” (Ripley 1836a, p. 13). To say that God is unseen is not to say that God is remote or incomprehensible. God is known, instead, by means of perception other than material sensation. Ripley proposed a proposition that, while not provable empirically, is still commonsensical—God is present, but can be known only through a distinctive way of perceiving. His existence is of a spiritual nature, and of course, not perceptible to the eye of sense (Ripley 1836a, p. 13). Ripley’s reliance on well-established and broadly accepted notions of a God who is with us, but incomprehensible in a physical sense, established a clearer and more familiar intellectual path toward his eventual representation of an inward God. “The very idea of God, as that of a Primeval Spirit—from whom all things proceed,” Ripley explained, precluded “the supposition,

that he can be seen by the outward eye" (Ripley 1836a, p. 13). This observation opened the concept of perception itself to closer consideration.

The term "soul" was a well-established term in the Christian vocabulary, and Ripley seized on it as a vehicle to consider spiritual experience. Ripley used it to represent the human ability to see the unseeable: "Though the eye cannot see God, the soul perceives him" (Ripley 1836a, p. 14). The "Invisible God" is thus made available to men and women as "that vital and unseen Intelligence, which animates our bodies, manifests itself in our actions, and constitutes our true and proper self" (Ripley 1836a, p. 26). Using the "soul," he can speak of the spiritual in familiar rather than abstract or exotic terms. Emerson too made effective use of the term, memorably declaring his faith in a religion of the soul in the Divinity School Address. Advising the aspiring ministers on how to respond to "the evils of the church, he declared that "the remedy to their deformity is, first soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul" (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 92). He continued to preach a religion of the soul in the aftermath of the Address, in part to distance himself from a Christocentric or Theistic language.² Emerson also devoted an essay to the "The Over-Soul," using a clever neology to express the simultaneously private and shared character of the soul. He praised "that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission" (Emerson [1841] 1980, p. 160).

Ripley elaborated the soul's ability to perceive God through the concept of "Reason," the Coleridgean phrase that became central to Transcendentalist thinking. A religious individual could hold "as firm faith in those ideas, which are made known to him by his Reason, as in those facts, which are presented to his notice by the senses" (Ripley 1836a, p. 11). Ripley explained the word "not as the power of reasoning, of evolving derivative truth from admitted premises; but in its highest philosophical sense, as the faculty or perceiving primitive, spiritual truth" (Ripley 1836a, p. 11).³ These were the things known by the soul rather than the physical senses, and he linked them closely to "the Conscience" (Ripley 1836a, p. 17). Reason was not, as Ripley explained it, a form of perception that was experienced as something foreign or strange. "The Christian is conversant with the invisible powers of his own nature," he wrote. "He is in a state of constant communication with feelings and faculties, that he has never seen. He takes counsel of Reason. He inquires at the oracles of Conscience. He communes with his own heart. He is conscious that he is the possessor of a living soul—of a soul which is to live for ever" (Ripley 1836a, p. 17).

By connecting Reason with the soul Ripley established a new dimension of perception or mental capacity. He took religious perception within the self and stressed the differences between the validations of Reason and those of material sensations such as vision or touch. Both forms of perception, he argued, can be the basis of certainty. The Christian "has no more doubt of the existence of his soul, than he has of the existence of his senses. He believes in his Reason as much, nay more, than he does in his eyes" (Ripley 1836a, p. 17). Men and women have this feeling of security in the non-material, or the transcendent, because the soul is an element of human identity and existence, just as the senses and the physical body are. The soul is "the inward nature of man," and though it "cannot be exhibited for inspection," it shares its invisibility with God. The soul, Ripley wrote, "is as invisible as the Creator himself" (Ripley 1836a, p. 17). Ripley's remarkable argument thus confirmed the certainty of the soul through the presumed certainty of God.

² See (Robinson 1989).

³ Coleridge's use of "Reason" as the higher, more spiritual form of perception that the "Understanding," provided Ripley, Emerson and others with the terminology to describe a trans-material or trans-empirical form of cognition. For a perceptive recent discussion, see (Greenham 2012, pp. 35–54).

3. Partaking of Divinity

The message of Christianity, as Ripley presented it, was to enable the process of realizing and developing the “inner nature” of men and women. In the third and fourth of his *Discourses*, he provided a “brief but comprehensive description of the purpose and the effects of the Christian religion,” emphasizing a religious life dedicated to the practice of spiritual self-cultivation. Ripley cited 2 Peter I: 4, a verse in which Peter spoke of the “exceeding great and precious promises,” that “ye might be partakers of the divine nature” (Ripley 1836a, p. 30). Peter’s Christianity was not “a system of abstract speculative doctrines,” but an approach “designed to take hold of the deepest and strongest principles of human nature, and to bend them all to the practice of goodness and the service of God” (Ripley 1836a, p. 31). That human nature had to be bent suggested that it was imperfect; that it could be bent suggested that it was capable of improvement. Ripley concurred with Peter that the theological doctrines of Christianity were far less significant than “its profound practical bearings,” which were capable of producing “the most magnificent changes in the heart of man and the fortunes of the world” (Ripley 1836a, p. 31).

The effort to sustain the “practice of goodness” was the same discipline that unlocked the inner life, and served as the bond between human nature and God. “Without the slightest approach to enthusiasm or extravagance in his language, [Peter] speaks with great clearness of the destiny of Christians to become partakers of the Divine Nature” (Ripley 1836a, p. 32). The word “partakers” enlivened Ripley’s exposition of a Transcendentalist theory of human potential. To partake of divinity suggested that each individual might be a part of, but not an exclusive possessor, of God. In ecclesiastical parlance, the act of partaking in the Lord’s Supper represented active participation with other congregants in the beliefs and works of the church. Similarly, partaking of divinity was, for Ripley, an active, ongoing, and social endeavor, not simply a state of being.

Ripley’s description of the shared nature of humanity and God was a clear repudiation of the Calvinist doctrines of innate depravity of humanity, and perhaps the strongest affirmation of the faith in human divinity within the literature of the Transcendentalist movement.⁴ To deny the divine potential of the human soul, Ripley believed, was essentially to deny the message of Christianity itself. To partake of divinity was in fact the form that salvation took in Ripley’s theology, an experience that was not a single event but a series of continuing moments of spiritual growth. Christianity was in this sense the realization of the God-like elements that constitute “the inward nature of man.” This realization did not occur instantaneously, nor was it ever completely achieved. Like his predecessor Channing and his contemporary Emerson, Ripley understood the divinity in humans as a potential spiritual energy. The Christian “has obtained too deep and correct an insight into his own nature, to admit the idea for a moment, that the ‘Be-all and end-all’ of man is with the present state” (Ripley 1836a, p. 18). To understand one’s “inner nature” is not to claim an all-knowing and all-powerful self, but to recognize the inexhaustible opportunities for positive development of the soul. A truly religious person does not focus on the power that she possesses, but “is conscious of undeveloped powers, which demand an Eternity for their expansion” (Ripley 1836a, p. 18). Christianity, for Ripley, is less a state of being than a process of becoming.

Ripley’s emphasis on the development of “the inward nature of man” (Ripley 1836a, p. 17) was not, as it might first seem, exclusively individualistic. The continuing path of spiritual experience was communal because of the love of all others engendered by the “higher nature of man” (Ripley 1836a, p. 63). As the higher nature grows, “the Christian regards his fellow men in a light adapted to call forth his love. They are children of the same Infinite Father with himself. However

⁴ Ripley’s strong affirmation of the divinity in human nature in the *Discourses* preceded Emerson’s similar affirmations in his controversial Divinity School Address of 1838. It has been overlooked in part because of the Harvard venue of Emerson’s address and the controversy that followed. Notable also is the fact that Ripley, who avoided direct criticism of the Unitarian movement in the *Discourses*, did not attack on the Unitarian preaching of the era, as Emerson did.

depraved their condition, they are of celestial origin. They are all formed in the Image of the Infinite and Eternal" (Ripley 1836a, p. 46). Nurtured by the growth of the soul, the higher nature understands more clearly the holiness of all souls. Ripley saw the love between God and his son Jesus as the primal example of this love of the soul for other kindred souls. "Did not the same Being who wrote the law of duty on the heart of man, inspire his Son, who set it forth with such clearness and force?" he asked (Ripley 1836a, p. 63). The law of duty reveals and empowers the collective love of others, and the readiness to protect and assist them—to do for others, as we would have them do for us. "Christianity coincides with the higher nature of man," Ripley explained, "inasmuch as they both inculcate the exercise of universal love" (Ripley 1836a, p. 63). The emphasis that Ripley placed on "universal love" is fundamental to his vision of what it meant to partake of divinity. This principle ultimately led him to the great experiment in communal living, Brook Farm, for which he is now best remembered.⁵ His *Discourses* offer a clear statement of the vision that guided him:

Our higher nature tells us to love and live in peace with all men. It strengthens the bonds of love, which unite men together, as a company of brethren. It inculcates the duty of reverence towards our fellow-beings, as children of God. It tends to break down the barriers of birth and of fortune, of differences of opinion and varieties of condition, which divide the heart of man, and to combine the scattered members of our race, in the great brotherhood of humanity. This is a consummation for which the noblest minds have devoutly longed in every age. (Ripley 1836a, p. 63)

In 1836, the Transcendentalists were engaged in articulating a "spiritual philosophy," without much deep or direct thinking about the political implications of those ideas, except perhaps in the internal politics of the Unitarian churches. It is striking to consider that some four years after publishing *Discourses*, a patently theological work, Ripley was working out the plans for Brook Farm.

4. Likeness to God and Partaking of Divinity

The doctrine of religion as a process of becoming might have suggested to some of Ripley's readers William Ellery Channing's sermon "Likeness to God," published some eight years before Ripley's *Discourses*. This work clearly influenced Ripley's vision of Christianity. "He had no equal among all the men whom I have known," Fredric Henry Hedge said of Channing. "The characteristic thing in Channing," he explained, was "Spirituality: living in the contemplation and pursuit of the highest; the habit of viewing all things in reference to the supreme good" (Hedge 1867, p. 27). Ripley "called himself a child of Channing" (Frothingham 1882, p. 51) and Perry Miller described him as "the most brilliant student in the post-Channing generation" (Miller 1950, p. 129). Channing preached a theology of aspiration that characterized "true religion" as the resolution of "proposing, as our great end, a growing likeness to the Supreme Being" (Channing [1828] 1985, p. 146). Religious experience, in this sense, was a willed decision to undertake a holy or Godly path in life. In avowing that the religious life begins with the "proposing" of an end, Channing emphasized both the human capability, and its concomitant responsibility, in the building of a spiritual life. In aspiring to divine likeness, individuals did not aspire to something beyond themselves, or foreign to themselves. A "likeness to God," Channing asserted, "has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of the mind" (Channing [1828] 1985, p. 146). We aspire to a quality that is essentially part of ourselves. Channing's conception of human nature closely resembles the one we find in Ripley's *Discourses* but "Likeness to God" carries the implication that God is a being with personality, with traits that can serve as models of human thinking and behavior. Religion is not, Channing wrote, "adoration of a God with whom we have no common properties (Channing [1828] 1985, p. 155). In its emotional impact, this God differs from the "Invisible God" of Ripley's *Discourses* (Ripley 1836a, p. 13). This difference between

⁵ See (Delano 2004; Francis 2007; Crowe 1984, pp. 124–88).

Channing and Ripley, as close as their thinking is in so many ways, illustrates a distance that was gradually opening between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism in the middle 1830s.⁶

Ripley also took one other relatively *avant-garde* position in the *Discourses* that might well have given Channing pause. We have seen how carefully Ripley has used Biblical citation to assure his theological contentions. In the fifth of his *Discourses* however, he warned decidedly against the over-dependence of scriptural authority, cautioning against “the primary mistake of confounding Christianity with the whole of the contents of the Bible.” While agreeing that “the Bible contains a complete record of Christianity,” Ripley also asserted frankly that “it also contains much additional matter” (Ripley 1836a, p. 55). Channing had made the liberal position on Bible clear in his influential 1819 address on “Unitarian Christianity,” the originating document for New England Unitarianism. “We [Unitarians] regard the Scriptures as the records of God’s successive revelations to mankind,” he explained, but we do not “attach equal importance to all the books in this collection.” Most important, Channing argued, was the use of reason in biblical interpretation. “Our leading principle interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books” (Channing [1819] 1985, pp. 71–72). Channing’s declaration of Unitarian freedom from an unquestioning belief in the literal truth of scriptures seems mild, however, when we hear Ripley condemn “the primary mistake of confounding Christianity with the whole contents of the Bible” (Ripley 1836a, pp. 54–55). As Ripley explained, “The Bible is not one book, but a collection of books,” many of which “are important, interesting, and of great price, but they are not Christianity” (Ripley 1836a, p. 55). Ripley’s insistence that religion must not be confined to Biblicism characterized the attitudes of most of the Transcendentalists. A generation after Channing in their theological training, they were deeply molded by the reconception of the scriptures as a widely varying collection of historical texts.

Except for the differing ways that Channing and Ripley handled the question of Biblical authority, they shared similar views of religious development. In explaining that the likeness of God arises from “the original and essential capacities of the mind,” Channing suggested an epistemological dimension in religious experience, in which the mind is drawn innately to those things that reflect its character and wishes. “God unfolds himself in his works to a kindred mind,” Channing explained. The self knows its likeness. Human knowledge of God is, in this sense, mirrored to men and women through “a principle of sympathy or accordance with his creation; for this creation is a birth and shining forth of the Divine Mind, a work through which his spirit breathes” (Channing [1828] 1985, p. 148). Channing had the Calvinists and conservative Unitarians in mind as he constructed this early version of the intuitive knowledge central to Transcendentalist theology. “In proportion as we receive this spirit, we possess *within ourselves* [italics mine] the explanation of what we see. We discern more and more of God in every thing, from the frail flower to the everlasting stars” (Channing [1828] 1985, p. 148). The sympathy or affinity that enables us to see divinity in the flowers and stars is the same force that makes spiritual growth—the sustained quest for likeness to God—possible. In one of the sermon’s more striking passages, Channing characterized the quest as a continual reaching inward to claim our innate potential more completely. Asking “how we obtain our ideas of God,” he responded, using terminology that Ripley would later employ, that “we derive them from our own souls. The divine attributes are first developed in ourselves, and thence transferred to our Creator.” We are, in this sense, the creators of our “Creator” when we realize our innate spirituality. “The idea of God, sublime and awful as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity” (Channing [1828] 1985, p. 150).

Channing intended his language to be inspirational and empowering to his readers. Visionary as it seems, it was also a speech of arousal and action, with an important element of pragmatism at its core. “We call God a Mind,” he said, and “he has revealed himself as a Spirit.” His distinction between “Mind” and “Spirit” indicated that “Spirit” was the incarnate form of God, humanly expressed through

⁶ Henry Ware, Jr., who preceded Emerson as minister at the Second Church in Boston, took Emerson to task for the implication in his Divinity School Address that God had no “personality.” See (Robinson 1989).

positive moral action. In a theme that was echoed by Ripley, Channing described “likeness” to God as a dynamic undertaking, in which the soul revealed itself as an energy or vitality always attuned to moral encounter and moral decision. “That unbounded spiritual energy which we call God, is conceived by us only through consciousness, through knowledge of ourselves” (Channing [1828] 1985, p. 150). If God was “a Mind,” he was also, for Channing, dynamism and force.

Ripley similarly elaborated the partaking of divinity as the cultivation of “the power of conceiving of a perfection higher than he has ever reached,” and making “this perfection a distinct object of pursuit” (Ripley 1836a, p. 39). As it develops, the higher nature of the individual “impels him to follow this ideal standard—not to rest content in imperfection—to forget the things that are behind—and to press forward to higher attainments, to diviner excellence.” Ripley compared this effort to that of the artist who finds his “result is never equal to his conception,” and “still imagines more glorious forms of beauty.” For Ripley, the artist’s perpetual pursuit of the beautiful is akin to that of the “good man who sees” a similar “vision of perfection,” and then finds himself short of “unspotted virtue” (Ripley 1836a, p. 39). That capacity to see a potentially better self “is the germ of resemblance to God,” Ripley believed, clearly echoing Channing. “As soon as we become acquainted with our own souls, we perceive that they are dependent, limited, finite, but at the same time endowed with powers, that command with complete authority, with capacities for boundless improvement, and aspirations after an approach towards Infinite Perfection.”⁷

5. Transparency and Partaking of Divinity

In their portrayal of the religious experience, Ripley and Channing provide an illuminating portrait of the emerging Transcendentalist theology in the 1830s. Their accounts of Transcendentalist religious experience are incomplete, however, without some consideration of the Emerson’s *Nature*, a book that can be called spiritual, but not theological. Ripley’s *Discourses* were ecclesiastical in origin, written first as part of his ministerial duties. Emerson shared these pastoral origins, but by 1836, it was clear that he hoped to be known as a lecturer and poet rather than a minister or theologian. As Elisabeth Hurth has noted, Emerson had been given an early exposure to the German higher criticism of the Bible through his brother William’s reports from Göttingen in the 1820s, and “came to accept a relativistic view of revelation that refuted the importance placed in the historical witness of Scripture” (Hurth 2007, p. 33). The miracles controversy had been settled in his mind before it ever began. Even so, he continued to find sustenance in a growing intellectual network comprised principally of Unitarian ministers, whose views on Biblical issues were liberal though not identical. The informal correspondence and conversation that had developed among these young spiritual philosophers was vital to Emerson and Ripley alike, and the first meeting of the Transcendental Club in 1836 signaled their sense of a developing movement (Myerson 1977). Regardless of how strongly the Transcendentalists acclaimed individual genius and self-cultivation, the quickening dialogue that flowed among them enabled their intellectual advances. Both Ripley and Emerson considered the spiritual philosophy as a new gospel, and both searched for programmatic ways to spread its liberating message to an American public that direly needed it.

The Transcendentalists, however, were by no means an organized sect. In tracing Emerson’s maturation in the early and mid-1830s, Kenneth S. Sacks explained how he differed from Ripley and Frederic Henry Hedge, thinkers who, with perhaps Theodore Parker, were the most acute Transcendentalist theologians and controversialists (Sacks 2003). Hedge and Ripley were steeped in the discourse of German philosophy and theology, and adept at the sharp disputation that marked Unitarian discourse in its emergence. They represented what Sacks termed “the analytic side

⁷ This doctrine of continuing spiritual development is an important aspect of the principle of “self-culture” that defined both early Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. The concept also had important social impact in the American nineteenth century. See (Robinson 1981; Robinson 1982; Howe 1997, pp. 107–35; Andrews 2017) for explorations of this concept.

of Transcendentalism" (Sacks 2003, p. 84), and understood most clearly how the new waves of German philosophy and Biblical scholarship had undermined the narrow empiricism of the moderate Unitarians. In his study of the extensive correspondence among the Transcendentalists in the 1830s, Sacks found that in contrast with the "analytic" Transcendentalists, Emerson was regarded, even by his friends, as "an accomplished poet and a philosophical dilettante" (Sacks 2003, p. 84). Emerson was set on the Transcendentalist path by the innovative literary essays of Thomas Carlyle, whom he had read voraciously in the 1820s, and later befriended. Emerson seemed to recognize his own weakness in rigorous philosophical analysis, and his distaste for it, and found in Carlyle both a stylistic example and a supportive correspondent as he developed what we might consider his literary or poetic version of the spiritual philosophy.⁸

"Literary" though it may be, Emerson's work cannot be read well without a sense of its testimony to religious experience. *Nature* is one of the most religiously expressive texts of the Transcendentalism, and it is notorious for some readers and magnetic for others, because of Emerson's portrayal of becoming a "transparent eyeball." This remarkable passage portrays the moment in which the individual self becomes "transparent" and absorbed into the larger universe, all the while gaining a complete vision of the very universe from which it fades. Far from analytical, the passage enacts an illogicality in which the self is both annihilated and infinitely enlarged, becoming nothing and everything simultaneously. The passage works not by argumentation or logic, but through Emerson's dramatization of the bizarre event itself. He first described the sensation of the "uplift" of the vanishing self: "Standing on the bare ground, —my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean egotism vanishes." The uplift brings a sense of invigorating purification, a baptism in the atmosphere itself, and an unburdening release of the ego marked by a rushing flow and a limitless power of visualization. "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 10). Asked one afternoon by an attentive student, "Why does he write 'eye-ball,' and not just eye," I realized that the eyeball, a material part of the body, was central to the impact of the description. The passage grabs the reader not only through its bizarre imagery, but also through its tactile or sensuous qualities, its materiality. We glimpse a corporeal *eyeball*, and become aware of being lifted up, of weightlessness, with the sensation of "currents" flowing through our still alert bodies.

The impression of this strange symbol is greatly enhanced by Emerson's employment of this concept of transparency, with its array of connections with visibility, presence, disappearance and the ghostly. A thing that is transparent is there—it exists—but appears to be absent. It is material, but simultaneously nonexistent. With his transparent eyeball that is both there and not there, Emerson engaged the nature of materiality and spirituality, suggesting that the presumed difference between matter and mind, or body and spirit, was unfounded. Ripley had evoked "an invisible God" (Ripley 1836a, p. 13) to open the way to an understanding of the soul, but Emerson's use of the trope of transparency brings mind and body together through the phenomenon of vision and its limitations. In the moment of religious awareness, body and spirit are one. As cartoon-like as Christopher Pearse Cranch could make this image in his famous satiric drawing, Emerson had actually created the image with the serious theological intention of portraying the merger of the soul with God, or the experience of "partaking of the divine nature."⁹

The concept of transparency remained active throughout *Nature*, as Emerson observed that the objects of the natural world are not only useful materials that we first see as commodities, but things of beauty that transform their human seers into disembodied ecstatic wisps. "The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate

⁸ See (Packer 2007, pp. 32–45) for a concise and perceptive account of Carlyle's impact on the Transcendentalists.

⁹ For a detailed and illustrated study of Cranch's cartoons of Emerson, see (Miller 1951).

and conspire with the morning wind. How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements!" (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 13). Perhaps the most powerful demonstration of transparency is Emerson's claim that "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 18). While it seems at first that he is saying that each object or fact is not one but two things, he is actually illustrating how each material thing shows its spiritual identity through its perceived transparency, its capacity of pointing beyond its materiality to a trans-material actuality or law. We glimpse this higher truth because of the "radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts," a correlation made possible through the essential bond of matter and spirit (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 19). In his *Discourses*, Ripley would articulate this correspondence as "the intimate connexion . . . between God and the human soul" (Ripley 1836a, p. 43).

The culmination of Emerson's discourse on transparency is his description of the "fortunate hours" when "the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own, shines through it." Nature does not disappear in these moments. It remains, now penetrated and illuminated by its very origins. "Material forms," Emerson explains, "preexist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by the virtue of preceding affections, in the world of spirit. A fact is the end or last issue of spirit" (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 22). The ultimate unity of "fact" and "spirit" that Emerson expounds is reflected in Ripley's theological assertion of the union of "God and the human soul." Ripley described religious seekers as capable of seeing "the glory of God inscribed on every created thing," turning the natural world into "a solemn hymn, ascending from every spot on this broad earth, and responding to the melody of the skies." In Ripley's portrayal of nature as a divine language, the elements of nature "are the inspired Prophets of God's will, the holy oracles of his wisdom, the speaking interpreters of his goodness and power" (Ripley 1836a, pp. 78–79).

Emerson stressed that the rare moments of recognition of this union came unexpectedly, a form of grace that cannot be planned or willed. "It appears to men, or it does not appear" (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 22).¹⁰ The structure of *Nature* reflects Emerson's pursuit of the ephemeral moment of transparency through the growing recognition of the moral sense, and its practical employment. "All things are moral, and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature," he wrote in *Nature's* pivotal chapter, "Discipline." "This ethical character," he explained, "so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end for which it was made" (Emerson [1836] 1971, p. 26). This turn from the mystical to the moral in *Nature* reflected Emerson's wrestling with the fleeting nature of spiritual experience, and his conviction that ethical practice could be the means of spiritual renewal. The self may regain its transparency by way of the moral sense.

Emerson's discussion of transparency is notable for its performative quality, its enactment of the experience of partaking of divinity. Emerson looks up to the sky while walking and feels his transformation into something more than himself; the "higher laws," like the sun, break through the universe and show its transparency. Despite his reputation for abstraction, Emerson makes things happen in his prose; his active narration serves as forms of religious assertion. *Nature* is not, of course, performative in this way throughout. With a faintly sermonic structure of successively numbered sections and subsections, Emerson combines philosophical argument with metaphor, image, and narrative theatrics to illustrate a theory of idealism as a functioning philosophical conceptualization, one that coheres with both spiritual yearning and moral aspiration.

In his perceptive analysis of "Emersonian Transparency," Lee Rust Brown showed that the transparency that Emerson described in *Nature* should be understood less as a condition than a necessarily repetitive process of "a renewed transparency" (Brown 1997, p. 52). "We constantly 'redeem' this world by deeds of seeing, reading, and moving" (Brown 1997, p. 55), Brown wrote, suggesting that the transparent eyeball moment is an instant of clarity and balance in an ongoing series of transitions. He described this as "the endless metamorphosis or generation of the world"

¹⁰ See (Robinson 1993, pp. 8–29), for a detailed discussion of Emerson's struggle with the question of access to grace.

(Brown 1997, p. 58). In this sense, Emerson's portrayal of the perennial effort of self-renewal tallies with the unending process of the spiritual self-development that characterize the religious vision of Channing and Ripley. As Emerson's work matured, he became deeply engaged with this conception of a metamorphic world, presenting it first as a dynamic source of renewing spiritual freshness and energy in "Circles," and then as a cause for enervating bewilderment in "Experience." Even so, the appeal the transparent eyeball passage, with its engaging oddity, has continued to carry an important implication for readers: the union with divinity is both capricious and evanescent. Thus with the transparent eyeball Emerson seems to dissent from the vision of religion as a continuing process of deliberate spiritual progress described by Channing and Ripley, and also by his own later work. If the eyeball moment was one in a series of ongoing events, Emerson had nevertheless framed a snapshot of his impression of the act of partaking of divinity.

6. Post-Christian Spirituality and Partaking of Divinity

Ripley closes his *Discourses* with a lengthy and passionately argued assurance that "the Pure in Heart behold the presence of God in the revelations of the gospel. They see the glory of the Father in the Person of his Son" (Ripley 1836a, p. 79). He placed this final stress on the necessity of Jesus to insure his readers that, in this period of controversy over the New Testament miracles, his philosophy of religion was also a philosophy of Christianity. Critics of the spiritual philosophy such as Norton regarded it as a step away from a Christ-centered religion, but Ripley designed the *Discourses* as an explanation and an affirmation of the purist form of Christianity. For Ripley the Transcendentalist stood not as disparager of Jesus, but his defender. He urged his readers to remember that the presence of divinity, wherever it is encountered, always originates from the same place. "Christianity corresponds to all that is divine in our nature and in the external Universe, and if our eyes have been unsealed to behold the glory of God in the one, we cannot be blind to his presence in the other" (Ripley 1836a, p. 79). Ripley also offered this closing affirmation of Jesus in response to doubts that he had encountered about the wisdom of preaching a natural world that reflected and revealed the divinity that we sense within ourselves. "There are some minds," he noted, "who think it unwise to direct the attention to the manifestations of God in Nature, lest it should weaken our interest in his manifestation in Christianity" (Ripley 1836a, p. 79). It is speculative, but usefully so, to wonder if Ripley's glimpses of Emerson's nature-oriented spirituality may not have made his anxiety on this question more acute. Was he, Ripley may have wondered, preaching the same radicalism that Emerson preached? Perhaps to assuage his own insecurity Ripley did not waver in his affirmation that a person "of pure heart and clear insight" will understand that the natural world is "in its whole spirit and essence . . . holy, heavenly, Godlike." Such purity and insight will also generate, he contended, "a faith, as firm as that which he reposes on his own being," that will lead to belief "in Jesus Christ, for he sees the revelation of God in the revelation of his Son" (Ripley 1836a, pp. 79–80). Ripley's earnest and passionate closing defense of the centrality of Jesus, as we now read it, seems prophetic of the post-Christian directions that the "spiritual philosophy" would soon begin to take.

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