Between Faith and Unbelief

American Transcendentalists and the Challenge of Atheism

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INTRODUCTION

This book sets out to shed light on what is specific to American Transcendentalism by comparing it with the atheistic vision of German philosophers and theologians like Ludwig Feuerbach and Arthur Schopenhauer. The term "atheism" literally means "without theism" or without belief in the existence of God. This is sometimes sub-divided into "positive atheism," which includes an outright denial of the very idea of God, and "negative atheism," implying a world-view that insists on the absence of God. Atheism technically refers both to the belief that there is no personal God as an object of faith and the claim that a God cannot exist. The present study demonstrates that the former position became a powerful challenge but also an expressible belief among American Transcendentalists. This is not to suggest that all the thinkers discussed were atheists in the true sense of the word, since the term atheism was often used as an accusation against critics of religion who seemed to present a threat to established beliefs. However, this study does argue that atheism was part of the discursive and religious context from which American Transcendentalism emerged.

The first published works of the young Transcendentalists led to an enormous outcry from the representatives of Unitarian establishment. They attacked not only the new style and the new content but also the writers themselves. Among the many epithets hurled at the Transcendentalists one finds terms like "infidel," "agnostic," "skeptic," "dissenter," and "freethinker." Of this list of accusations, infidel was the most pervasive. In the context of the Unitarian-Transcendentalist debates, infidelity became the most common term for an atheism that referred primarily to the rejection of the supernatural God of historical Christianity. Within the Unitarian-Transcendentalist tradition, which is the focus here, atheism had many other faces. A comprehensive description of the New England debate over atheism would, among other things, have to trace the corrosive implications of Lockean empiricism, Hume's skepticism, and French materialism. While these aspects of the battle over atheism have been explored by many scholars, the present study examines the distinctive contribution of German

"infidels" whose alleged atheism eventually was to move beyond a mere debunking of historical Christianity.

For Unitarian critics, the Transcendentalists' "infidelity" was primarily a result of their growing receptivity to the religious and philosophical models of Germany. Thus the Unitarian Andrews Norton traced in the Transcendentalists' works the omnipresence of the "modern German school of infidelity." American Transcendentalists absorbed a wealth of learning and philosophy from this school, but no single source was their mentor. The present study is therefore not primarily a source study; rather, it argues that tendencies toward atheism were inherent in Transcendentalist thought. The threat of atheism was thus not as new as Unitarian critics like Samuel Osgood assumed; it was already latent in the Transcendentalist platform long before the menacing shades of German atheism became known to larger audiences. The atheist scenario came to the surface in the controversy about Emerson's "new views." Emerson was repeatedly criticized for solipsism. The deity Emerson worshipped was, it seemed, himself. God became an index of the inner life of man. Emersonian Transcendentalism thus anticipated some of the central concerns in the works of German atheists like Feuerbach.

Beyond illuminating the atheistic tendencies that accompanied the rise of Transcendentalism, the story of German "infidelity" in New England also brings into sharper focus the intellectual forces that carried Transcendentalism beyond historical Christianity into disbelief in God as an object of faith—a conclusion explicitly confronted in Theodore Parker's sermons on *Theism, Atheism, and the Popular Theology* (1853), Orestes Brownson's *Essay in Refutation of Atheism* (1873), and Frederic Henry Hedge's study *Atheism in Philosophy and Other Essays* (1884). In particular Parker's detailed discussions of German atheism attest to the prevalence of the atheist issue among New England divines, belying James Turner's assertion in *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (1985) about the "freakishness" and "exotic" nature of "out-and-out disbelief in God" before the 1860s.

The following chapters examine the variety of positions implied by the phenomenon of "unbelief" and argue that the charge of atheism leveled against the Transcendentalist "new school" was not just projected into its devaluation of evidential theology but rather also pointed to an anthropocentric strain implicit in the Transcendentalist platform. A study of this aspect of Transcendentalist thought sheds light on a largely overlooked critique of Transcendentalism, one less con-

cerned with the "new school's" rejection of historical Christianity and more focused on its threat to religion in general. Parker's and Emerson's contemporary critics were acutely aware of tendencies toward an implicit atheism that emerged from an extreme transhistorical idealism. According to critics like Brownson, the transcendental idealist was prone to an anthropotheistic viewpoint that dissolved the divine in man. From idealism to atheism seemed but a short step.

CHAPTER ONE

"THE SPIRIT OF INFIDELITY": RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND HARVARD'S EARLY GÖTTINGEN STUDENTS

Shortly before leaving Göttingen University in 1825, Ralph Waldo Emerson's brother William was convinced that after his theological studies he was no longer in accord with "traditionary opinions." Defying family expectations, William decided to "sacrifice his influence" and announced that he no longer wanted to pursue the ministry as a career.[1] William had emerged from ministerial and academic training that aligned rationalism with credence in supernaturalism. This alignment represented a summation of tendencies long at work in the Unitarian tradition and was nurtured by a rich background in seventeenth and eighteenth-century English theology. Unitarians like Henry Ware Jr. and Andrews Norton drew in particular on the evidentialist argument employed by Samuel Clarke that "there was a Necessity of some particular Divine revelation, to make the whole Doctrine of Religion clear and obvious to all Capacities."[2] In this context biblical

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[1] *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–1994), 1:352 n. 37; hereafter cited parenthetically as *L*, with volume and page number. The following Emerson texts are cited parenthetically and abbreviated as: *J*, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910–1914); *W*, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–1904); *JMN*, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman and Ralph H. Ort et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1960–1982); *CW*, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson and Joseph Slater et al., 6 vols. to date (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971–); *EL*, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1959–1972); *TN*, *The Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph H. Ort et al., 3 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990–1996); *S*, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank, 4 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989–1992).

[2] Samuel Clarke, *The Works of Samuel Clarke, D.D.*, 4 vols. (1738; New York: Garland, 1978), 2: 667. See also Lilian Handlin, "Babylon est delenda—The Young Andrews Norton," in *American Unitarianism, 1805–1865*, ed. Conrad E. Wright (Boston: Mas-

revelation, like scientific propositions, could be verified empirically. The evidentiary appeal of facts and of empirical implications that they had taken on in the natural sciences was transposed to the realm of biblical interpretation. The theological conception of biblical events accordingly belonged to the realm of reliable and verifiable evidences. This argument functioned as a pervasive intellectual consensus that put exegesis to the cause of reassurance. Under the tutelage of this exegesis, Norton affirmed the biblical narratives as a factually reliable repository of historical Christianity.[3]

What William Emerson encountered at Göttingen University were new ideals of biblical research that removed the Scriptures from narrow theological grounds and subjected them to a criticism that evaluated the historical reliability of the biblical texts.[4] The challenge to the evidentialist framework came from the branch of biblical studies designated as "higher criticism" which forced discussions on the authority of Scripture, the meaning of history, and the nature of faith.[5] Higher criticism posed a serious threat to exegetes who had canvassed eighteenth-

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sachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989), 53–85. For a discussion of supernatural rationalism, see Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians* (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 5–12.

[3] For a specialized treatment of nineteenth century biblical criticism at Harvard, see Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800–1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969). See also Eugene R. Chable, "A Study of the Interpretation of the New Testament in New England Unitarianism" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1956).

[4] For a description of the biblical and historical studies at Göttingen, see Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 39–41. The visits of Ticknor, Everett, Cogswell and Bancroft were largely the outcome of the correspondence, from 1795 to 1812, of the Hamburg historian Christoph Daniel Ebeling with William Bentley of Salem. This exchange of letters contributed to the outstanding reputation of Göttingen's late eighteenth-century historical school as it was represented in particular by Johannes von Müller, who pioneered in the application of the critical method in the historical and social sciences. The tradition of this school was continued in theology first by Johann Lorenz von Mosheim and then Johann Salomo Semler, Johann David Michaelis, and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. See Henry August Pochmann, *German Culture in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 328–329, 515 n. 161, 533 n. 131; and Jürgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 13–15, 75–77.

[5] For a general discussion of the history and background of German biblical criticism, see Fred Gladstone Bratton, *A History of the Bible* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), 281–328; Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*. Trans. S. McClean Gilmour and Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abington, 1972).

century evidentialists for corroborating testimony that Christianity was a lawyer-proof religion based upon a historical revelation for which Scripture was the source book. In the hands of Norton, the new skills and approaches of biblical study were associated with a deep historical skepticism. Norton was acutely aware that the higher criticism challenged the authenticity and authority of the Bible. Its advocates, Norton judged, had been "infected with the spirit of infidelity" and undermined the validity of Christianity as a "divine revelation."[6] According to Norton, the supernatural truths of Christianity rested on evidences relating faith to history. With the higher criticism these evidences were called into doubt. Norton welcomed the higher criticism of the Bible as a weapon against Trinitarianism, but he was slow to absorb the full range of German critical scholarship when it came to the historical claims of revealed Christianity. However, Norton could not prevent the new biblical criticism from making inroads in major theological seminaries and New England pulpits.

Between 1810 and 1830, Unitarians were increasingly confronted with a subtle questioning of the evidentialist framework that undermined the tenuous connection of faith to history and seemed to prepare the ground for a denial of God, as Norton charged.[7] This new development began in the 1810s, when George Ticknor, Edward Everett, Joseph Cogswell and, in a second wave, John Motley, Henry Dwight, William Emerson, George Calvert, and George Bancroft were exposed to the historico-critical procedures prevalent among Göttingen's biblical critics.[8] The Harvard–Göttingen axis produced transitional men who increasingly realized the inadequacy of a theology grounded in

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[6] Andrews Norton, *A Statement of Reasons for not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians, Concerning the Nature of God and the Person of Christ.* 4th ed. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1819), 16.

[7] See Andrews Norton, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity. With Notes* (Cambridge, Mass.: John Owen, 1839), 30.

[8] The Harvard–Göttingen axis is described in Orie William Long, *Literary Pioneers: American Explorers of European Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935); Daniel B. Shumway, "Göttingen's American Students," *German-American Review* 3 (1907): 21–24; Reginald H. Phelps, "The Idea of the Modern University—Göttingen and America," *The Germanic Review* 29 (1954): 175–190; Cynthia Stokes Brown, "The American Discovery of the German University: Four Students in Göttingen, 1815–1822" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1966); Fred L. Burwick, "The Göttingen Influence on George Bancroft's Idea of Humanity," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* 11 (1966): 194–212; and Elisabeth Hurth, "Sowing the Seeds of 'Subversion': Harvard's Early Göttingen Students," *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1992, 91–106. For an analysis of the Harvard–Göttingen axis in the context of the historical Jesus quest, see Elisabeth

historical fact. The impact of the Harvard–Göttingen axis thus shows that the Transcendentalists' "new views" were inherent in a Unitarian framework that was broad enough to include both critics and defenders of a firm reliance on the evidences of historical Christianity.

The insight into the declining potency of an evidential theology played into a crisis of faith that made the Harvard–Göttingen students like William Emerson renounce the ministry. A decade before the rise of the Transcendentalist movement, the Harvard–Göttingen students realized that Unitarianism needed a new spiritual and epistemological foundation. Confronted with the historical skepticism of the new biblical criticism, the Harvard–Göttingen men found themselves with nowhere to turn but inward against an apologetic framework which asserted that one needed history to establish faith. The Harvard–Göttingen axis thus undermined the foundations of the post-Lockean theology of evidence and sowed—in Norton's view—the seeds of "infidelity" and "irreligion" within the Unitarian ranks.[9] These seeds fed into Ralph Waldo Emerson's long-standing uncertainty about his profession and calling, an uncertainty particularly pressing for a minister who not only struggled with professional difficulties and parish disfavor but also with the theological problem concerning the validity of historical revelation. Emerson could find a model for his predicament in the crisis William had suffered after his studies under Göttingen's higher critics, leading him outside the forms and traditions of historical Christianity. In 1832, Ralph Waldo was to fall in line and "sever[ed] the strained cord" that "bound" him to his Boston pastorate (*L*, 1:357).

I

When Harvard's early Göttingen students arrived at the German university, they were subjected to a program that encompassed a variety of historical and philological fields of study which had entered into the historico-critical approach to the Bible. The rigorous drill the young Harvard students underwent at Göttingen is perhaps illustrated best in the schedule of daily routine that Bancroft sent to Norton in 1819: "5–7, Hebrew and Syriac; 7–8, Heeren in Ethnography; 8–9, Church

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Hurth, *In His Name: Comparative Studies in the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1989), 119–141.

[9] See Norton, *A Statement of Reasons*, 16. See also *Discourse*, 11, 43, 48–49.

history by the elder Planck; 9–10, Exegesis of the N[ew] T[estament] by old Eichhorn; 10–11, [Exegesis] of the O[ld] T[estament] [by old Eichhorn]; 11–12, Syriac by old Eichhorn; 12–1 pm, Dinner and walk; 1–2, Library; 2–4, Latin or French; 4–5, Philological Encyclopedie by Dissen; 5–7, Greek; 7–8, Syriac; 8–9, Tea and walk; 9–11, Repetition of the old lectures and preparation for the new."[10] This schedule shows that biblical criticism at Göttingen was largely dominated by Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, who had come to Göttingen in 1788 as professor of Oriental languages after an outstanding career at Jena during which he had gained popularity for his unorthodox interpretation of the Bible. In Eichhorn's higher criticism the time-honored doctrines of scriptural inspiration and authenticity were questioned by a literary and historical analysis that studied the Bible as a collection of documents presenting the same problems as any other ancient writing. Eichhorn's interest in the Bible as the product of a particular historical and cultural conditioning not only undermined the uniqueness of the biblical narratives but, more importantly, also brought the factual question about the historical veracity of the Bible into the arena of theological debate.

A distinguished scholar in theology, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, history, philosophy, and author of the influential *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (1780), Eichhorn deeply impressed and intrigued Harvard's Göttingen students. But they quickly sensed that Unitarian scriptural exegesis did not draw on the same exegetical spring as the Göttingen critics, who were preoccupied with the "doctrine respecting the origin and formation of the Gospels." This "doctrine" issued from "the supposition of an original written history which [the Evangelists] all followed" and which was chiefly compiled from pre-existent documents in the Aramaic dialect.[11] Eichhorn, Norton observed, postulated that "*the text of the Original Gospel*" had been subjected "to continual alterations and additions, … before it assumed that form in which it was used by the first three [E]vangelists."[12]

[10] The Life *and Letters of George Bancroft*, ed. M.A. DeWolfe Howe, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 1:58.

[11] George Ticknor to Elisha Ticknor, 5 November 1815, in *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, ed. George Hillard, 2 vols. (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1876), 1:79; Horatio B. Hackett, "Synoptical Study of the Gospels and recent Literature pertaining to it," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 3 (1846): 11.

[12] Andrews Norton, *The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, vol. 1 (Boston: John B. Russel, 1837); vol. 2, 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: John Owen, 1844), 1:13.

When Ticknor dealt with the criticism of the Gospel accounts in Eichhorn's "Course of Lectures on the Exegesis of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the four concluding chapters of John," he did not delve into the problems of the Proto-Gospel and synoptical relationships; rather, Ticknor equated Eichhorn's position with an attack on the factuality and historical reliability of the biblical narratives of Jesus. Eichhorn, Ticknor thus complained, "takes from the N[ew] T[estament] all that distinguishes it from any other ancient book. He denies to it and to all its parts the lowest degree of inspiration, explains its miracles into delusions or the natural consequences of natural causes, … calls the death and resurrection a suspension of animation and subsequent revival."[13] For Norton, Eichhorn's criticism amounted to a rejection of Christianity as a miraculous revelation. This rejection, Norton charged, was bound to clear a path to atheism. Ticknor could not agree more and prayed that he would never be led to "listen with pleasure to such flippant witticisms as Eichhorn has been … making on all that [he had] been taught to consider solemn and important."[14] Both Norton and Ticknor were ready to acknowledge the argument that the literary relationship between the Gospels issued from a common Proto-Gospel, but historico-critical considerations that moved into the realm of mythical embellishment and accretions were primarily considered as a threat to the claims of historically grounded faith.

To Ticknor, the trying and testing of the life of Jesus narratives in Eichhorn's historical criticism seemed to make a spectacle of what he had grown to accept as sacrosanct supernatural claims of Christianity. Higher criticism, Ticknor judged, not only posed a general threat to biblical truth but also called into question the historical veracity of the Jesus tradition. Norton concurred; if, as Eichhorn supposed, "during the first two centuries, it was so common to enlarge the histories of Jesus Christ, … and to alter and remodel them," then, Norton argued, one could "hardly pretend to rely with much confidence upon those histories which now exist."[15] For Norton, issues of factuality remained central and spurred the apologetic concern to demonstrate that historico-critical findings did not reduce "the Scriptures … to a human book."[16]

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[13] George Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, "Four Students in Göttingen," 111.

[14] George Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, "Four Students in Göttingen," 110.

[15] Norton, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, 1:17–18.

[16] Francis Cunningham, "The Biblical Repository," *Christian Examiner* 10 (1831): 350.

The Harvard–Göttingen men acutely sensed that the higher criticism had consequences for the significance of the historical Jesus himself. Thus Ticknor observed that Eichhorn put the life of Jesus on the same level as that of other historical figures. Eichhorn's "faith in Christ is, as far as I can understand it," Ticknor complained, "precisely like his faith in Socrates."[17] To Unitarian believers, this position seemed to undermine the biblical Jesus portrait and came close to rationalistic atheism. Bancroft found in German theology "everything which learning and acuteness can give, and … nothing, which religious feeling and reverence for Christianity give."[18] Bancroft therefore judged this "theology … to be anything but [Christiani]ty"; it was merely designed "to scoff at the [B]ible and laugh at Christ."[19]

The Harvard–Göttingen men associated the new skills and approaches of higher criticism with the deist "heresy" and learned "irreligion." As to Eichhorn's "personal faith," Ticknor observed, "it is certainly but feeble. As far as I can judge from his books and lectures, from his general reputation and my personal acquaintance with him, I believe that he is nothing more than a Deist."[20] There was scarcely any American practitioner commenting on historico-critical procedures during this early period of influence who did not similarly equate higher criticism with deism and with mere "irreligion" or atheism. Thus Bancroft observed that he "never heard anything like moral or religious feeling manifested in [the] theological lectures" at Göttingen. To Bancroft, there was "a great deal more religion in a few lines of Xenophon, than in a whole course of Eichhorn."[21] Everett agreed. "Mr. Eichhorn," Everett complained to Bancroft in 1818, "unfortunately has adopted a style of lecturing little adapted to the seriousness of the subject … and irreverent as regards the great topics in discussion."[22]

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17 George Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, "Four Students in Göttingen," 111.

18 Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:64.

19 George Bancroft, letters of 21 May 1819 and 10 July 1819; MS at the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), quoted by permission.

20 Ticknor, journal entry, 27 March 1816, in Brown, "Four Students in Göttingen," 110.

21 George Bancroft, letter of 15 January, 1820; quoted in Long, *Literary Pioneers*, 120. See also 121.

22 Edward Everett to George Bancroft, 13 April 1818; quoted in Stuart Joel Horn, *Edward Everett and American Nationalism* (Ph.D. diss., The City University of New York, 1973), 61.

Given the apparent impiety and immorality of the new biblical critics, the Harvard–Göttingen men were determined to assure their sponsors that they had "nothing to do with … [Göttingen's] infidel systems."[23] This charge of infidelity, however, distorted the higher critical position. The critics around Eichhorn sought to re-affirm the religious relevance of the biblical record against attacks on historical positivity. Eichhorn was not prepared to accept the life of Jesus narratives at face value as historical occurrences, but he did not conclude from this that the accounts flowed from deceit and delusion. Eichhorn's argument was intended constructively. By the "freeing of the Primal Gospel from its accretions," Eichhorn argued, "countless doubts with which Jesus, his life, and his teaching have been assailed become completely meaningless.… By this separation of the apostolic from the nonapostolic which higher criticism recommends … the means are found to establish the credibility and truth of the gospel story on unshakable foundations."[24] The Harvard–Göttingen students did not acknowledge this affirmative intention. They sought to stand firm against the threat of "infidelity" and were not prepared to "rival … Eichhorn in his profane indecency."[25] The Unitarian bonds still seemed strong enough to make the Harvard–Göttingen men conform to tradition.

II

But while the Harvard–Göttingen men were trying to dispel their sponsors' misgivings about the dangerous impact of higher criticism, anxieties of influence became more and more apparent. Thus Bancroft wrote reassuringly that he "should be unwilling to give [his] friends any reasonable ground for fearing [he] should lose [his] belief in, or respect for Christianity."[26] Yet Bancroft and his colleagues increasingly found that the impact of the Göttingen scholars could not be limited to what was "merely *critical*" and instead affected their "philosophy" as well.[27] After his first year at Göttingen, William Emerson was taken aback by the effects of biblical criticism on his own thought. "I do not think nor

[23] Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:55.

[24] Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1804–1827), 1:458–459. See also Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 78–79.

[25] George Bancroft, letter of 10 July 1819, MHS.

[26] Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:42.

[27] Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:55.

feel nor act as I have ever done before," William confessed, "my mind seems to have undergone a revolution which surprises me. I cannot avoid tracing much of this to the books and lectures of Eichhorn."[28] Everett, who had been sent to Göttingen to take a doctorate with Eichhorn himself and get a translation of his *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* under way, experienced a similar intellectual "revolution." In his *Defense of Christianity Against the Work of George B. English* (1814), Everett did question typological exegesis, yet he still affirmed that Jesus had been miraculously inspired to give an authoritative revelation.[29] Upon his return from Göttingen, however, Everett was closer to the skeptical position he had himself initially set out to refute and was alienated from the ministerial profession to which his studies abroad were supposed to contribute.

What concerned Everett above all else was the discrepancy between the "public worship of God," and "arbitrary facts" uncovered by historico-critical methods, a discrepancy the German theologian Gotthold Ephraim Lessing referred to as the "ugly ditch" between accidental historical truths and necessary truths of reason.[30] The crux of Lessing's metaphor of disjunction lay in his insistence that historical evidence could not produce conviction. Historical truth could not be assigned the certainty of demonstrated truth. To Everett, Lessing's "ugly broad ditch" was irreconcilable with the Unitarian position because it wielded the axe of criticism against the historical roots of Christianity. It seemed questionable to rest one's faith on historical assertions that could not lay claim to a high degree of reliability. A seminal answer to this disparagement of scriptural revelation was to be found outside Eichhorn's biblical criticism. "Of the two parties, which are now waging war with one another," Bancroft observed of the theological spectrum at Göttingen, "the rationalist and the orthodox, it is hard to say, which is the most to be feared; the one retaining nothing of [Christiani]ty but its principles, the other clinging to all the particulars of the orthodox and

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[28] William Emerson, letter of 8 August 1824, in Karen Kalinevitch, "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Older Brother: The Letters and Journal of William Emerson" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1982), 123.

[29] See Edward Everett, *Defence of Christianity Against the Work of George B. English* (Cambridge: Hilliard, 1814), 260. See also Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 37.

[30] Edward Everett, letter of 5 January 1816; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 40. See also Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. Henry Chadwick, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53. See also 51, 56.

joining mysticism and darkness to their unlimited faith."[31] Of the two camps, it was the latter that came closest to the Harvard–Göttingen students' concerns and carried them from Göttingen's biblical critics to the experiential theology practised at Berlin by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who seemed to stem the rising tide of infidelity.

At Berlin, Bancroft observed during his study year there, "atheists" like Eichhorn "were no longer going forward so triumphant as before."[32] What prevailed instead was Schleiermacher's emphasis on the religious consciousness of human nature—a subjective theology that flanked the inroads made by historico-critical analysis on the historical foundations of revealed religion. By appealing to man's immediate God-consciousness, Schleiermacher's religious experience theology minimized supernaturalist presuppositions about the life of Jesus. The Harvard–Göttingen men who had the opportunity of extending their studies from Göttingen to Berlin were immediately struck by the possibilities Schleiermacher's position held out for a re-ordering of religious experience and knowledge. Drawing on the terms of Schleiermacher's experiental theology, William Emerson wrote to his brother Edward in 1824: "I too am a Son of God, and … I need but throw off my shackles, these bonds of habit … to attest my relation to the Divinity."[33] A similar shift toward religious subjectivism and intuitionism showed in the idealistic strain of Bancroft's writings after his sojourn at Berlin. Impressed by Schleiermacher's lectures on education, Bancroft considered principles and plans for "Germanizing American secondary education."[34] Bancroft also came under the spell of Schleiermacher's "mode of preaching" and insisted on an "internal sense" that placed man in direct contact with the decrees of God.[35]

The Harvard–Göttingen men thus began to advance claims for the divinity and creative power of religious consciousness that were remarkably similar to Transcendentalist assertions. The twin influence of biblical criticism and an experiential theology supplied the terms of a spiritual epistemology on which Transcendentalist assumptions could

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[31] George Bancroft, letter of 5 November 1820, MHS.

[32] George Bancroft, letter of 5 November 1820, MHS.

[33] William Emerson, letter of 27 June 1824, in Kalinevitch, "William Emerson," 111. On Schleiermacher's intuitive theology of experience, see Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, 297–298.

[34] Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 531 n. 108.

[35] Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:97; George Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 409, 410.

grow and cohere. The Harvard–Göttingen group applied this influence selectively, however, slighting it when it seemed to counteract scriptural integrity and enforcing it when it seemed directed against empirical-mechanistic "bonds of habit." Thus Bancroft approved Schleiermacher's canon as an affirmative theology that left the integrity of biblical narratives of the life of Jesus intact. With Schleiermacher, Bancroft judged, "the strict humanity of Christ [is not] in any way doubted." "Schleiermacher has remained a Christian, true to the moral principles of … Jesus."[36] When it came to the historical Jesus, the Harvard–Göttingen men unanimously agreed that the concrete historical figure of Jesus was not to be downplayed or questioned. This did not entail a way back to supernatural rationalist apologetics; rather, with Schleiermacher, the Harvard–Göttingen men came to believe that the import of the biblical narratives of Jesus could not be identified with their factual accuracy and was rooted instead in the religious subject. From here it was only a small step to the affirmation of religious inwardness that accompanied the rise of Transcendentalism.

III

The young students at Göttingen University acutely sensed that the higher critical approach was unlikely to be met with approval by conservative Unitarians. The more Bancroft delved into historico-critical studies, the less likely it seemed to him that his new learning would be accepted after his return. "'Tis out of the question," Bancroft wrote to Everett from Göttingen, "to expect, that in any American University whatsoever, the station of Professor of theology would be offered me or anyone else, who had got his theology in Germany." "Who is there in America that cares for all this?" "Who would dare to interpret in America the epistles to the Hebrews, the Apocalypse, but above all the O[ld] T[estament] as it must and ought to be done. The cry of heresy will attend the first attempt."[37] Bancroft's assessment was correct. The *Christian Examiner* observed with regard to the reception of Johann Jakob Griesbach's edition of the New Testament at Harvard that "any argument founded on the principles of biblical criticism, is

[36] George Bancroft, letters of 24 December 1820 and 3 December 1820, MHS.

[37] Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:65; George Bancroft, letters of 10 July 1819 and 1 August 1819, MHS.

received with a great deal of uneasiness and suspicion."[38] Similarly, Moses Stuart judged after Everett's early attempts at translating Eichhorn that Eichhorn's "speculations" would be "obnoxious" to American critics.[39]

Initially, the Harvard–Göttingen men did not want to set themselves apart from the conservative Unitarian camp at Harvard and therefore turned their studies to what was acceptable theologically and exegetically. Under the impact of Göttingen's biblical critics, Bancroft wanted to devote himself to "raising [in America] a degraded and neglected branch of study, which in itself is so noble, and to aid establishing a thorough school of Theological Critics."[40] Yet Bancroft's efforts after his return never yielded any such results. Similarly, Everett did not "regret the time … [he had] spent in studying divinity."[41] But upon his return from Göttingen, Everett refused to make further contributions to biblical studies, transposing the new critical methods instead to the study of the classics. Once again the exposure to higher criticism did not lead to stringent critical exegesis, and the philological aspects of the new procedures seemed to be a less troublesome issue than the theological.

In the case of Bancroft, Everett, and William Emerson, the uneasiness and suspicion accompanying the confrontation with the new biblical criticism and life of Jesus research also contributed to a severe crisis of profession. Bancroft had been sent to Göttingen to "pursue [his] theological studies" so that he might be able to "defend the Revelation of God."[42] But upon his return, Bancroft lasted in the ministerial profession only until 1823 and made a step sideward toward the academy and later to a political and historical career. In a similar manner, the Harvard–Göttingen axis shaped the career of Everett. Though originally determined "to separate … the public teaching of duty from all connection with arbitrary facts," Everett's exposure to the new biblical criticism eventually shattered his conviction concerning life in the ministry.[43]

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[38] Anon., "The New Testament in the Common Version, conformed to Griesbach's Standard Greek Text" *Christian Examiner* 6 (1829): 353.

[39] Moses Stuart to Edward Everett, 25 December 1813; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 36.

[40] Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:54. See also Herbst, *The German Historical School*, 76.

[41] Edward Everett, letter of 5 January 1816; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 40.

[42] Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:33

[43] Edward Everett, letter of 5 January 1816; quoted in Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 40.

After the confrontation with the historico-critical studies, William Emerson also broke with the ministerial office. But while Everett refused to teach at Harvard what he had learned from Eichhorn and sidestepped critical findings that threatened his cherished assumptions about the Jesus figure and Christian history, William Emerson was ready to apply historico-critical exegesis, in particular to the issue of the Lord's Supper. "William's mind was exact and judicial and his conscience active," Edward Waldo Emerson observed in 1883 of his father's elder brother who had departed from the ministry after his Göttingen studies. "The German philosophy and the Biblical criticism shook his belief in the forms and teaching of the religion in which he had been brought up" (*W*, 4:367 n.). According to Edward Waldo Emerson, this corrosive influence of the new critical studies became most apparent in William's rejection of the traditional view of the Lord's Supper and his belief "that the rite of the Lord's Supper was not authoritatively established by Jesus for [continued] observance as a sacrament by Christians" (*W*, 4:367 n.).[44]

William's consideration of the issue of the Lord's Supper was in line with a rich tradition of historical precedents. In 1667, Solomon Stoddard had devalued the Lord's supper by terminating its exclusivity and by accepting profession of faith and repentance as prerequisites for church membership and communion. With William Emerson, the Lord's Supper underwent a different devaluation. William did not set out to blur the distinction between saints and sinners by opening communion to all parishioners; rather, in a letter to Ezra Ripley, he stated that he did not believe "that the Communion rite was enjoyed by Jesus for perpetual observance" (*W*, 11:551 n.). For Ripley, the Lord's Supper was an obligatory ceremony that pointed to the revelatory significance of Christ's sacrifice. For William, however, whose "private articles of faith" had been shaken by the higher criticism, the view of the Lord's Supper as an obligatory ceremony was no longer tenable.[45]

William had first encountered this devaluation of the significance of the Lord's Supper in the biblical criticism taught at Göttingen and Berlin. Griesbach and Eichhorn demonstrated that the words "Do this in remembrance of me" did not appear in all manuscripts. Schleiermacher, whom William singled out during his Berlin sojourn as one of the

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[44] See Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 160.

[45] Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 107.

critics contributing to substantial progress in theology, treated the rite of communion in the context of the Jewish feast of the Passover and argued that one could not "conclude from Christ's own words as they [were] reported in the three Gospels that [he] instituted this as a permanent rite of the Christian church."[46] Another attack on the Lord's Supper came from the anti-supernatural criticism of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, who read the sacrament against the background of primitive Christianity. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Reimarus argued, "were not instituted by Jesus, but rather created by the early church on the basis of certain historical assumptions" designed to account for the delayed parusia.[47] These literary and historical arguments against the sacrament of the Lord's Supper entered into William Emerson's skepticism about the universal, permanent significance of the Lord's Supper as well as the special authority of the historical Jesus. And "respectfully but with great clearness," William stated that he regarded the Lord's Supper merely as an external ceremony (*W*, 4:367 n.). The "new critical spirit" had left its mark.[48] Ralph Waldo Emerson was soon to follow in his brother's footsteps.

IV

In 1822 Mary Moody Emerson set out to draw Ralph Waldo's attention to the biblical criticism practiced in Germany. "There is," she wrote, "one idea of dramatic representation [that is] interesting, that of Eich[h]orn respecting the Apocalypse of St. John. The learned German you know believes all passed in Patmos in scenic order. And … this [may] be a key to many revelations. In the infancy of the world men were taught by signs. It would seem that the higher and last made [of] instructions from Heaven applied to Reason as well as Sentiment. And I am glad to escape from all sorts of earthly dramas" (*JMN*, 2:375–376). While this letter attests to Mary Moody Emerson's sympathetic interest in Eichhorn's biblical criticism, she was prepared to accept this

[46] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, ed. Jack C. Verheyden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 392.

[47] *The Aims of Jesus and his Disciples: A further installment of the Anonymous Wolfenbüttel Fragments*, ed. Gotthold E. Lessing (Brunswick, 1778); quoted in Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954), 24.

[48] Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 50.

criticism only as long as it stayed within tradition. She disagreed with German higher criticism when it led to a denial of the historical revelation of God's being in the person of Christ. The belief in this special revelation, she hoped, would "prevail, [and] German madness may be cured" (*JMN*, 2:383).

But with Emerson "German madness" would not be cured, although he acutely sensed the dangers lurking in the new biblical criticism. In the application of this criticism, Emerson determined that the religious element was "somewhat lost." "Our theological sky blackens a little," he observed of the impact of the Harvard–Göttingen students, "or else the eyes of our old men are growing dim. But certain it is, that, with the flood of knowledge [and] genius poured out upon our pulpits, the light of Christianity seems to be somewhat lost. The young imagine that they have rescued [and] purified the Christian creed; the old, that the boundless liberality of the day has swept away the essence with the corruption of the gospel and has arrived at too sceptical refinements" (*L*, 1:127–128). Yet Emerson himself arrived at "sceptical refinements" that worked to dissolve the foundations of historical Christianity.

William Emerson's influence prepared the stage for this shift. In letters from Göttingen, William time and again emphasized to his brother the "rapid advances in theology" made by Eichhorn and Schleiermacher and praised "the results of so many centuries of struggle against superstition and ignorance."[49] Ralph Waldo further had numerous opportunities to observe how the new critical studies changed the direction of ministerial careers. He listened first-hand to the reports of Harvard's first Göttingen students who had seen how their religion dissolved in the crucible of historico-critical scrutiny. In 1821 Emerson attended several of Ticknor's lectures at Harvard; he also fell under the spell of Everett's and Bancroft's reports, all of which gave him a growing sense of the exegetical and theological context in which the higher criticism was practiced (cf. *L*, 1:127).

Emerson's sermons show the process of transition and reveal a gradual advance towards historico-critical methods. Consonant with historico-critical procedures, Emerson acknowledged the importance of literary form, the uses of symbolic language, and historical circumstances

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[49] William Emerson, letter of 2 March, 1825, in Kalinevitch, "William Emerson," 207.

for a proper interpretation of scriptural texts. As a result, the significance of historical revelation was devalued. "It is not a revelation," Emerson argued, "that taught us the rudiments of our religion" (*S*, 1:72). Having learnt from Eichhorn that the Gospels represented the outcome of a long compositional process that resulted in discrepancies and inaccuracies, Emerson was prepared to acknowledge that the historico-critical data of the new biblical studies contradicted the Unitarian claim that the center of religious authority rested on the Gospel accounts. Emerson in effect encouraged his parishioners to question scriptural authority. The "skillful hands" of the biblical narrators, Emerson reminded his audience, did not always "sketch" events with "fidelity" (*S*, 1:88). The Scriptures, Emerson reiterated, were written by human hands and were not to be trusted as historically reliable reports. Emerson became in his sermons increasingly reluctant to base the truth of Christianity on historically recorded testimony. Christian faith could not be bound up with historical statements that were questionable and no longer valid as authenticated facts. The "proof of the Being … of God," Emerson argued, did not derive from "learned" evidences but rather from the insight that "God is within us" (*S*, 1:205, 208).

Emerson's position soon gave rise to rumors that the young minister at Second Church did not treat the Bible with sufficient reverence. In 1829, Ware insinuated that Emerson "did not look to the Scriptures with all the same respect as others" (*L*, 1:273). The Harvard–Göttingen men, when appropriating the new methods of biblical criticism, were confronted with similar suspicions. Bancroft, who had been sent to Göttingen to "become an accomplished philologian and biblical critic," time and again assured his patron that he would not give way to the "irreligious" and "heartless formality" of the Göttingen critics: "Of their infidel systems I hear not a word; and I trust I have been too long … under your inspection to be in danger of being led away from the religion of my Fathers."[50] The New Englanders who listened to Bancroft's sermons after his return from Göttingen judged differently. Bancroft's sermon audiences listened with discomfort to the use of phrases like "our dear pelican Christ" in Cambridge pulpits.[51] The vocabulary of the new biblical criticism was still incompatible with

[50] George Bancroft, letter of 4 August 1818, MHS; Howe, *George Bancroft*, 1:33, 55.

[51] Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 63.

Unitarian christological affirmations, and Bancroft's audiences more than welcomed his abandonment of a ministerial career in the spring of 1823.

To Unitarians nourished in a theology of evidences, the skeptical inquiries into the historicity of the Jesus tradition were deeply troubling. Boston pulpits did not hesitate to express their strong aversion towards the biblical critics' tools and charged that they endangered faith itself. The "descended being the Companion of God before time, living [and] suffering as he did, … [t]his deep and high theology," it was hoped, would "prevail" (*JMN*, 2:383). With Emerson, however, it did not "prevail"; on the contrary, by the late 1820s Emerson had yielded to the procedures of the higher criticism and was determined to put them into use. In March 1831, Emerson set up a series of vestry lectures on the origin, authorship, and authenticity of the Gospels.[52] The vestry lectures bore ample witness of Emerson's appropriation of standard evidentialist works, namely Nathaniel Lardner's *The Credibility of the Gospel History*, George Campbell's *The Four Gospels* and James Macknight's annotated *New Literal Translation of all Apostolic Epistles* as well as his *Harmony of the Four Gospels*. But Emerson's vestries also revealed his familiarity with the techniques and principles of the new biblical criticism. In keeping with the premises of German biblical critics like Griesbach and Eichhorn, Emerson's vestries scrutinized the literary tradition behind the canonical gospels, examined the traditional ascriptions of authorship and date, and studied the historical circumstances of writer and audience. Emerson could model the application of these principles after the work of Harvard's first Dexter Lectures, but he also did a substantial amount of independent study of German biblical critics. The application of the higher critical exegetical tradition might have been hardly of interest to the audience Emerson hoped to attract, but it became for him increasingly a most welcome tool in his efforts to move away from a rigid reliance on historical revelation.

While some of Emerson's vestry lectures were in keeping with the traditionalist view of the authority and historical veracity of the biblical narratives, the vestry on "The Origin of the Three First Gospels" departed from evidentialist studies to make substantial borrowings from Herbert Marsh's edition of Johann David Michaelis's *Introduction to the New Testament*. Emerson's appropriation of Michaelis's study in his

[52] *The Vestry Lectures and a Rare Sermon*, ed. Kenneth W. Cameron (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1984); hereafter cited as *VL*.

fourth vestry reveals that he infused his writings with what Marsh's reviewers termed a "[t]incture of the spirit of skepticism" about the "authenticity integrity, credibility and inspiration of the Gospels."[53] The key point of departure for Emerson was the "synoptic problem": "The relation of the three books of Matthew, Mark [and] Luke to each other is very remarkable. If you will look at a Harmony and take their narratives of the same fact, you will find that they frequently agree not only in relating the same things in the same manner but in the same words" (*VL*, 4:12). Emerson based his observation on James Macknight's *Harmony* as well as Newcome's edition of Griesbach's *Synopsis Evangeliorum*. Macknight's *Harmony* was largely concerned with paraphrasing and harmonizing the four Gospels so as to produce a unilateral account. Griesbach's *Synopsis*, by contrast, denied that a harmonization of the first three Gospels was possible.[54] In the fourth vestry lecture, Emerson also broke with harmonizing transpositions and reminded his audience that "even eye witnesses of the same facts if they write their report independently of each other, will never relate them … in the same manner … and even the circumstances which they observe in common, they will arrange and combine in such a manner in their own minds as to produce two representations, which though upon the whole the same, widely differ in the choice and position of the respective parts" (*VL*, 4:12). According to this insistence on the variation and personal viewpoint that each of the Evangelists contributed, the Evangelists were individual witnesses and historians and not servile copyists, as conservative biblical critics maintained.

Emerson could draw for this view on Connop Thirwall's 1825 translation of Schleiermacher's *Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke*. Schleiermacher and his translator presented in their studies detailed descrip-

[53] John Randolph, *Remarks on Michaelis's Introduction to the New Testament* (London: J. Bensley, 1802), 5.

[54] On Griesbach's *Synopsis*, see Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 5:304–311. On Emerson's acquaintance with Griesbach, see *JMN*, 3: 354–355. For a discussion of the impact of higher critical views on Emerson as preacher at Second Church, see Wesley T. Mott, *The Strains of Eloquence: Emerson and His Sermons* (Penn State: Penn State University Press, 1989), 56–60. See also Karen Kalinevitch, "Turning from the Orthodox: Emerson's Gospel Lectures," *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1986. 69–112; Barbara Packer, "Origin and Authority: Emerson and the Higher Criticism", in *Reconstructing American History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 67–92; and Elisabeth Hurth, "William and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Problem of the Lord's Supper: The Influence of German 'Historical Speculators,'" *Church History* 62 (1993): 190–206.

tions of Eichhorn's solution of the synoptic problem. On the basis of these descriptions, Emerson declared in his fourth vestry: "Eichhorn … supposes that our Gospels … are only four out of many records of the same kind and that all were derived from one common document which he supposes to have been written in Aramaic or the vulgar Hebrew of the time.… He [also] supposes that … Matthew, Mark and Luke used different copies of this document which had [been] enriched or varied by the particular information of the transcribers, and that they may account for the variation in their gospels" (*VL*, 4:12–13). Discussing this theory of an Aramaic Proto-Gospel in his *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, Norton condemned Eichhorn as an infidel whose "notions respecting the Gospels … essentially affect[ed] the belief of their genuineness."[55] In 1831, Emerson, however, stood already firmly in the tradition of the new biblical criticism and was in no way repelled by Eichhorn's assumption that the synoptic Gospels, as second-century variations of an originally Aramaic account of the life of Jesus, could no longer be regarded as reliable historical data. Emerson was even prepared to go beyond Eichhorn's Proto-Gospel hypothesis, arguing that the common source for the synoptic Gospels was the oral tradition. The main exposition of this view was, as Emerson pointed out in his fourth vestry lecture, given by Johann Karl Ludwig Gieseler, who had attempted to show that the synoptic Gospels were different forms of a primitive oral Gospel that had been adapted to the missionary preaching of the different apostles.[56] Emerson made full use of this theory and argued with Gieseler that "not enough attention seems to have been paid to the fact that … oral instruction was the great mode of communication in that age of early Christianity" (*VL*, 4:13).

The principles stemming from Gieseler's emphasis on the flux of the oral tradition upon which the Synoptics had drawn—the fragmentation of the Gospels, the recognition of several of their pericopes as bearing no relation to the actual events of Jesus' life—all counteracted Norton's claims about the genuineness of the biblical narratives and contributed to Emerson's growing devaluation of the historical evidences of supernatural revelation. At the exegetical and hermeneutical juncture, however, the historico-critical tools were somewhat at variance with Emerson's intentions. The preacher-exegete in the evidentialist

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[55] Norton, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospel*, 1:17.

[56] On Gieseler's reception in Transcendentalist New England, see Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 209, 307.

tradition could rely on a common bond between preacher and congregation, on a shared familiarity with the text and its interpretation. The higher criticism, by contrast, with its focus on historical milieu, literary origin and interpretative traditions, drove the wedge of exegetical intricacies and hermeneutical theory between the audience and the text. This wedge turned out to be scarcely suitable to Emerson's vestry project. With the vestry lectures Emerson had hoped to attract in particular the young members of his parish, yet the vestry enterprise failed. To Emerson, it seemed that if his "poor Tuesday evening lectures (horresco referens) were to any auditor the total of his exposition of Christianity," it would leave only "a beggarly faith" (*J*, 3:315). The tools and techniques of higher-critical exegesis belonged more to the province of the academically trained theologian than to the popular piety of the general lay church member. Yet in the final months of his Boston pastorate, Emerson applied the tactics of this exegesis.

V

As had been the case with his brother William, it was the issue of the Lord's Supper that served for Emerson as a catalyst of a professional choice. Emerson was ready to resign his pastorate unless he were permitted to dispense with the rite of the Lord's Supper.[57] Emerson was prepared to utilize historico-critical exegesis to break with the Second Church, and he was acutely aware that this exegesis could be exploited to provoke a confrontation with the Unitarian clergy. William had already set the example for this strategy. William's dismissal of the Lord's Supper as an external ceremony and the critical principles that induced it had a significant impact on Emerson's own objections against the sacrament. In his sermon on the Lord's Supper, the young minister of Second Church entered "in a way unusual and remarkable for him, into a critical and systematic consideration of the scriptural authorities of the rite," a mode of analysis that was, as Edward Waldo Emerson suggests, "supplied by the elder brother" (*W*, 4:367 n.).

While minister at Second Church, Ralph Waldo Emerson shared close intellectual contact with William. Thus Emerson would ask his brother: "Prithee, dear William send me some topics for sermons, or if

[57] See Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 160–161.

it please you better the whole model 'wrought to the nail'" (*L*, 1:211). Significantly, Emerson had also urged his brother in 1830 to supply him with information from his Göttingen studies. He wrote William "to make a synopsis of the leading arguments against Christianity.... He also wanted him to mark, in the works of Eichhorn or others, the passages that would tend to destroy a candid inquirer's belief in the divine authority of the New Testament."[58] And in February of 1832, five months before he would deliver the "Lord's Supper Sermon" to the Second Church, Emerson again mentioned to his aunt the "German commentators" who questioned the historicity of the biblical narratives (*JMN*, 3:328).

The influence of these commentators in the Lord's Supper sermon was clear to Edward Waldo Emerson because of his father's "unusual and remarkable" rational exegesis. This rational exegesis was by no means unusual for Ralph Waldo but rather accorded with the exegetical principles and techniques of his vestry lectures. Thus Emerson built his argument in the Lord's Supper sermon by first reminding his parishioners of the differing versions of the words of institution. Using the close textual and literary exegesis also characteristic of the synoptic analysis in his vestries, Emerson stressed that the words "this do in remembrance of me" do not appear in Mark's and Matthew's accounts of the Lord's Supper, whereas in John the "whole transaction is passed over without notice" (*W*, 11:5). Emerson then proceeded to bring the Fourth Gospel into special prominence, emphasizing that "[i]t only differs in this, that we have found the Supper used in New England and the washing of the feet not." Given the account of the Fourth Gospel, the interpretation of the Lord's Supper as a permanent institution appeared arbitrary to Emerson: "I cannot help remarking that it is not a little singular that we should have preserved this rite and insisted upon perpetuating one symbolical act of Christ while we have totally neglected all others" (*W*, 11:11).

The interpretation so far followed the terms of the biblical critics whom the Harvard–Göttingen students had encountered first hand. Emerson's arguments were in keeping with Schleiermacher's observations on the Lord's Supper in the *The Life of Jesus*, which entertained a pronounced preference for St. John's Gospel and regarded the symbolic act of feet-washing to be of equal rank with the Lord's Supper.[59]

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[58] Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 152.
[59] See Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, 393.

Schleiermacher further pointed out that "some of the narratives contain[ed] no … injunction" to "institute a permanent rite" and that against the ceremony of feet-washing the interpretation of the Lord's Supper as a "perpetual and universal institution" could not be justified.[60] And in the same manner that Emerson reiterated in his sermon that he could not "bring himself to believe that … Jesus looked beyond the living generation … and meant to impose a memorial feast upon the whole world," (*W*, 11:7), Schleiermacher argued that the Last Supper was "an affair only of a small number of [Jesus'] disciples." It did "not follow that [Jesus] intended the whole Christian church to observe it."[61]

Emerson's exegesis also accorded with arguments of a work long acknowledged to be the major source for his sermon on the Lord's Supper, namely Thomas Clarkson's *Portraitures of Quakerism*. Emerson's reading of the Lord's Supper "followed Clarkson in detail: the absence of any intimation of permanence in Matthew and Mark, the especial significance of the silence of John, … the mention of Luke, who was not present, but whose authority need not be rejected."[62] In addition to Clarkson's influence, however, Emerson's sermon also attests to the appropriation of a different exegetical tradition—the historico-critical method of exegesis. Here Emerson found a formidable critical tool that he had already used in the vestries he delivered in the months before the sermon on the Lord's Supper. Moreover, the exegetical apparatus of his approach to Scripture, which had been such a strain for Emerson's vestry audiences, now fully met the demands of the deacons and members of the congregation who expected from their minister an elaborate and weighty exegetical argumentation.

Emerson's application of historico-critical principles did not stop with his recognition of the importance of the Jewish tradition which helped shape the form of the Lord's Supper. Emerson also applied the sharp edge of historico-critical exegesis to the liturgic formula of the rite itself. Jesus' words at the Passover, Emerson argued, were in keeping with the metaphorical language characteristic of all his teachings: "He always taught by parables and symbols. It was the national way

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[60] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 643.

[61] Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, 392.

[62] Mary C. Turpie, "A Quaker Source for Emerson's Sermon on the Lord's Supper," *New England Quarterly* 17 (1944): 96–97.

of teaching, and was largely used by him. Remember the readiness which he always showed to spiritualize every occurrence" (*W*, 11:9–10). Emerson here again drew on the critical mode of exegesis that he had applied in his vestries and used observations on symbolic form to reduce the Lord's Supper to a ceremonial institution. He consciously applied biblical criticism to undermine claims to universality.

Emerson's rejection of the Lord's Supper as an empty ritual was aligned with a christology that played down the revelatory significance of the human figure of Jesus. This devaluation questioned the special authority of Jesus as "the Mediator" (*W*, 11:18). On this issue, Emerson could draw once more on his brother's Göttingen studies. William had been exposed to Eichhorn's insistence on the opposition between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith." Reconstructing the original Gospel upon which the Evangelists had laid a body of mythical accretions, Eichhorn arrived at the historical Jesus, the ethical teacher of Nazareth. In his sermon on the Lord's supper, Emerson focused in a similar way on the historical Jesus, carefully separating the Gospel accounts of Jesus from what Jesus taught in compliance with the tradition of his Jewish milieu. Emerson then advanced an alternative form of "remembrance" of Jesus which focused on him primarily as a human figure rather than "the Mediator" with unique revelatory significance: "I will love him as a glorified friend, after the free way of friendship" (*W*, 11:20).

This humanistic emphasis on Jesus and the elimination of all sacrificial overtones of the Last Supper provided the basis for the closing argument of Emerson's sermon—the rejection of the Lord's Supper as a "worthless" "form". "Forms are as essential as bodies," Emerson observed, "but to exalt particular forms, to adhere to one form a moment after it is outgrown, is unreasonable, and it is alien to the spirit of Christ" (*W*, 11:20). This rejection of a Christianity of "forms" forced Emerson all the more to affirm a new basis of religion. If "decent forms" and "saving ordinances" could only serve as the "sandy foundations of falsehoods," then the proof of the validity of revelation had to be sought somewhere else—not in historical and external evidences but rather within the heart (*W*, 11:21).

In this context a crucial impetus to "sever the strained cord" that "bound" Emerson to the Second Church was provided by the experiential theology of Schleiermacher. In his vestries Emerson repeatedly took note of the striking way in which Schleiermacher corroborated his own growing reliance on the intuitive testimony of the heart. Com-

menting on the effects of the historico-critical approach to biblical narratives in the fourth vestry, Emerson used Schleiermacher to reiterate that "if we leave the letter and explore the spirit of the apostles and their master, we shall find there is an evidence that will come from the heart to the head, an echo to every sentiment taught by Jesus" (*VL*, 4:15). Underlying this passage was Schleiermacher's subjective synthesis of the rationalistic principles of historico-critical exegesis with a religion of the heart through which Schleiermacher sought to mediate between the experience of faith and the intellectual demands of the new biblical criticism. Confronted with the historical skepticism induced by the higher criticism of Eichhorn, William Emerson had welcomed this religious experience theology with its insistence on man's immediate consciousness of divinity. Similarly, his brother realized that the reliance on religious self-consciousness liberated religion from the externally grounded truth afforded by miracles and inspired Scripture.

Emerson could also draw support from a man who uniquely corroborated the claims of a religion of the heart. "I am entering into acquaintance with Goethe who just died," he wrote to Mary Moody Emerson on August 19, 1832 (*L*, 1:354). Significantly, William, too, had become acquainted with Goethe at a time when, under the impact of his Göttingen studies, he was gradually moving away from the claims of historical Christianity. "To William, beset by distressing doubt at Göttingen," Edward Waldo Emerson writes, "it occurred that, but eighty miles away at Weimar, lived the wisest man of the age. He forthwith sought him out, was kindly received, and laid his doubts before him. He hoped, no doubt, that Goethe could clear these up, and show some way in which he could honourably and sincerely exercise the priestly office" (*W*, 4:367–368 n.). William's conversation with "the gentle and venerable poet" made a deep and lasting impression on him. "I was half an hour with him," William wrote to his aunt in October 1824, "and it was a half hour I shall not soon forget" (*L*, 162 n. 12). The advice William received was in effect to consider that "we had nothing to do with the different systems of philosophy, but that the highest aim of life should be for each one to accommodate himself as perfectly as possible to the station in which he was placed" (*L*, 1:161 n. 12). But on his return journey to Cambridge during a very stormy crossing of the Atlantic, when he was several times "compelled," as he later wrote Mary Moody Emerson, "to make up … [his] last accounts with this world," he "could not go to the bottom in peace with the intention in

his heart of following the advice Goethe had given him."[63] And reporting the incident to Waldo in 1825, William told his brother that he had decided against the ministry and wanted to pursue a career as a lawyer.

While William received from Goethe the advice to satisfy his parishioners' expectations and keep his opinions to himself, Emerson seized upon the German poet for just the opposite advice—to receive confirmation for a religion that relied on the inner testimony of the heart. Emerson's journal entries during the months in which he was preparing to leave the ministry bore ample witness of this significance of Goethe for the young minister. Quoting from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Emerson wrote in September 1832: "Think of Living" (*JMN*, 4:40). A month earlier he had confirmed the "present deity at [his] heart," the "God within" (*JMN*, 4:40, 39). With the insistence on the intuitive emotional principles of the heart, Goethe completed for Emerson what the criticism of the German higher critics had already precipitated—the rejection of a rigid reliance on scriptural authority, on the "external evidences" of an "effete superannuated Christianity" (*JMN*, 4:27).

"[E]very candid theologian after careful study will find himself wide from the traditionary opinions of the bulk of his parishioners." Thus William Emerson had tried to explain to his family in 1825 that he was going to "sacrifice his influence" rather than his "conscience" (*L*, 1:352 n. 37). In like manner, his younger brother wrote to Mary Moody Emerson on August 19, 1832 that he was determined to leave the ministry. Emerson expressly referred to his decision as a "German" behavior: "[T]he least leaf must … grow after the fashion of *its own* lobes [and] veins [and] not after that of the oak or the rose, and I can only do my work well by abjuring the opinions [and] customs of all others [and] adhering strictly to the divine plan a few dim inches of whose outline I faintly discern in my breast. Is that not German en[ough]?" (*L*, 1:354).

In describing his decision to place the claims of his heart over and above the "opinions and customs" of the ministry as a "German" behavior, Emerson referred in particular to the higher critics who had reinforced his own acute sense of the disparity between individual conscience and scriptural authority. For Norton, the historical skepticism of the new biblical criticism was bound to lead to "infidelity". To tam-

[63] Letter to Mary Moody Emerson, 27 October 1825; quoted in Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 113.

per with the historic foundation of faith was to undermine faith itself. For Emerson, by contrast, the higher criticism became an initial platform for his Transcendentalist beliefs—a faith based on the inductive authority of intuition and experience. The overriding thrust of the new biblical criticism was to move toward an expressly immanent position. The incompatibility between the historical testimony of Scripture and revelation increasingly led to the affirmation of a truth that had to be sought independently of biblical revelation, in the "spirit" rather than the "letter." The new biblical criticism was in this respect in accord with what would become the trademark of Emerson's full-fledged Transcendentalist position: the conception of revelation as gradual and progressive, and, more importantly, the use of subjective religious experience as a new foundation for spiritual truth.