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Introduction: Becoming an Atheist

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INTRODUCTION

Becoming an Atheist

RALPH WALDO EMERSON HAS NOT USUALLY BEEN DESCRIBED AS AN ATHEIST. Rather, he is one of America's great intellectuals of the nineteenth century, an essayist, a poet, a popular lecturer of his day, the creator of Transcendentalism, and the guru of a dedicated and creative group of literati in and around nineteenth century Concord, Massachusetts. Admittedly, he left his ministerial position in the Second Church of Boston in 1832, and the label *atheist* may, or may not, be the best word to use.

Defining the term is hazardous, unfortunately. What is an atheist? Like all words that have a range of possible meanings, it invites ambiguity. A theism is a religion that includes a personal God or gods; the Greek noun *theos* means *god*, and the prefix *a* adds the negative *no* or *not*. In one sense, then, an atheist is one who rejects any theistic religion. There is, though, the possibility of non-theistic religion, as the examples of Buddhism and Taoism remind us. Should our atheist not bother about the difference between theistic and non-theistic versions, he will be one who rejects all religions, of whatever type. Still, we cannot overlook the fact that a personal God or gods is the defining note of the concept of theism, and so an atheist may be one who rejects or refuses to believe in a personal God or gods. The absence of a personal God raises still another question, viz. With what is religion concerned if not with a personal

God? There are the Buddhist and Taoist answers, but no one is inclined to associate atheists with Buddhists and Taoists. This study hopes to clarify some of this ambiguity in Emerson's case and let the term *atheist* be a way of highlighting Emerson's complicated relation to religion. It is an odd feature of some atheists that they are not content to ignore religion and religious people: they may angrily attack the former or accuse the latter of some phobia or psychiatric disorder. Emerson, however, remained benevolent toward religion, holding on to the word itself, even while rejecting it for himself. In short, he could live neither with it nor without it.

Maybe poets and mystics find it easy to read Emerson. After all, they seem to have a special vision of the world, a vision that is able to look at physical realities and see not only the physical reality but some higher reality or meaning attending the physical, or suggested by it, or standing behind it in some way. We who are neither poets nor mystics may have to work a bit harder, then, to wrap our minds around Emerson's worldview, because it is a worldview that looks at the astounding diversity of physical realities and sees one reality. Just one. To Emerson, everything is one, and that one he calls *Over-Soul*. The Over-Soul is all that exists; everything is Over-Soul. He calls it by other names as well; but, once we readers are on his wave length, the diversity of names does not confuse; indeed, it even helps. Naturally, why the Sage of Concord should not only say this but construct a whole philosophically-based worldview upon this startling notion is a good question. The best answer, I believe, is that he had to.

When he left the Unitarian ministry in 1832, he rejected Christianity, as he understood it, and religion in general. A thoughtful man, he did not do this lightly. Ever the intellectual, he sought answers to basic questions that most, if not all, thinking persons ask, basic questions about human life, values, goals, and meaningfulness. Rejecting one system of answers, he would reasonably search out, or, in his case, create an alternative. He wasn't rejecting his Calvinist-Puritan-Unitarian heritage alone; had dissatisfaction with these been the issue, there were other denominations and religions

to consider. His biographers, for instance, document his early interest in Hinduism all through his college years. The Unitarian option, already the official theology of the Second Church where he ministered, was clear and hospitable to many in his day, and his special regard for the Reverend William Ellery Channing might have kept him in that intellectual and spiritual home. Readers may never know every detail of that great transition of his life. Recognizing the dearth of insight into his motivation and unwilling to carry on armchair psychology, we can at least recognize that he rejected the worldview of his New England ancestors and created one of his very own, one that a number of his contemporaries considered atheistic.

Possibly, he would not have approved of being associated with atheists, because atheists had traditionally gotten a bad press. They were generally materialists, and he was not. They saw no firm basis for morality, and he insisted that there had to be such a basis. There certainly was no such tendency in his family of ministers, and the very cerebral and crisp Unitarianism of Boston would have rejected such a label. His early sermons sometimes attacked atheism: he wrote that the “insane voice” of atheism has been heard, though generally not heeded; that men are not prone to atheism; and that atheism can be cured. That his comments on Catholics are harsher than those on atheists implies something about his willingness to attack what he truly disliked; his relatively-mild attacks on atheism suggest a higher level of tolerance of atheism than should be expected in traditional ministers. By 1831 he sounded an even-milder note, arguing that the atheist may still observe his moral obligations; further, he expected the atheist to recognize man’s derivative existence. There were atheists whom he found admirable: Achille Murat impressed him during their shipboard acquaintance in 1827, and his writings are replete with favorable references to thinkers who were probably atheists.

Nonetheless, seeing him as atheist makes more sense than any protestations to the contrary that he might offer, and the reading that I offer here was inspired by the judgment that his world view makes sense if we read it as his personal alternative to the religion

that he rejected. It makes sense because, I believe, it was formed from what he objected to in Christianity. Rejecting his Unitarian upbringing, he did not affiliate himself with any other organized religion; this fact implies that, whatever the root of the dissatisfaction with Unitarianism, other organized religions were equally unsatisfactory.

As an alternative to religion, a philosophical system or school might have been a consideration. Philosophy, after all, pre-dated Christianity by about six hundred years and had a secular pedigree that might have served him well. There is little evidence, though, that his goal was to create a philosophical world-view. He employs no identifiable philosophical method; he never seeks to argue and persuade his readers, preferring to provoke them into their own intellectual and spiritual odyssey. Nonetheless his readers have to be alert to the wealth of philosophical concepts and terms that he uses freely. His philosophical eclecticism tells us that, having rejected organized religion, for reasons we hope to identify, he did not align himself to any one philosophical school.

It is conventional wisdom that there were many influences on Emerson. While all of these influences belong comfortably in the family of Idealistic philosophies, there is enough diversity therein to allow us to marvel at Emerson’s ability to appropriate them in a new way. This new way, or Transcendentalism, was old, then, as well as new. It is a perspective that understands reality to be both material and non-material, or spiritual, as do all versions of Idealistic philosophy. Unlike the latter, though, Transcendentalism holds that the spiritual dimension does not exist outside the material realm and yet ‘transcends’ it. Traditional forms of Idealism see the spiritual as completely distinct and separate; the transcendent is outside of, or ‘without’ the material realm. Emerson’s version, however, argues that the transcendent is ‘within’ the material, even while not separate. Thus the human soul seeks within for the transcendent.

Part of the challenge of Transcendentalism is the word itself. The words *transcendentalism* and *transcendentalist* are ambiguous when they first appear in Emerson’s Journals and Letters, where their general sense is *reform* and *reformers*. Emerson does not

seem comfortable with being associated with the reformers, even though the emerging movement dates back to the Transcendental Club, or Hedge's Club, which he supported and whose meetings he attended. In Providence, Rhode Island for a lecture series, he wrote to his mother on March 28, 1840, "You must know I am reckoned here a Transcendentalist, and what that beast is, all persons in Providence have a great appetite to know." And yet, in 1842, in *The Transcendentalist*, he praises the movement and relates it to his own world view as already articulated and published in *Essays, First Series* the previous year. He speculates that the inspiration for the word was probably the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant. His knowledge of the Kantian critiques was not extensive, and he associated Kant's forms of intuition with the moral sentiment of his own. Whatever the vocabulary, Emerson approved of the view that the human mind is not completely dependent on sense data but has internal resources through which experience is acquired and shaped.

A new vision of the unity of Nature, Emerson's Transcendentalism was created from philosophical elements of a long past, even while it is arguable that Emerson may be labeled a philosopher in any traditional sense. He viewed Nature as a unity, and such an idea as the unity of Nature speaks of an earlier age, of pre-modern times and cosmologies. It may even strike one as quaint, as it may have already done to nineteenth-century Americans. It is doubtful, though, that Emerson can be understood, unless, like him, we see the unity of Nature as a non-negotiable, basic, or determining concept. Yet, he held that everything is Over-Soul. The connection between Nature and Over-Soul, then, must be central to understanding him.

Many of the thinkers and schools of thought that influenced him made some appearance in his essays, and we can identify enough of these to accomplish the present task. There are two mistakes in Emersonian commentary that I hope to avoid here. One mistake is to overlook his on-going interest in, and respect for, Unitarian Christianity, though he rejected it for himself. His departure from the ministry was not merely a change of jobs, a transition to be

mentioned quickly and passed over. For instance, he continued using Christian terminology, even while he changed its meaning. This free-wheeling word play should come as no surprise to readers, because it is one of his favorite strategies, probably one more technique for provoking the reader into thinking along new paths. Furthermore, the tenets of his Transcendentalism are too close to their Unitarian analogues to be accidental; even those that he rejects are important to notice, simply because he thought them important enough to replace. In a strict sense he was not a philosopher to readers who expect argumentation and careful discourse. It would be a mistake, however, not to take up the disparate philosophical ideas that he put to work. Far from arguing, he is provocative; he is not, alas, always logical. Accordingly I have pointed to some parallels between Unitarianism and the basic elements of his Transcendentalism, identifying key philosophical ideas and thinkers that he employed. My task is to demonstrate that his world view was an intellectual and spiritual home, a home which he built from disparate philosophical ideas, a home in which he took up residence after testing religion and finding it wanting. Even though he definitively left the ministry and religion, thoughts of religion never left him, and assorted philosophical ideas were his construction material.

The world-view that he achieved for himself, which eventually received the label *Transcendentalism*, was like those ever-growing circles that he described in the essay *Circles*; insights generate further insights, in a never-ending dynamic of human progress. Elucidating Transcendentalism is the difficult part of what I hope to accomplish. It is not, though, the place to begin. We have to begin by surveying, first the Unitarianism of his place and time, and, second, his ministerial vocation. It was a vocation that tugged at him. But his heart was just not in it.

His world-view was an eclectic mix that satisfied him, even while it has confused so many readers through the years. Through the years his writings have been the locus of innumerable investigations, most of them literary in interest; and this literary interest is extensive and appropriate. Overlooking the philosophical concepts,

though, is a mistake. This is a need that I hope to serve here. He was at home with Idealism, with Plato and Plotinus especially. From the very beginning of his college years he read Hindu literature with great interest. Coleridge was important; Spinoza, Eriugena, and Swedenborg were helpful. The Scottish Moralists, especially Dugald Stewart, also played their role in the shaping of the heady mixture called *Transcendentalism*. This world-view truly cannot be understood without seeing the array of philosophical ideas with which it is permeated.

What follows here, then, is an intellectual history of the great transition of his life; it is an account of his journey out of Christianity into a new intellectual and spiritual home of his own creation. Chronologically, this journey began almost as soon as he decided to study for the ministry, continued through the 1820s and 1830s, and was as complete as it would ever be with the publication of his first book of essays in 1841. I have cited a few texts later than 1841 only when they help to clarify ideas of the transitional years. In subsequent years, from the 1840s on, his worldview in place, his attention turned to social commentary, but I do not deal with this later phase.

In the chapters that follow, we follow the path of this important transitional period of his life. We begin with a portrait of the Unitarianism in which he was raised. William Ellery Channing is important for understanding this religious community, which in turn is important for understanding Emerson. Attention to Channing, therefore, is necessary. This denomination was how he understood Christianity, so that the rejection of the former became a rejection of the latter and, indeed, of all organized religion. His short career in the ministry is an important biographical element, because it is a survey of his unsure vocation as minister. He seemed less than enthusiastic about the direct, personal contact with people in his parish; and much time was spent away from the parish, albeit in a concern that the health of his wife Ellen might be improved by travelling about. And there is the unsettling influence of the new trends in theology that reached him via his brother William. In this task, journals, letters, and sermons tell us what we need to know.

I am calling the years 1832-1836 an interim period. Though not having his own parish anymore, he still served as a “supply” or substitute preacher and began now his lecturing career. The sermons, for the most part, observe traditional Unitarian requirements; at times, though, there are departures that we recognize as more like the Transcendentalism to come, especially in four of the themes, viz. God, Heaven, human existence, and religion. The lectures are good sources for understanding his signature view of the human soul, viz. that its highest activity is the moral sentiment.

An important turning-point is the publication of *Nature* in 1836, an act of independence for him. The several sections of what he called his “little book” spell out his unique idealistic blend of philosophical concepts that form his unique view of the physical world. Equally important in his achieving intellectual and spiritual independence is the address given to the Harvard Divinity School’s graduating class of 1838. Here we find his virtual attack on Christianity and his re-definition of religion. This was a startling and divisive address, as we see from reactions of key contemporaries. This was a second great announcement of the new Emerson, who presented so forcefully his objections to Unitarian and Christian beliefs.

The central concepts of his ontology are the Over-Soul and Nature, and these have detailed treatment here. While he held on to traditional terms like revelation and religion, he re-defined these for his main purpose, viz. to discard a supernatural sense of revelation from a transcendent God in favor of a natural revelation from within the human soul. The Over-Soul supported this task and provided authority for human moral experience. The physical world is the dynamic self-embodiment of the Over-Soul. Borrowing philosophical vocabulary from Coleridge, Spinoza, and Eriugena, and arguing for the inadequacy of materialism and empiricism, he defined the relation of Over-Soul and Nature in terms of ideas or laws.

The Over-Soul and Nature being what they are, the question of the position of human beings in his world view requires examination; in the grand view of Transcendentalism, human beings still do occupy a privileged place. Their role is to serve as the intellectual

and spiritual conduit for the ideas or laws emanating from the Over-Soul; this role establishes their uniqueness and defines their moral obligations. How we are to live, how we are to acquire virtue or be moral are crucial questions for Emerson. He answers these questions, also presenting his dialectical understanding of the relationship between freedom and fate. Lastly, I offer my own answers to the traditional questions raised about him, and the charges leveled against him by his contemporaries, viz. that he was either a pantheist or an atheist.

The early essays are essential works; if there is any replacement for his Unitarianism, it is discernible here, and the essays are his most carefully crafted works. Sermons, early lectures, correspondence, and journal entries have proved helpful too. I have depended on the earlier works, in those years when he was working out the great transition of his life; later works, beginning with those of the mid-1840s, when his attention shifted to social concerns, were less helpful for my specific purpose. An interesting note is that, despite his constant reminders that life's intellectual and spiritual journey is unending, Emerson did not change his mind about the basic ideas of Transcendentalism after he made up his mind.