CHAPTER 36

BOSTON AND BEYOND

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One mark of the artistry of the American Transcendentalist writers is that they and their ideas are firmly linked in readers' minds with specific, finely realized places. We think of Thoreau at Walden Pond, hoeing beans so that, "attached...to the earth, I got strength like Antaeus" (Walden 155). And we picture Emerson walking in the Concord woods and pastures, then traveling to Cambridge to deliver an address at the Harvard Divinity School, where he reports that his inspiration comes not from far-off Palestine but from the countryside, where "the air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay" (Emerson 176). In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Walt Whitman reminds readers that "Brooklyn of ample hills was mine, / I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it" (162).

The Transcendentalists' embrace of what Emerson spoke of as the "near, the low, the common" was central to their strategy of escaping what might be called the anxiety of provincialism (Emerson 167). In "Life without Principle" Thoreau both acknowledged the problem and pointed to a way out when he charged that "with respect to a true culture and manhood, we are essentially provincial still, not metropolitan,—mere Jonathans. We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards" (Thoreau 174). Nothing more dramatically reveals one's provincialism than the assumption of an unearned cosmopolitanism. In "The American Scholar" Emerson explained that he had no use for "the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art...I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low." For "Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds." Charging that Americans had "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," Emerson proclaimed American intellectual independence and
laid claim to a great subject: "[T]his confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar" (EmcCw 147, 69).

While this attention to place enabled the Transcendentalists, along with other antebellum writers, to escape the anxiety of provincialism, it may obscure for us an essential truth about the movement: in both its origins and continuing development, it was transnational. That it had its beginnings in the work of writers such as Johann G. Fichte, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle is well known. Less well understood is the way that deepening contacts between American writers and like-minded colleagues in England proved to be essential to Transcendentalism's growth and development from the 1830s through the Civil War. By focusing on Transcendentalism as a movement centered in Concord and Boston—with offshoots in places as Brooklyn and New York, where Margaret Fuller and George Ripley served as literary editors of Horace Greeley's Tribune—we might well overlook the importance of the Americans to their counterparts in England. Even as they took much from abroad, the American Transcendentalists gave much in return.

In March 1840, the leading British radical quarterly, the Westminster Review, published the first comprehensive critical essay on Emerson to appear in Britain—or anywhere else. In "American Philosophy—Emerson's Works," the British poet, critic, and politician RichardMockton Milnes categorically dismissed Emerson's claims of American originality. After stating that "there is little in such of his works as have reached us (and we have read all that we can find), which would be new to the competent student of European Philosophy," he argued that "much, nay most, of what his country would probably claim exclusively for his own, has been thought of, spoken of, and written of, by Fichte, or Goethe, or Novalis, or Coleridge, or Carlyle." Coleridge, Milnes reports, told him that "I am a poor Poet in England, but I am a great Philosopher over the Atlantic," where Aids to Reflection "went through many editions...before the first was exhausted at home." Also influential in America is the "loftier and more suggestive poetry of Wordsworth" (345, 350, 346).

Milnes's purpose is not to claim that Emerson or other American Transcendentalists are derivative, mere echoes of European sources, but rather to establish the grounds for transnational cooperation: "[N]o one, however well read," he writes of Emerson, "would feel anything but gratification at reading thoughts already familiar to him, arrayed in language so freshly vigorous, so eloquently true." The "seed" of the American transcendental philosophy "may have been brought from elsewhere," but even now the "plant is assimilated to the climate and the soil" (345). While particularly well-suited to the Americans' lofty ambitions, Transcendentalism will serve, he predicts, as the basis for a mutually beneficial relationship between England and America: "[A]lready has it been shown more clearly than was ever before believed, that the links of national sympathy are to be found on each side of the Atlantic, and that the chain wants but to be well soldered together" (372).

Over the next two decades the links of the "chain" that connected American Transcendentalists with their British counterparts would indeed be "well soldered" together. As Transcendentalism expanded beyond the philosophic idealism that Milnes discussed to include questions such as abolition, the rights of women and workers, social reform, literary expression, and liberal theology, the mutually productive relationships that developed between writers on both sides of the Atlantic proved crucial as the two nations together faced the seemingly intractable questions that confronted them. This story can be told through two British sources that served as essential places of cultural contact: the Westminster Review and the work of the irrepressible London publisher and bookseller John Chapman.

Late in 1843 or early 1844, John Chapman, a young disciple of Emerson, purchased the publishing business of John Green, "the Unitarian and Transcendental Bibliophile for all England hitherto," as Theodore Parker described him in an 1844 letter to Emerson (Eml. 3:287-130). Green was the distributor of the Died in England and offered books by Americans such as Channing and Parker. Expanding upon Green's "franchise," Chapman would work tirelessly to bring the work of the American Transcendentalists to Britain, while also publishing books by advanced British thinkers and translations from the German higher criticism. In 1846 he released George Eliot's anonymous translation of D. F. Strauss's Life of Jesus. In 1851 the always-pressed Chapman somehow assembled the funds to purchase the Westminster Review. Working closely with Eliot as de facto but unacknowledged editor, he enhanced the reputation of the quarterly. Even as it continued to challenge America to eliminate slavery, the Westminster remained a stalwart supporter of the great commonwealth across the water. True friends do not hesitate to tell each other the truth, even when it hurts.

Chapman had been publishing quietly by accident. While looking for a publisher for his book Human Nature, he had entered Green's bookshop to pitch the proposal (Haight, Eliot and Chapman 3). However, Green convinced Chapman to purchase the entire business. Chapman thus became his own publisher and released the book early in 1844. A reading of Human Nature reveals Emerson's deep impact on Chapman. For instance, after quoting at length from Emerson's "Compensation," he speaks of the American's revolutionary power: "When the truth and importance of [Emerson's] doctrines shall be fully appreciated, when they shall live in consciousness, and become graven in the universal mind, a great mental and moral revolution will inevitably ensue. Our daily habits and occupations, our desires and aims, nay our very life-purpose, modes of thought, and religion, must be effectually changed and renewed" (66). It would, however, be as publisher, not as author, that Chapman set out to realize that "great mental and moral revolution."

On July 30, 1844, Henry G. Wright, an Englishman and a former member of the Fruitlands community in Massachusetts, wrote to Emerson to introduce Chapman as a publisher who had already achieved "a good and an increasing connexion among the best of our modern thinkers, especially among the Unitarians." Chapman, he explained, worshipped "at the shrine of certain Transatlantic Discourses on 'Nature' and transcendental 'Essay' writers." On the same sheet, Chapman added his offer to serve as Emerson's British publisher, an offer that Emerson accepted (Eml.
Within the year Chapman published pamphlet form two of Emerson’s lectures, “The Young American” and his “Address… on the… Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” and, most important, Emerson’s Essays: Second Series. At the end of the Young American pamphlet, a listing of “Works published by John Chapman” identified three additional books by Emerson: Essays, Nature and Orations, and Nature, and Lectures on the Times (although it is not clear whether he actually published the latter two works). “Emancipation of the Negroes” is particularly significant, for here Emerson, who in “The American Scholar” had declared the end of America’s “dependence” on England, recognized that if the nation were to abolish slavery, it must enter into a partnership with the British, who had created a “moral revolution” by ending Negro slavery (EmCWC 26). He told Carlyle on September 1, 1844, that he “hastened” the work through the Boston printers so as to rush it to Chapman (EmCWC 364).

In 1841, the London publisher James Fraser had released the first series of Emerson’s Essays, which contained Carlyle’s short preface: “The name of Ralph Waldo Emerson is not entirely new in England; distinguished travelers bring us tidings of such a man. Fractions of his writing have found their way into the hands of the curious here; trifling hints that there is, in New England, some spiritual Notability called Emerson, glide through the Reviews and Magazines. Whether these hints are true or not true, readers are now to judge for themselves a little better” (vi). In that 1844 letter, Parker had told Emerson that he had learned from a “Scotch Bookseller at Cambridge” that of your Essays—and another volume containing Lectures, orations and—between 5000 & 6000 had already been sold,” but since no copyright had been acquired, Emerson did not benefit (EmCWC 3287). Chapman hoped to secure copyright protection for Essays: Second Series, but given the “contradictory and convoluted” provisions of the law, was unable to do so (AshS 19). On August 31, 1844, Emerson wrote him that “I very cheerfully & thankfully confide the whole presentation of me to my countrymen to your kind charge” (EmCWC 7261). Carlyle visited Chapman on September 29, 1844, and shortly afterward wrote Emerson that the publisher “is a tall lank youth… full of goodwill, but of what ever equipment time must yet try. By a little Book of his [Human Nature]… he seemed to me sunk very deep in the dust-hole of extinct Socinianism; a painful predilection for a man!” Still, Carlyle had confidence that Chapman “will print the Book [Essays: Second Series] correctly… and your ever-increasing little congregation here will do with the new word what they can” (EmCWC 367).

Chapman was disappointed to learn that the Dial would be suspended after the April 1844 issue. However, he asked Parker to present to Emerson a plan “to start a new Dial i.e. a monthly Magazine—to be printed in London—to be written for by yourself.” Along with like-minded British writers (EmCWC 3287). Nothing came of that proposal, but it reflects Chapman’s vision of Transcendentalism as a transatlantic movement, a vision that Emerson came to share. As Emerson’s successful lecture tour in Britain during the 1847–48 season was coming to an end, he wrote to James Elliot Cabot that Chapman is “eager to have a Journal for New and Old England published simultaneously in London & Boston, and… substantially on the plan of the Dial. I found some young men lately at Oxford, Fellows of Colleges, who entered willingly enough into his thought.” These included James Anthony Froude and Arthur Hugh Clough. “It deserves consideration,” Emerson continued, “whether our book would not be better, & certainly, easier supplied from two countries” (EmCWC 4560–61). He shared his enthusiasm in letters to Margaret Fuller and to his wife, Lizian, writing to Lizian, “Let the Mass[achussetts]. Q[quarterly]. [Review] give way to this & we should have two legs, & beat the sea” (EmCWC 4566). That “new Dial” would not come into being, but in becoming proprietor of the Westminster, Chapman did the next best thing.

When in 1846 Chapman brought out a work by the American mesmeric visionary Andrew Jackson Davis, Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind. By and through Andrew Jackson Davis, the “Poughkeepsie Seen,” and “Clairvoyant,” he also published a pamphlet, Brief Outlines and Review, which served as an introduction to the work and a justification of his own role as radical publisher: “There are, perhaps, few English publishers, occupying a respectable position in their profession, who would not shrink from the responsibility of issuing [this] work… not only on account of the asserted nature of its origin—which the inherent conservatism of Englishmen will predispose them to discredit,—but also in consequence of the views which the work unfolds, and the power with which our present modes of thought, prevailing theology, existing institutions and practices are attacked; and the vitiating portion of their influences exposed” (Brief Outlines 5). In a time of political and religious repression, Chapman courageously laid siege to those destructive “modes of thought.” One of Transcendentalism’s enduring legacies, Barbara Parker wrote in reference to Theodore Parker, was the strength “to stand fast in a time of trouble” (Packer 93). Permanently strapped for cash, Chapman indeed stood fast. As Valerie Dodd put it, while he “concentrate[d] on progressive religious and philosophical works,” he boldly and “defiantly flew in the face of an adverse intellectual climate, which only strengthened his resolve.” Ironically, the works of “philosophical Christianity and scientific theology” that Chapman offered “were seen as a greater threat to orthodoxy than outright atheism” (Dodd 161–62). Chapman’s list included radical works such as Francis W. Newman’s The Soul: her Sorrows and her Aspirations (1849) and Phases of Faith (1850), as well as Froude’s notorious novel Nemesis of Faith, a sensation in 1849. In 1848 Chapman became the London agent for the New York publisher George P. Putnam, who had dissolved his partnership with John Wiley (AshS 46–48). His American list expanded greatly, becoming a virtual meeting place for like-minded British and American writers. The 1852 Analytical Catalogue of Mr. Chapman’s Publications, compiled by George Eliot, presents a fairly extensive summary of the theories of many of his most important publications (Haight, Eliot 86–87).

In the spring of 1847, Chapman and his family moved to commodious accommodations at 142 Strand, where he ran his publishing and bookselling business and also held his brilliant soirées, which attracted advanced thinkers from Britain, as well as visiting Americans. So large was the establishment that he also rented rooms and went out of his way to accommodate Americans such as Emerson, William Cullen...
Bryant, and Horace Greeley. Early in 1851 George Eliot became a boarder, but so strongly was she attracted to the handsome Chapman that his wife, Susanna, and his mistress, Elisabeth Tilley (who was also his children's governess), drove her from the premises. Fortunately, Chapman negotiated a truce that brought Eliot back to 143 Strand so that she could work with him on the Westminster, where her brilliant work helped lay the groundwork for her emergence as the great novelist that she became.

Founded by Jeremy Bentham and John Mill, the Westminster Review (1824–1914) served as the great voice of radical thought, set alongside the Tory Quarterly Review (1809–1967) and the Whig Edinburgh Review (1802–1929). No periodical did more than the Westminster to introduce progressive American thought to Britain and to bring advanced thought from Britain to America. From the start it embraced the United States as a successful democracy, the ideal commonwealth that was implementing the social policies for which it was campaigning at home. While English in origin and character, America did very well without such English institutions as an established church, monarchy, tax on the popular press, repressive Corn Laws, or restricted electorate. Needless to say, the Westminster's praise of the United States served as a point of conflict with conservative British periodicals, which "found it desirable to maintain an unfriendly attitude toward the radical experiment in America. It menaced the English government; and the Westminster by rejoicing in that menace made it all the worse" (Nesbit 47–48). When the quarterly did write critically of such features of American life as slavery, it reminded readers of shared culpability. Who first brought slaves to Virginia? In an article on Canada—which it urged to break away from Britain and join with America—the Westminster asserted that "No nations on the face of the globe are so well governed, or so prosperous as the United States" (Nesbit 63). Progressive Americans could not have asked for a better friend.

The importance of the Westminster in antebellum America becomes even clearer when we realize that, as Edward Everett Hale recalled, Americans "of literary aspirations, especially young people, read the English magazines almost religiously" (Hale 160). In the absence of international copyright, British periodicals were available in inexpensive reprints, leading the Westminster to observe in January 1852 that "we find nothing answering to "our" Blackwood and "our" Tait, our "Edinburgh" and "Westminster," but instead these very magazines are "circulating in the States like aboriginal productions." After acknowledging the superiority of American theological periodicals, the Westminster remarked that Americans "seem more disposed for 'annexation' than for rivalry in other departments." (Ironically, it was an American, Rufus Wilmot Griswold, who wrote the piece "Retrospective" [320].) Calling British cultural hegemony a "disgusting spectacle," Edgar Allan Poe, writing in the Broadway Journal of October 4, 1845, asserted that "we know the British to bear us little but ill-will; and yet 'day after day, we submit our necks to the degrading yoke of the crudest opinion that emanates from the fatherland." (Poe 1077.) The Westminster was the notable exception.

James Martineau, Britain's foremost Unitarian theologian during the nineteenth century, identified William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker as the two writers who exerted the most profound influence on him at different stages of his development. In 1849 he wrote to Francis W. Newman that "I suppose it agrees with the experience of every teachable man, that during his life some three or four books appear, so impressive and speaking to his peculiar affections and wants, as to constitute one of the great powers of his being, and visibly to make him what he becomes before he dies. When I was young Channing worked upon me thus; more recently Parker" (Carpenter 302–3). For Martineau, as for others, Channing's Unitarianism would give way to the Transcendentalism of Parker and Emerson; however, Channing remained a profound presence in Britain through the 1830s and into the 1840s.

In "Dr. Channing's Works," published anonymously in April 1830, the Westminster hailed the American as a writer who "sends back to us from across the Atlantic" a "new spirit in religion," one that combines a powerful imaginative and spiritual vision with an intense commitment to social reform (489). Occupied by Channing's "Remarks on the Character and Writings of John Milton," published in the Christian Examiner in 1824 and as a pamphlet in 1826, the Westminster essay helps us understand why Channing became such a liberating figure for British Unitarians. The reviewer finds in Channing the very qualities that he celebrates in Milton: an appreciation of poetry as a vehicle to know spiritual truths not available to the rational mind; a passionate defense of freedom of speech; and a demand for social transformation so powerful as to justify revolutionary action. Milton's and Channing's attacks on priestcraft and political repression served as proxies in the Westminster's war against the Anglican Church and the Tories. That Channing forcefully articulated those same themes in speaking of Milton came as a revelation. As "an incarnation of the intellectual spirit of Christianity," Channing opened the way for a reinvigoration of Unitarian theology through his engagement with contemporary philosophy and his ability to address social questions. The American rectified a "grand mistake" of the religious world: "alienating itself from the philosophical world" (473). Remarkably, Channing's affirmation of Milton's continuing importance helped England rediscover its own democratic traditions.

By way of contrast, one might cite William Hazlitt's condescending "American Literature—Dr. Channing," published in the Edinburgh Review in October 1829. Accusing Channing, along with other Americans, of the intellectual timidity that comes from living in a country dominated by the tyranny of the majority, Hazlitt dismissed Channing's Milton essay by calling it "elaborate and stately, but neither new nor discriminating" (325). Even so, as Barbara Packer notes, the Edinburgh "remained friendlier to the United States than did many other foreign periodicals." Consequently, "Bostonians who read the British reviews quickly learned that their local idols were not always treated with reverence elsewhere," and yet the style of those reviews was so "infectious" that even Frederic Henry Hedge, a founder of the Transcendental Club in 1836, came to affect the "witty nonchalance" of the "invisible invincibles" of the Edinburgh (39). In this context, we can see why the Westminster stands as an exception to British cultural hostility toward America.

The author of the Westminster's inspirational article on Channing has not been identified. One possibility is W. J. Fox, the Unitarian minister turned politician
who, in January 1824, had written the lead article in the quarterly’s first issue, which “emphasizes most the increased importance of the people in national life” (Nebbitt 42). Alternatively, the author might have been another member of the circle of freethinkers and reformers who met at Fox’s house in Stamford Hill. Fox, who was involved in just about all of the reform campaigns of the time, sent Channing a collection of his sermons, Christ and Christianity, published in 1823. In his reply thanking Fox, Channing articulated what he took to be their shared commitment to “a spirit of revolution which is now spreading over the world. I see one tendency which is sure. It is rescuing men from the tyranny of the past, and perhaps nothing but the breaking up of old institutions, terrible as the first effects may be, can set the mind free to enter a new career, to achieve something nobler than the low forms of religion and virtue which have come down from the former ages” (Garnett 140). Under the influence of works such as Strauss’s Life of Jesus, Fox would grow increasingly heterodox and eventually leave the pulpit to focus on social reform. He was elected to Parliament in 1847.

Over the course of the 1830s and into the next decade, Channing became increasingly committed to the abolitionist cause. On October 1, 1842, shortly before his death, on October 2 of that year, he organized an observance in Lenox, Massachusetts, of the anniversary of the British emancipation of slaves in the West Indies and delivered the major address, in which he interpreted British emancipation as a “new proof of the coming of Christ in his kingdom” (Stange 97). In September 1840, the Westminster’s editor, W. E. Hickson, claimed that Channing’s “On the Elevation of the Laboring Portion of the Community” had found a wide readership in Britain. He credited John Green for bringing out “these lectures in a cheap form [four pence] for extensive circulation. The tract containing them is one all should read, but which especially should be in the hands of the friends and members of the Mechanics Institute” (Hickson 383). James Martineau, in his 1850 review of Memoir of William Ellery Channing, which Chapman brought out in England, wrote that the American’s “influence though not fitted for permanence, has been both wide and deep” (“Channing” 345).

That Theodore Parker became almost as well known in Britain as in the United States was due in no small part to the exceptional work of his English publishers, first Green and then Chapman. So important was Parker’s Discourse of Matters pertaining to Religion to Chapman that in 1851 he attempted to divert funds from one of his wealthy patrons, Edward Lombe, to bring out an inexpensive edition for the widest possible circulation, a request that Lombe rejected (Ashton 139). Nevertheless, that Chapman risked alienating his patron at the very time that he depended upon his support to purchase the Westminster reflects his determination to bring Parker to the people. The key to Parker’s appeal in Britain was perhaps best captured by Henry B. Wilson, who wrote in Westminster in 1860 that Parker’s “doctrine of Immanence as contrasted to the conception of an extra-mundane Deity” is “one with which the progress of science—better than any controversy—is daily rendering men more and more familiar.” After speaking of the commanding power of Parker’s spiritual vision, which “makes us outgrow any form or any system and approach still closer to the truth,” Wilson noted Emerson’s tribute to Parker as a reformer who “insisted beyond all men in pulpit that the essence of Christianity is its practical morals” (Wilson 532).

Parker had been subjected to “quasi-persecution,” Wilson wrote, but was “too strong to be put down.” The reference is to the intense pressure placed on Parker by his ministerial colleagues to resign from the Boston Association of Ministers since on such questions as miracles, the authority of the Bible, and the divinity of Christ his preaching undermined Christian doctrine. Few of his ministerial colleagues would invite him to speak from their pulpits. Worn down from that struggle and other work, in 1843 Parker and his wife set out on a trip to England and the Continent. He formed particularly close relationships with leading British Unitarians, most notably with James Martineau, in whose Liverpool church he preached. He might have been denied such invitations in Boston but not in England. In 1850, through the good offices of Martineau, Parker secured the safe passage to England of the escaped slaves William and Ellen Craft, who narrowly avoided recapture in Boston (Stange 119).

In April 1847 James Martineau wrote for the Westminster a review of two books of theology published by Chapman: Eliot’s translation of Strauss’s Life of Jesus, mentioned earlier, and Parker’s Discourse of Matters pertaining to Religion. The discussion of Parker is penetrating and appreciative, especially when read against the hegemonic power of the Anglican Church. Martineau speaks of Parker’s claim that it is the reverential intuition in man which is the active, spontaneous source of religion; which knows its own object, goes out in search of it, discerns it with a clearness and perfection proportioned to the power and harmony of the faculties, and cannot, by any external means, be put into any better apprehension of it… In conjunction with all the principles of man’s nature… it evolves itself into Absolute Religion.” (Strauss 169)

Martineau does not use the term, but it is as a Transcendentalist that he characterizes Parker: “For him, however, the historical element of the Scriptures is but the scaffold that holds the divine seed of religious truth: and no wind can sweep it away, till it has dropped the burden of its reproductive wealth” (172).

In 1853 Chapman released Parker’s Theism, Atheism, and Popular Theology, a collection of recent sermons. Henry Morley’s review in the Westminster credited Chapman with taking the initiative in putting the project together: “Though the composition of an American author, we owe the publication of this admirable volume to the enterprise of an English publisher, who has enriched it with a portrait of the author.” (That may be, but the work did appear simultaneously in the United States.) Morley captured the profound appeal of Parker’s theology for that group of English readers who, despite their doubts, refused to consider themselves atheists. Parker’s quest is “for the better conception of divine things, of which the writer is a chief apostle.” In his work “there is shown to arise in natural development the