



Emerson and Quakerism

Frederick B. Tolles

American Literature, Vol. 10, No. 2. (May, 1938), pp. 142-165.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9831%28193805%2910%3A2%3C142%3AEAQ%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M>

American Literature is currently published by Duke University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/duke.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

EMERSON AND QUAKERISM

FREDERICK B. TOLLES

Cambridge, Massachusetts

A VAST deal of learned ink has flowed on the subject of the origins of Emerson's thought. We have had studies of his indebtedness to Asian philosophy, to Plato and the Neo-Platonists, to Swedenborg, to Goethe and the German philosophers, and so on through a large corpus of scholarly writings. And we have had various estimates of his relation to, or his place in, the Puritan tradition. There is one more thread, however, which remains to be picked up before the final statement is made concerning the influences which moulded Emerson's thinking. And once this thread is picked up and laid in its proper place it will be found in a measure to clarify and define Emerson's relation to Puritanism.

Emerson himself furnished the clue, and it is rather surprising that the commentators have so generally neglected it. On one occasion when his kinsman, the Reverend David Greene Haskins, asked him to define his religious position, Emerson answered "with greater deliberateness, and longer pauses between his words than usual, 'I am more of a Quaker than anything else. I believe in the "still, small voice," and that voice is Christ within us.'"¹

The significant parallelism between the religion of the Friends and the ideas which were abroad in New England in the thirties

¹ David Greene Haskins, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Maternal Ancestors, with Some Reminiscences of Him* (Boston, 1886), p. 48.

There is some reason to believe that Emerson may have made this, or a similar statement more than once to his friends. For we find Daniel Ricketson, the New Bedford historian and poet, writing to a friend in 1895, thirteen years after Emerson's death, "I can say in the words of my friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'If I am anything, I am a Quaker'" (*Daniel Ricketson and His Friends*, ed. Anna Ricketson and Walton Ricketson, Boston, 1902, p. 261). Of course Ricketson may here be quoting, consciously or unconsciously, from Haskins's book or from E. W. Emerson's *Emerson in Concord* (Boston, 1889, p. 48) in which the statement in question was reprinted.

There is, however, additional evidence that Emerson's contemporaries were in the habit of thinking of him as a Quaker. Miss Geraldine Endor Jewsbury of Manchester, England, wrote to Jane Carlyle in 1848: "Emerson has taken his departure . . . I don't fancy he took to me. I am too tumultuous for him . . . I had far rather the Quaker liked me" (*Selections from the Letters of Geraldine Endor Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Mrs. Alexander Ireland, London, 1892, pp. 235-236). It is possible, to be sure, that Miss Jewsbury may have used the term "Quaker" in a general sense with reference merely to Emerson's quiet demeanor, and that she intended it to carry no religious connotation. I give the evidence for what it is worth.

and forties was apparent to Emerson and his contemporaries if it has not been to subsequent scholars.² George Bancroft, writing in 1837, implied a comparison between Quakerism and Transcendentalism when he contrasted them both with the philosophy of Locke.³ Emerson read the second volume of Bancroft's *History* with its famous panegyric on the Quakers soon after it appeared, and was pleased to note that "the huge world has at last come round to . . . George Fox and William Penn; time-honoured John Locke received kicks."⁴ A few years later (1842) Emerson contributed to the *Dial* a paper on Transcendentalism in which he quoted part of a letter written by a Quaker, as follows:

It is very interesting to me to see, as I do, all around me here, the essential doctrines of the Quakers revived, modified, stript of all that puritanism and sectarianism had heaped upon them, and made the foundation of an intellectual philosophy, that is illuminating the finest minds and reaches the wants of the least cultivated.⁵

Emerson commented thus:

The identity, which the writer of this letter finds between the speculative opinions of serious persons at the present moment, and those entertained by the first Quakers, is indeed so striking as to have drawn a very general attention of late years to the history of that sect. . . . Of course, in proportion to the depth of the experience, will be its independence on time and circumstances, yet one can hardly read George Fox's *Journal*, or Sewel's *History of the Quakers*, without many a rising of joyful surprise at the correspondence of facts and expressions to states of thought and feeling with which we are very familiar.⁶

² The only recent writer who, to my knowledge, has given his serious attention to this correspondence is Mr. Henry Seidel Canby (*Classic Americans*, New York, 1931, p. 155). He tends to make light of the similarity, maintaining that "the Quakers were content with inner light, but Emerson, sprung from a harsher discipline, and a stronger will, rationalizes this inner light and lifts it out of mysticism into a doctrine for intelligent men." I shall not here take issue with this statement; some objections to it, however, will appear in the sequel.

Mr. Van Wyck Brooks appears to be aware of the importance of Quakerism in Emerson's background of ideas, but he limits his consideration of it to a few passing allusions patched together from scattered entries in the *Journals* (see *The Life of Emerson*, New York, 1932, p. 45; and *The Flowering of New England*, New York, 1936, p. 199).

³ *History of the United States* (Boston, 1837), II, chap. xvi. Octavius Brooks Frothingham (*Transcendentalism in New England*, New York, 1876, pp. 117-120) comments briefly on this passage.

⁴ *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston and New York, 1909-1914), IV, 304. Henceforth these will be cited simply as *Journals*.

⁵ *Uncollected Writings*, ed. Charles C. Bigelow (New York, 1912), p. 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Thoreau, too, had some inkling of it, for in 1843 he wrote to his sister on hearing a Quaker sermon by Lucretia Mott, "It was a good speech,—Transcendentalism in its mildest form."⁷

This affinity, so clearly recognized by Emerson and his contemporaries, and so overlooked by later students, will bear investigation. But before we proceed to examine Emerson's work for traces of Quaker influence, let us indulge in a side-glance at the intellectual tradition to which both Emerson and the Quakers belonged.

The sect of Quakers arose in the middle of the seventeenth century as a by-product of the Puritan movement. When Puritanism, which had been conceived and brought forth in rebellion against an established ecclesiastical order, hardened in its turn into an equally rigid ecclesiastical system, George Fox appeared on the scene, took up the banner of protestantism once more, and carried it to an advanced position whither few were willing to follow. Feeling that the English people had forsaken the fountain of living waters and had hewed them out broken cisterns which could hold no water, he carried the Lutheran principle of the priesthood of all believers to its logical conclusion: whereas the Puritans had "purified" the church of prayer-books, vestments and music, the Quakers wished to go one step further and purify the church of the clergy. "Some seek truth in books, some in learned men, but what they seek for is in themselves,"⁸ wrote William Penn. Thus Fox and the other primitive Friends began where the other reformers had left off, and Quakerism must therefore be regarded not only as a revolt against the Puritan church but also, and at the same time, a further extension of the basic reforming spirit which underlay Puritanism.

The position of Emerson with reference to Puritanism was curiously and significantly like that of the first Friends. In England the ascendancy of the Puritans came to an abrupt end in 1660; but in America and particularly in New England, where Puritanism had driven its roots into the granite bedrock, it lingered on for two hundred years.⁹ As Parrington has it, "there was no vigorous attack, but only a tedious decay."¹⁰ Before any vigorous concerted attack

⁷ *Familiar Letters* (Concord ed., Boston, 1929), p. 97.

⁸ Quoted by Bancroft, *History of the United States*, II, 338.

⁹ A few courageous voices like those of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were lifted up at the outset against the iron-clad sway of "God's unworthy Prophets," but they were voices in the wilderness, and for the most part they went unheard.

¹⁰ *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1927), I, 148.

was possible there had to be a leader; and in the second third of the nineteenth century, after the way had been opened by the Unitarian movement, the leader appeared in the person of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In Emerson's youth the old religion "still dwelt like a Sabbath peace in the country population of New England, [teaching] privation, self-denial, and sorrow."¹¹ In 1841, when Dr. Ezra Ripley, the pastor of the Concord church, died at the patriarchal age of ninety years, Emerson was able to say:

He was identified with the ideas and forms of the New England Church, which expired about the same time with him, so that he and his coevals seemed the rear guard of the great camp and army of the Puritans, which, however in its last days declining into formalism, in the heyday of its strength had planted and liberated America.¹²

Like George Fox, who rejected priestly authority and bade men look for recourse to "that of God in themselves," Emerson turned away from churches and placed his emphasis on the self-reliant individual. But the analogy does not stop there. Quakerism, as we have seen, was at once a protest against the existing Puritan establishment and a continuation of the nonconforming principle from which Puritanism took its rise. It was so also with Emerson. It is not enough merely to see that he turned his back upon his Puritan inheritance; it must also be recognized that he took that inheritance as a point of departure from which to continue on the old road of nonconformity along which his Puritan ancestors had started. Emerson himself understood the true nature of his position when he wrote in his *Journals* on the occasion, already mentioned, of Dr. Ripley's death:

Great, grim, earnest men, I belong by natural affinity to other thoughts and schools than yours, but my affection hovers respectfully about your retiring footprints, your unpainted churches, strict platforms, and sad offices; the iron-gray deacon and the wearisome prayer rich with the diction of ages.

Well, the new is only the seed of the old. What is this abolition and non-resistance and temperance but the continuation of Puritanism, though

¹¹ *Journals*, V, 543.

¹² *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, p. 383. All references are to the Centenary Edition of Emerson's *Works* (Boston and New York, 1903-1904).

it operate inevitably the destruction of the church in which it grew, as the new is always making the old superfluous?¹³

The fundamental agreement which is seen to exist between the attitude of Emerson and that of the Quakers is therefore due in part, at least, to the similarity of the historical circumstances out of which they grew. Both took their rise in a reaction against, and at the same time a logical development from, Puritanism, and the delay which attended the ultimate revolt in New England can only be ascribed to the firmer hold which Puritanism had on the New England mind.

We know that Emerson admired and respected the Quakers as a sect. "I have sometimes thought," he said in 1869:

and indeed I always do think, that the sect of the Quakers in their best representatives appear to me to have come nearer to the sublime history and genius of Christ than any other of the sects. They have kept the traditions perhaps for a longer time, kept the early purity, did keep it for a longer time; and I think I see this cause, I think I find in the language of that sect, in all the history and all the anecdotes of its leaders and teachers, a certain fidelity to the Scriptural character.¹⁴

We also know that he remembered certain individuals among the Quakers with deepest gratitude. "I refer now," he wrote in 1836:

to last evening's lively remembrance of the scattered company who have ministered to my highest wants: Edward Stabler,¹⁵ Peter Hunt, Sampson Reed, my peasant Tarbox, Mary Rotch, Jonathan Phillips, A. B. Alcott,—even Murat has a claim,—a strange class, plain and wise, whose charm to me is wonderful, how elevating! . . . Theirs is the true light of all our day. They are the argument for the spiritual world, for their spirit is it. Nothing is impossible, since such communion has already been. Whilst we hear them speak, how frivolous are the distinctions of fortune! and the voice of fame is as unassuming as the tinkle of the passing sleigh-bell.¹⁶

¹³ *Journals*, VI, 53.

¹⁴ From a lecture on "Natural Religion" delivered at Horticultural Hall in Boston on April 4, 1869 (*Uncollected Lectures*, ed. Clarence Gohdes, New York, 1932, p. 57).

¹⁵ This name appears in the published *Journals* as *Stubler*. The editors, in transcribing the MS, apparently misread the name, for the man here referred to was certainly Edward *Stabler* (1769-1831), a Quaker preacher who practiced the trade of druggist in Alexandria (see William Stabler, *A Memoir of the Life of Edward Stabler*, Philadelphia, 1846). I have not seen the MS, but a glance at any facsimile of Emerson's handwriting will show that he habitually neglected to close his *a*'s, a fact which would easily account for the error. Moreover, I am informed by the City Records Office in Alexandria that the name *Stubler* is unknown there.

¹⁶ *Journals*, IV, 51-52.

The names in this list which concern us are those of two Quakers, Edward Stabler and Mary Rotch.¹⁷ I purpose now to indicate something of Emerson's indebtedness to these two persons, adding, as a third branch of the inquiry, a discussion of the influence of Quaker writers upon his intellectual development.

It is worthy of note at the outset that the years during which he was subject to the direct influence of Quakerism (roughly 1827-1836) were the formative years of his intellectual life. They were the years immediately preceding his first publication—a period during which we can watch the growth of his characteristic ideas as they germinated and began to bear fruit in the *Journals*.

Emerson's method of composition is sufficiently well known. He was continually extracting from his reading, his intercourse with friends, his observations of nature, and his own ceaseless reflections the precious metal from which to coin ideas. He stamped each day's coinage with his own likeness, and committed it to the "savings-bank"—his *Journals*—where he had always a reserve fund available upon which to draw for the material of his essays. It is, therefore, chiefly to the *Journals* that we must look for guidance in determining the scope and direction of the Quaker influence on Emerson's writings.

About Edward Stabler and Emerson's relations with him we know very little. He makes his first appearance in the *Journals* in an entry dated May 12, 1828:

It was said of Jesus that "he taught as one having authority," a distinction most palpable. There are a few men in every age, I suppose, who teach thus. Stabler the Quaker, whom I saw on board the boat in Delaware Bay, was one.¹⁸

Emerson must have encountered Stabler on his way back to Boston from the South whither he had gone, late in 1826, for his health's sake. He was in Alexandria in May, 1827, and proceeded from there to Philadelphia by boat. Presumably he struck up an acquaintance with the old Quaker, and immediately engaged him, as was his

¹⁷ Six years later, in 1842, he made another list in which the names of actual persons mingle with those of characters in literature. Most of the names are new, but those of his two Quaker friends reappear. "I have a company who travel with me in the world," he writes, "and one or other of whom I must still meet, whose office none can supply to me: Edward Stabler; my Methodist Tarbox; Wordsworth's Pedlar; Mary Rotch; Alcott; Manzoni's Fra Cristoforo; Swedenborg; Mrs. Black; and now Greaves, and his disciple Lane; supreme people who represent, with whatever defects, the Ethical Idea" (*Journals*, VI, 240-241).

¹⁸ *Journals*, II, 296.

custom, in serious talk. Few things are as ephemeral as conversations with chance acquaintances, and, except for a few fragments, this conversation between the young divinity student and the old Quaker itinerant is lost.

Of the two scraps of this conversation which Emerson later preserved only one has significance for us. In the spring of 1831 he was giving a good deal of thought to the notion of compensation, and Stabler's words, as he remembered them, played directly into this train of thought. In his *Journals* for June 29, 1831, he wrote:

Is not the law of compensation perfect? . . . Old Stabler, the Quaker in the Baltimore steamboat, said to me, that, if a man sacrificed his impurity, purity should be the price with which it would be paid; if a man gave up his hatred, he should be rewarded with love—'tis the same old melody and it sounds through the vast of being.¹⁹

Seven years later, when he was casting about for material to incorporate into his address before the graduating class of the Divinity School at Cambridge, he came across this entry, and it appears, thus phrased, in that address: "He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity."²⁰

As to what further intellectual stimulus Emerson received from Stabler we can only conjecture.²¹ It seems not unreasonable, however, to attribute to his influence the strong interest which Emerson later manifested in the Society of Friends.

We pass from the shadowy figure of Edward Stabler to a consideration of Emerson's reading in the literature of Quakerism. He was reading about George Fox in Sewel's *History of the Quakers* early in 1830. The first reference in the *Journals* runs as follows:

And there is some confused idealism in the conversation of a soldier with Geo. Fox [Sewel's *History of the Quakers*, vol. I, p. 85]. "Christ did not

¹⁹ *Journals*, II, 389. Cf. the following passage from a letter of Stabler, dated 8th mo. 30, 1828: "If we would give up our pride, we should have humility in place of it. Our obduracy might be exchanged for tenderness of heart; and our fierceness, for gentleness, &c" (William Stabler, *Memoir of the Life of Edward Stabler*, p. 151).

²⁰ *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*, p. 122.

²¹ The only other reference to Stabler in the *Journals* is another fragment of their conversation which Emerson suddenly remembered in 1833: "Stabler said the difference between Brother Witherlee's preaching and his was this: Brother W. said, 'If you do not become good you shall be whipt,' and himself said, 'If you will become good you shall not be whipt'" (*Journals*, III, 228). He never converted this anecdote into ready currency for the essays, but left it drawing interest in the "savings-bank."

suffer outwardly," said Fox. [The Soldier asked him] "whether there were not Jews, Chief Priests and Pilate outwardly?"²²

The saintly career of George Fox made a deep impression upon Emerson. Fox's name figures in many of those lists, so frequent in the *Journals*, of men whom Emerson especially revered, alongside those of Jesus, Plato, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Swedenborg, and others. The character of George Fox made a strong appeal to him because of the Quaker's basic conviction that "though he read of Christ and God, he knew them only from the like spirit in his own soul."²³

Two years later Emerson picked Sewel up again, and read further in the history of the Friends, although it does not appear that he read the entire work.²⁴ His reading at this time is of especial interest in view of the circumstances in which he found himself. It was the hour of decision. He had told his congregation at the Second Church in Boston "that he could no longer administer the Lord's Supper as a divinely appointed, sacred ordinance of religion . . . that he could henceforth conduct the service only as a memorial service, without attributing to it any deeper significance."²⁵ The parish was not willing to sanction any change in the rite, feeling that "it would be tantamount to admitting that they were no longer Christians."²⁶ Accordingly, he was faced with the choice between resigning his charge and continuing to administer a sacrament with which he had no sympathy. "The objection to conforming to usages which have become dead to you," he later wrote, "is that it scatters your force."²⁷ He found his objection to conforming to

²² *Journals*, II, 335. There may be some confused idealism here, but there is also some confused reporting. As the incident stands in Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Society of Friends* (London, 1833), pp. 106-107, the soldier denied that there was such a person as Jesus. Fox asked, "Did he not suffer in Jerusalem?" The soldier answered, "Not outwardly." Then Fox asked, "Were there not Jews, Chief Priests, and Pilate outwardly?" The soldier was perplexed, and refused to answer.

Traces of Emerson's reading in Sewel appear in at least two of the sermons which he preached as minister of the Second Church in Boston during the next two years. See *Young Emerson Speaks*, ed. A. C. McGiffert, Jr. (Boston, 1938), pp. 134, 186.

²³ Quoted by Emerson in a speech at the second annual meeting of the Free Religious Association in Boston, May 28, 1869 (*Miscellanies*, p. 488).

²⁴ His notes (*Journals*, II, 497-500) are all based on the first volume. This is not surprising, considering his habit of reading for "lustres" only.

²⁵ These are the words he used, years later, in telling the story to Charles Eliot Norton (*Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*, ed. Sara Norton and M. A. DeWolfe Howe, Boston, 1913, I, 509).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Self-Reliance," *Essays, First Series*, p. 54.

this usage insuperable, and he fled to the White Mountains for a few weeks to settle the matter with his conscience.

Among the books which he took with him were Sewel's *History of the Quakers* and Tuke's *Memoirs of the Life of Fox*.²⁸ He filled several pages in his *Journals* with notes on these two books. And, significantly enough, these notes follow directly after a long passage of self-examination in which we can actually watch the progress of his mind from doubt and perplexity to certainty and decision. "I know very well," he says at the end:

that it is a bad sign in a man to be too conscientious, and stick at gnats. The most desperate scoundrels have been the over-refiners. Without accommodation society is impracticable. But this ordinance is esteemed the most sacred of religious institutions, and I cannot go habitually to an institution which they esteem holiest with indifference and dislike.²⁹

In the notes which follow he refers almost at once to Fox's attitude towards the Communion rite. It is hard to escape the conclusion that his purpose in reading these particular books at this time was to find a source of moral strength and reassurance for the decision which he was about to make. When he returned to Boston in September, his mind was made up. It was a memorable and a heroic decision, for he knew that henceforth all but a few liberal pulpits in New England were forever closed to him. By this decision America lost a preacher and gained a man of letters.

Here again, one of Emerson's contemporaries saw clearly what subsequent generations have failed to recognize. A lifelong Quaker friend wrote in 1840:

Yr refusal to administer the Lord's Supper years ago, & your late omission of public prayer are both spoken of with an irrecognition of the existence of Quakers which is too ridiculous.³⁰

On September 9, 1832, Emerson delivered from the pulpit of the Second Church a well-ordered exposition of his views on the Lord's Supper, announcing at the close of the sermon his intention of re-

²⁸ Neither Emerson nor his editors name this book specifically, but "Fox's Life" (*Journals*, II, 499) can only refer to Tuke's *Memoirs* inasmuch as it was the only biography of Fox which had been written by 1832. All of Emerson's notes can be traced to Sewel except this: "He also wrote to them [the magistrates] about the evil of putting to death for stealing." The source of this statement is Henry Tuke, *Memoirs of the Life of Fox* (Philadelphia, 1815), p. 35.

²⁹ *Journals*, II, 497.

³⁰ *Records of a Lifelong Friendship: Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Henry Furness* ed. Horace Howard Furness (Boston, 1910), p. 13.

signing his charge. The sermon opens with a brief historical review of the age-old controversy over the Eucharist, a controversy almost coeval with the rite itself, and Emerson does not forget to mention in this connection that "it is now near two hundred years since the Society of Quakers denied the authority of the rite altogether, and gave good reasons for disusing it."³¹ The arguments which he adduces in support of his decision are precisely those which the Quakers had used,³² and his conclusion expresses an attitude towards Christianity which is entirely consonant with the religion of the Friends:

I am not engaged to Christianity by decent forms, or saving ordinances; it is not usage, it is not what I do not understand, that binds me to it,—let these be the sandy foundations of falsehoods. What I revere and obey in it is its reality, its boundless charity, its deep interior life, the rest it gives to mind, the echo it returns to my thoughts, the perfect accord it makes with my reason through all its representation of God and His Providence; and the persuasion and courage that come out thence to lead me upward and onward. Freedom is the essence of this faith. It has for its object simply to make men good and wise. Its institutions then should be as flexible as the wants of men. That form out of which the life and suitableness have departed should be as worthless in its eyes as the dead leaves that are falling around us.³³

Emerson's contact, through his reading, with the Friends' way of life had borne fruit in the most decisive action of his life. It is no wonder that his brother ministers found his behavior rather "Quakerish," and even hinted at mental derangement!³⁴

He did not forget what he had read in Sewel's *History*. Among the notes which he took in 1832 on the life of George Fox we find this: "He taught that the Scriptures could not be understood but by the same spirit that gave them forth."³⁵ Looking into Sewel, we find that a certain priest at Nottingham had told his congregation that they were to try all doctrines, religions, and opinions by the Scriptures.

George Fox hearing this, felt such mighty power and godly zeal working in him, that he was made to cry out, "O no, it is not the Scripture, but

³¹ *Miscellanies*, p. 4.

³² See, for instance, Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1st ed., London, 1678), Proposition XIII.

³³ *Miscellanies*, p. 21.

³⁴ James Elliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1887), I, 158.

³⁵ *Journals*, II, 498.

it is the Holy Spirit, by which the holy men of God gave forth the Scriptures, whereby opinions, religions, and judgments are to be tried."³⁶

In his very first published work Emerson made use of this idea without acknowledging the source: viz., "Every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit which gave it forth,"—is the fundamental law of criticism."³⁷ And many years later (1854), in an address on the Fugitive Slave Law, he said, apropos of attempts made to justify slavery by quoting the Bible:

These things show that no forms, neither constitutions, nor laws, nor covenants, nor churches, nor bibles, are of any use in themselves. . . . To interpret Christ it needs Christ in the heart. The teachings of the Spirit can be apprehended only by the same spirit that gave them forth.³⁸

In January, 1835, he was reading about George Fox again: "Bitter cold days, yet I read of that inward fervor which ran as fire from heart to heart through England in George Fox's time."³⁹ His immediate object this time was to collect material for a lecture on the life of Fox which he was to deliver in Boston before the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge on February 26, 1835. This lecture has never been published, but a few sentences abstracted from it are printed in an appendix to J. E. Cabot's *Memoir*.⁴⁰ Emerson apparently went back to Sewel and Tuke for his biographical information, and he incorporated into his lecture many of the notes which he had made on these authors in 1832. The lecture does not add materially to Emerson's literary stature or to our knowledge of the contents of his mind, and may well be suffered to remain in manuscript. We may, however, note that in this lecture he described Fox as "a realist, even [ever?] putting a thing for a name."⁴¹

³⁶ Sewel, *History*, I, 58. This was one of George Fox's ruling ideas; one finds it constantly reiterated in the pages of his *Journal*. The thought can be traced back to the German mystics of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—Sebastian Franck, Caspar Schwenkfeld and, above all, Jacob Boehme—the spiritual forerunners of George Fox and the Quakers (see Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th & 17th Centuries*, London, 1914, pp. 60-61, 73-74, 170, 225, and *passim*). We know, from frequent references in the essays and the *Journals*, that Emerson was a reader of Boehme. He may have read, in John Sparrow's preface to the *Aurora* (edition of 1656, which he was reading in August, 1835 [*Journals*, III, 524]), that no one "can . . . understand the Holy Scriptures but by the same Gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Soul" (quoted by Jones, *Spiritual Reformers*, p. 225).

³⁷ *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*, p. 35.

³⁸ *Miscellanies*, p. 234.

³⁹ *Journals*, III, 432.

⁴⁰ II, 713-714.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, II, 713. This phrase goes back to "a reformer, putting ever a thing for a form," in his earlier notes on Fox (*Journals*, II, 500).

He must have recognized his own kinship and that of his like-minded contemporaries with the founder of Quakerism, for he used the phrase again: "Realist seems the true name for the movement party among our Scholars here. I at least endeavor to make the exchange evermore, of a reality for a name."⁴²

His interest in George Fox did not cease with the delivery of this lecture. On the contrary, there are a number of references to Fox scattered through the *Journals* for 1835, indicating that his life and teachings were constantly before Emerson's mind during that year. For instance:

Some persons in Rhode Island saying to George Fox, that, if they had money enough, they would hire him to be their minister, he said, "Then it was time for him to be gone, for if their eye was to him, or to any of them, then would they never come to their own teacher."⁴³

No doubt he copied down this anecdote because it perfectly reflected his own feeling about the ministry. "I have sometimes thought," he wrote elsewhere, "that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry."⁴⁴

Again he observed: "George Fox's chosen expression for the God manifest in the mind is the Seed. He means the seed of which the Beauty of the world is the Flower, and Goodness is the Fruit."⁴⁵ Emerson made frequent use of this expression in his essays,⁴⁶ for, like so many other utterances of Fox, it harmonized perfectly with his own thinking.

At the same time that he was preparing his lecture on Fox, he wrote in his *Journals*:

The Quaker casts himself down a passive instrument of the Supreme Reason, and will not risque silencing it by venturing the cooperation of his Understanding. He therefore enacts his first thought, however violent or ludicrous, nor stays to consider whether the purport of his vision may not be expressed in more seemly and accustomed forms.⁴⁷

If one did not know that Emerson's thoughts had been running in this vein for some time, one would be tempted to see in this pas-

⁴² *Journals*, IV, 459.

⁴³ *Journals*, III, 493-494. This anecdote is found in Fox's *Journal*, ed. Norman Penney (London, 1924), p. 290; and is excerpted thence into Tuke's *Memoirs* (ed. cited), p. 232.

⁴⁴ *Journals*, II, 491.

⁴⁵ *Journals*, III, 497.

⁴⁶ See, for example, "Intellect," *Essays, First Series*, p. 332, and note; and "Character," *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, pp. 96-97.

⁴⁷ *Journals*, III, 433.

sage—suggested, surely, by his acquaintance with Fox's life—the germ of "Self-Reliance." Here, at any rate, was remarkable corroboration of his own convictions, for he had long held that our first and third thoughts coincide,⁴⁸ and that "our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment."⁴⁹

We lie [he wrote] in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm. Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due.⁵⁰

To say that Emerson owed his doctrine of self-reliance exclusively to the Quakers would be to disregard most of the evidence; nevertheless, he himself recognized the identity of his teaching with the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light. In George Fox he found a kindred spirit—a religious teacher who posited his religion on man's "involuntary perceptions"—a preacher whose preaching consisted in calling men to "that of God in themselves."

George Fox was not the only one among the early Quakers whose career interested Emerson. Strangely enough, the bizarre figure of the enthusiast James Nayler appealed to him, and he referred to Nayler's dying words as one of the few utterances in literature "of the highest moral class."⁵¹

In 1830, the same year in which he first picked up Sewel's *History*, he was reading Thomas Clarkson's *Life of William Penn*.⁵² He respected in Penn as in Fox the unquestioning readiness to accept the precepts of the New Testament literally, and he saw in Penn's career a moving affirmation of the practicability of the New Testament way of life.

I wish the Christian principle, the *ultra* principle of non-resistance and returning good for ill, might be tried fairly. William Penn made one

⁴⁸ *Journals*, II, 435-436.

⁴⁹ "Self-Reliance," *Essays, First Series*, p. 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

⁵¹ *Journals*, V, 112. He marked this speech in his copy of Sewel's *History*, and twice quoted it in full: once, in the 1835 lecture on George Fox, and again, in a paper on "Transcendentalism" written for the *Dial* in 1842 (reprinted in *Uncollected Writings*, p. 64).

⁵² *Journals*, II, 328.

trial. The world was not ripe, and yet it did well. An angel stands a poor chance among wild beasts; a better chance among men: but among angels best of all. And so I admit of this system that it is, like the Free Trade, fit for one nation only on condition that all adopt it. Still a man may try it in his own person, and even his sufferings by reason of it shall be its triumphs.⁵³

He recognized the unison between Penn's religion and his own when he wrote:

To be at perfect agreement with a man of most opposite conclusions you have only to translate your language into his. The same thought which you call *God* in his nomenclature is called *Christ*. In the language of William Penn, moral sentiment is called *Christ*.⁵⁴

Penn's name, nearly always in a favorable context, appears many times in the essays as well as in the *Journals*. Emerson was not blind to the flaws in Penn's character; he regarded him as an imperfect agent of unalterable laws. In "The Sovereignty of Ethics" he wrote:

Truth gathers itself spotless and unhurt after all our surrenders and concealments and partisanship—never hurt by the treachery or ruin of its best defenders, whether Luther or William Penn or St. Paul. We answer, when they tell us of the bad behavior of Luther or Paul: "Well, what if he did? Who was more pained than Luther or Paul?" Shall we attach ourselves violently to our teachers' and historical personalities, and think the foundation shaken if any fault is shown in their record? But how is the truth hurt by their falling from it?⁵⁵

The genesis of this passage is found in a conversation with a Quaker of New Bedford:

Truth. It is not wise to talk, as men do, of reason as the gift of God bestowed, etc., or, of reasoning from nature up to nature's God, etc. The intellectual power is not the gift, but the presence of God. Nor do we reason to the being of God, but God goes with us into nature, when we go or think at all. Truth is always new and wild as the wild air, and is alive. The mind is always true, when there is mind, and it makes no difference that the premises are false, we arrive at true conclusions.

Mr. Arnold, with whom I talked at New Bedford, saw as much as

⁵³ *Ibid.*, II, 418-419.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 478.

⁵⁵ *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, pp. 195-196.

this, and when Penn's treacheries were enumerated, replied, "Well, what if he did? it was only Penn who did it."⁵⁶

It is worth noting that although the thought first occurred to his mind with reference to Penn, Emerson characteristically generalized it, applying it to Luther and St. Paul.

Emerson's interest in the Abolition movement gave him further contact with Quakers and Quakerism. His early *Journals* testify that he had been incensed against slavery as early as 1822; the Abolition movement in this country was not formally inaugurated until 1831. Emerson, however, chose to keep silence on this subject until 1844, when he delivered an address on the anniversary of the emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies. His objection to slavery was exactly the same as that of the Quakers: "Because every man has within him something really divine, therefore is slavery the unpardonable outrage it is."⁵⁷ Again he wrote:

Yesterday, had I been born and bred a Quaker, I should have risen and protested against the preacher's words. I would have said that in the light of Christianity is no such thing as slavery. The only bondage it recognizes is that of sin.⁵⁸

In the 1844 address he acknowledged the priority of the Quakers in the movement for the liberation of the slaves, and gave due credit to John Woolman and other Quakers for their part in the development of the anti-slavery sentiment. He was acquainted with Woolman's *Journal*, and had a copy of it in his library, the gift of his friend John Greenleaf Whittier.⁵⁹ He had a great admiration for Lucretia Mott,

⁵⁶ *Journals*, IX, 14-15. James Arnold (1781-1868) was a wealthy Quaker merchant of New Bedford who had joined the Unitarian Church of that city under circumstances which will be noticed below.

⁵⁷ *Journals*, III, 390.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 447.

⁵⁹ Professor H. J. Cadbury has called my attention to a letter from Whittier to Emerson which was discovered by accident in a secret drawer after the contents of Emerson's study had been removed to the Concord Antiquarian Society building. The letter is dated 12th mo. 12, 1852, and refers to a mutual interchange of books between the two writers: "I feel guilty in respect to the Bhagavad Gita, but it is too late to repent: & I will keep it even until I restore it to thee personally in exchange for Geo. Fox." Evidently the Quaker poet had lent Emerson the *Journal* or some other writing of George Fox. This incident is significant, showing as it does, that Emerson's interest in Fox persisted in 1852. See Professor Cadbury's note in the *Bulletin of the Friends' Historical Association*, XXIV, 48-49 (Spring, 1935).

Emerson saw Whittier occasionally, at the meetings of the Saturday Club and elsewhere, and a number of letters passed between them, but they were never intimate friends. There was too great a gulf between them with respect to intellectual background and

the Abolitionist and Feminist⁶⁰ leader whom he met several times in later life, and he called her "the flower of Quakerism."⁶¹

In 1858 Emerson was lecturing in Philadelphia. Mrs. Mott was in the audience, and wrote afterwards to a friend:

We have been greatly pleased with listening to R. W. Emerson. His lecture on "The Law of Success" is full of gems. . . . I spoke to Emerson after the lecture, thanking him for it; he replied, "I got some leaves out of your book," adding, "from your New Bedford friends." I remembered that his mind was enlightened beyond his pulpit ordinances about the time of the enlightened Mary Newall's coming out, and I doubt not she had some influence on him.⁶²

This brings us to the last and most important of the Quaker influences which in some measure determined the character and direction of Emerson's thought. During the winter of 1833-1834 Emerson supplied the pulpit of his cousin, the Reverend Orville Dewey, minister of the Unitarian Church in New Bedford. The reason for this congregation's willingness to accept a preacher of Emerson's heterodox views is significant. As the historian of the church puts it:

It is doubtful if there was another congregation in New England so well prepared to receive Emerson's message as this one was at that time, because of the large influx of liberal Friends that came into it during Dr. Dewey's ten years ministry bringing so much of their free spirit with them.⁶³

There had been a schism in the New Bedford Friends' Meeting ten years before, and the liberal party had seceded in a body, joining the Unitarian Church. Among them was Miss Mary Rotch, a wealthy Quakeress who had been one of two elders removed from office by the Friends' Meeting in 1824. When asked in England who his chief friends in America were, Emerson made this reply: "I find

habits. For an amusing anecdote illustrating the disparity of their views on the subject of prayer, see Albert Mordell, *Quaker Militant* (Boston, 1933), p. 295.

⁶⁰ In his lecture on "Woman," he noted that "the Quakers have the honour of having first established, in their discipline, the equality of the sexes" (*Miscellanies*, p. 415). In the unpublished lecture on George Fox he gives the Quakers credit for having led the way in other humanitarian and reform movements such as Temperance, Pacifism, Prison Reform, the abolition of oaths, and the establishment of freedom of conscience.

⁶¹ *Journals*, VIII, 110.

⁶² Anna D. Hallowell, *James and Lucretia Mott* (Boston, 1884), p. 385.

⁶³ E. Stanton Hodgkin, *One Hundred Years of Unitarianism in New Bedford* (New Bedford, 1924), p. 37. This writer adds, with a penetration which we have not met elsewhere: "The transcendentalism that Emerson was proclaiming was intellectualized Quakerism, pure and simple" (*loc. cit.*).

many among the Quakers. I know one simple old lady in particular whom I especially honour. She said to me, 'I cannot think what you find in me which is worth notice.' Ah," continued Emerson, "if she had said yea, and the whole world had thundered in her ear nay, she would still have said yea."⁶⁴

Emerson had many serious conversations with Miss Rotch, and was a frequent visitor at her house.⁶⁵ It may have been at her home that he first became acquainted with the custom to which he refers in "Social Aims":

It is an excellent custom of the Quakers, if only for a school of manners,—the silent prayer before meals. It has the effect to stop mirth, and introduce a moment of reflection. After the pause, all resume their usual intercourse from a vantage-ground.⁶⁶

It is also possible, as M. D. Conway suggests, that it was "the vision of Mary Rotch leaving church when the Last Supper was to be commemorated which first cast a blight upon that rite in Emerson's eyes."⁶⁷ These, of course, are only conjectures, but we have positive evidence of his indebtedness to her in respect of her religious views, an indebtedness which the student of Emerson cannot overlook.

First, however, it will be necessary to refer to the circumstances which surrounded Miss Rotch's resignation from the Friends' Meeting. The New Bedford Friends in 1823 were undergoing a miniature schism which foreshadowed the general rift between Liberal (or

⁶⁴ W. Hale White, "What Mr. Emerson Owed to Bedfordshire," *Athenaeum*, No. 2846, pp. 602-603 (1882).

⁶⁵ It has traditionally been supposed that Emerson lodged at her house when he came to New Bedford to preach. This tradition was founded on Charles T. Congdon's statement (*Reminiscences of a Journalist*, Boston, 1880, p. 34) that Emerson stayed "in the home of a Quaker lady, just below ours." W. E. Emery, writing in the *New Bedford Morning Mercury* (Jan. 2, 1933, p. 4) on "Emerson's Home in New Bedford, Mass.," questions the accuracy of this tradition, and points out, on the basis of Congdon's statement, that it is more likely that Emerson stayed at the house of Mrs. Deborah Brayton, a Quaker lady who kept a boarding house not far from Congdon's residence. He adds that he has authoritative corroboration of his conjecture from an independent source. It is, of course, a matter of supreme unimportance; the important thing is that Emerson knew Miss Rotch, and profited from his acquaintance with her.

⁶⁶ *Letters and Social Aims*, p. 86.

⁶⁷ Moncure Daniel Conway, *Emerson at Home and Abroad* (London, 1883), p. 69. W. E. Emery (*loc. cit.*) denies that Mary Rotch's example had any influence on Emerson's refusal to administer the Lord's Supper, stating that his renunciation of the rite had taken place two years before he knew her. Mr. Emery overlooks the fact that Emerson had preached in New Bedford earlier, in 1827 (Cabot, *Memoir*, p. 131), and very likely had made Miss Rotch's acquaintance at that time.

Hicksite) and Orthodox Friends throughout the country later in the decade. The seeds of dissent were planted by the preaching of Mary Newhall (or Newall), who came to New Bedford in 1822, and immediately began to preach advanced doctrines. Her sermons were popular with the majority of the Friends, but the conservative element among the elders frowned upon her preaching and tried to silence her. Among her adherents were Mary Rotch and Elizabeth Rodman, themselves elders; and when they went so far as to rise and join in her prayers, the inevitable conflict was precipitated. The "old lights" finally succeeded in expelling the two ladies from the Select Meeting, and, as we have seen, they joined the Unitarian Church, together with a number of their supporters.⁶⁸

When Emerson was in New Bedford in 1834, he read the account of the proceedings against Miss Rotch with great interest.

I have been much interested lately in the MS Record of the debates in the Quaker Monthly Meetings here in 1823, when Elizabeth Rodman and Mary Rotch were proposed to be removed from the place of Elders for uniting in the prayers of Mary Newhall. I must quote a sentence or two from two of these speakers. "February, 1823: M. N. rose in the meeting and began with, 'As the stream does not rise higher than the fountain,' etc.; spoke of the Mosaic dispensation in which the performance of certain rituals constituted the required religion; the more spiritual dispensation of our Saviour; of the advent of Christ; and the yet more inward and spiritual dispensation of the present day. These dispensations she compared to the progressive stages of the human heart in the work of religion, from loving our neighbor as ourselves to loving our enemies, and lastly arriving at that state of humility when self would be totally abandoned and we could only say, Lord be merciful to me a sinner."⁶⁹

Knowing that all was grist that came to his mill, one looks for a reflection of this passage in Emerson's published writings. It is not far to seek. In his first book, *Nature*, which he was writing at this very time, we find the following:

The exercise of the Will, or the lesson of power, is taught in every event. From the child's successive possession of his several senses up to

⁶⁸ It is possible to follow the course of this interesting conflict through the eyes of contemporaries. See *The Diary of Samuel Rodman*, ed. Z. W. Pease (New Bedford, 1927), *passim*; and *Life in New Bedford a Hundred Years Ago: A Chronicle of the Social, Religious and Commercial History of the Period as Recorded in a Diary Kept by Joseph R. Anthony*, ed. Z. W. Pease (New Bedford, 1922), *passim*.

⁶⁹ *Journals*, III, 265-266. Note that he quotes only *one* of the speakers. Unfortunately the MS which he saw has disappeared, so that we are unable to conjecture what other speech it was that caught his attention.

the hour when he saith, "Thy will be done!" he is learning the secret that he can reduce under his will not only particular events but great classes, nay, the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character.⁷⁰

We find the same germinal idea, developed in a different way, in a lecture on "War," delivered in 1838:

War and peace thus resolve themselves into a mercury of the state of cultivation. At a certain stage of his progress, the man fights, if he be of a sound body and mind. At a certain higher stage, he makes no offensive demonstration, but is alive to repel injury, and of an unconquerable heart. At a still higher stage, he comes into the region of holiness; passion has passed away from him; his warlike nature is all converted into an active medicinal principle; he sacrifices himself, and accepts with alacrity wearisome tasks of denial and charity; but, being attacked, he bears it and turns the other cheek, as one engaged, throughout his being, no longer to the service of an individual but to the common soul of all men.⁷¹

There can be little doubt that this conception of successive stages of resignation, leading up to complete humility and submission, was suggested by the speech of Mary Newhall which he read in the Quaker records.

Returning to Mary Rotch, I will preface my discussion of her influence on Emerson by a quotation from the Reverend Orville Dewey who knew and admired her:

Her religious opinions were of the most catholic stamp, and in one respect they were peculiar. The Friends' idea of the "inward light" seemed to have become with her coincident with the idea of the Author of all light; and when speaking of the Supreme Being, she would never say "God," but "that Influence." That Influence was constantly with her; and she carried the idea so far as to believe that it prompted her daily action, and decided for her every question of duty.⁷²

This sense of the indwelling presence of God, and of its all-sufficiency as a guide to conduct is illustrated by an anecdote which Emerson delighted to tell on occasions when the stream of conversation threatened to lose itself in the sands of theological debate. A little girl had asked Miss Rotch if she might do something. Miss Rotch asked her, "What does the voice in thee say?" The child disappeared, and presently returned to announce that "the little

⁷⁰ *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*, pp. 39-40.

⁷¹ *Miscellanies*, pp. 166-167.

⁷² *Autobiography and Letters of Orville Dewey, D.D.*, ed. Mary E. Dewey (Boston, 1883), p. 68.

voice says no." "That," said Emerson, "starts the tears to one's eyes."⁷³ Be that as it may, this theory of the immanence of God and of the individual's private responsibility for his conduct was in complete harmony with Emerson's own views as they were beginning to take definite form in his mind at this time.

He questioned her further about her religion, and she unfolded to him her extreme doctrine of obedience, a doctrine which was to figure in Emerson's writings to the very last. The long passage in the *Journals* in which he discusses this doctrine is worth quoting in full in view of the use which he was later to make of it.

Pleasantly mingled with my sad thoughts the sublime religion of Miss Rotch yesterday. She was much disciplined, she said, in the years of Quaker dissension, and driven inward, driven home, to find an anchor, until she learned to have *no choice*, to acquiesce without understanding the reason when she found an obstruction to any particular course of acting. She objected to having this spiritual direction called an impression, or an intimation, or an oracle. It was none of them. It was so simple it could hardly be spoken of. It was long, long, before she could attain to anything satisfactory. She was in a state of great dreariness, but she had a friend, a woman, now deceased, who used to advise her to dwell patiently with this dreariness and absence, in the confidence that it was necessary to the sweeping away of all her dependence upon traditions, and that she would finally attain to something better. And when she attained a better state of mind, its beginnings were very, very, small. And now it is not anything to speak of. She designed to go to England with Mr. and Mrs. Farrar, and the plan was very pleasant, and she was making her preparations, and the time was fixed, when she conceived a reluctance to go for which she could not see any reason, but which continued; and she therefore suspended her purpose, and suffered them to depart without her. She said that she had seen reason to think it was best for her to have staid at home. But in obeying it, she never felt it of any importance that she should know now or at any time what the reasons were. But she should feel that it was presumption to press through this reluctance and choose for herself. I said it was not so much any particular power as a *healthful state of the mind*; to which she assented cordially. I said, it must produce a sublime tranquillity in view of the future,—this assurance of higher direction; and she assented.⁷⁴

He goes on, speaking *in propria persona*, to find classical antecedents for the beliefs of the simple old Quakeress:

⁷³ Conway, *Emerson at Home and Abroad*, p. 69.

⁷⁴ *Journals*, III, 258-259.

Can you believe, Waldo Emerson, that you may relieve yourself of the perpetual perplexity of choosing, and by putting your ear close to the soul, learn always the true way? I cannot but remark how perfectly this agrees with the Daemon of Socrates, even in that story which I once thought anomalous, of the direction as to the choice of two roads; and with the grand unalterableness of Fichte's morality. Hold up this lamp and look back at the best passages of your life. Once there was choice in the mode, but obedience in the thing. In general there has been pretty quiet obedience *in the main*, but much recusancy *in the particular*.

"HAMLET. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart,—but it is no matter.

"HORATIO. If your mind dislike anything, obey it."⁷⁵

This doctrine made a lasting impression upon Emerson. Eight years later he still recalled Mary Rotch's words, for he made this note in his *Journal*:

Mary Rotch inclined to speak of the spirit negatively and instead of calling it a light, "an oracle," "a leading," she said, "When she would do that she should not, she found an objection."⁷⁶

The first explicit appearance of this doctrine in his published writings (it is present, of course, by implication in "Self-Reliance") is to be found in "Spiritual Laws" in his first volume of essays:

We need only obey. There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word. . . .

I say, *do not choose*; but that is a figure of speech by which I would distinguish what is commonly called *choice* among men, and which is a partial act, the choice of the hands, of the eyes, of the appetites, and not a whole act of the man.⁷⁷

Later on, as this teaching sank deeper into his consciousness, he saw it as the necessary bridge between self-reliance and the Over-Soul, and in the essay on "Worship" in *The Conduct of Life* it has become inextricably woven into the fabric of his thought:

And so I think that the last lesson of life, the choral song which rises from all elements and all angels, is a voluntary obedience, a necessitated

⁷⁵ *Journals*, III, 260.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 280. The negative function which Mary Rotch assigned to the Inner Light is not generally characteristic of Quaker belief. The more normal Quaker position is that the Light reveals truth and positively leads to action. Emerson, however, regularly follows Miss Rotch's negative definition. In his essay on "Swedenborg" (*Representative Men*, p. 140), he writes, "The illuminated Quakers explained their Light, not as something that leads to any action, but it appears as an obstruction to anything unfit."

⁷⁷ *Essays, First Series*, pp. 139-140.

freedom. Man is made of the same atoms as the world is, and he shares the same impressions, predispositions, and destiny. When his mind is illuminated, when his heart is kind, he throws himself into the sublime order, and does, with knowledge, what the stones do by structure.⁷⁸

As he grew older, the doctrine of complete acquiescence, which Mary Rotch had arrived at only after a long period of self-communion and inward struggle, became more and more acceptable to him as a rule of life. In "The Sovereignty of Ethics," printed four years before his death, in the *North American Review*, we find this passage:

Have you said to yourself ever: "I abdicate all choice, I see that it is not for me to interfere. I see that I have been one of the crowd; that I have been a pitiful person, because I have wished to be my own master, and to dress and order my whole way and system of living. I thought I managed it very well. I see that my neighbors think so. I have heard prayers, I have prayed even, but I have never until now dreamed that this undertaking the entire management of my own affairs was not commendable. I have never seen, until now, that it dwarfed me. I have not discovered, until this blessed ray flashed just now through my soul, that there dwelt any power in Nature that would relieve me of my load. But now I see."⁷⁹

Finally, in "Greatness," one of his very last essays, he enunciated the doctrine once more, this time acknowledging its Quaker origin:

If you have ever known a good mind among the Quakers, you will have found that is the element of their faith. As they express it, it might be thus: "I do not pretend to any commandment or large revelation, but if at any time I form some plan, propose a journey or a course of conduct, I perhaps find a silent obstacle in my mind that I cannot account for. Very well,—I let it lie, thinking it may pass away, but if it do not pass away I yield to it, obey it. You ask me to describe it. I cannot describe it. It is not an oracle, nor an angel, nor a dream, nor a law; it is too simple to be described, it is but a grain of mustard-seed, but such as it is, it is something which the contradiction of all mankind could not shake and which the consent of all mankind could not confirm."⁸⁰

This was not the only debt which Emerson owed to Mary Rotch. His ideas on the subject of immortality bear the impress of her ripe wisdom.

⁷⁸ *The Conduct of Life*, p. 240.

⁷⁹ *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, pp. 196-197.

⁸⁰ *Letters and Social Aims*, pp. 309-310.

My Reason [he wrote in his *Journals*] is well enough convinced of its immortality. It knows itself immortal. But it cannot persuade its down-looking brother, the Understanding, of the same. That fears for the cord that ties them, lest it break. Hence Miss Rotch affirms undoubtedly, "I shall live forever," and, on the other hand, does not much believe in her retaining Personality.⁸¹

This, essentially, was the final position which he reached in his essay on "Immortality," where he wrote:

I confess that everything connected with our personality fails. Nature never spares the individual; we are always balked of a complete success: no prosperity is promised to our self-esteem. We have our indemnity only in the moral and intellectual reality to which we aspire. That is immortal, and we only through that.⁸²

The Quakerism of Mary Rotch must therefore be taken into account in any discussion of the influences which contributed to the shaping of Emerson's intellectual viewpoint. Together with his reading in the literature of Quakerism and his early personal contact with the Quaker preacher Edward Stabler, it formed a significant strand in the background of ideas out of which his essays came.

There is no need to labor the point. I have no desire to exaggerate the importance of the Quaker influence. Nevertheless, this much can safely be asserted: that between 1827 and 1836, when the salient ideas which characterize the essays were in the germinal state, Emerson was strongly subject to the influence of Quaker thought through the three channels which I have enumerated and discussed. His receptive mind eagerly assimilated this new body of thought. It sank deep into his consciousness, and inevitably colored all his subsequent thinking. Although the period of direct contact was substantially over before the publication of his first book in 1836, the interest in Quakerism remained, indelibly engraved on his mind, and concretely embedded in his *Journals* where it could fertilize and nourish all his later speculations.

The doctrines of self-reliance and the Inner Light are, as Emerson himself was aware, only two figures of speech to express the same basic concept of individualism;⁸³ and reliance upon self is, in

⁸¹ *Journals*, III, 398-399.

⁸² *Letters and Social Aims*, pp. 342-343.

⁸³ The essential unity between the central faith of Quakerism and the individualism of Emerson comes out clearly in a passage from the *Journals* in which he records a con-

the end, reliance upon God as the Over-Soul made manifest in the individual consciousness. Emerson's "spiritual religion" is entirely at one with Quakerism in this respect. Religion for him, as for George Fox and Mary Rotch, was an intuitive and personal experience, completely divorced from traditional forms and authority.⁸⁴ The central conviction upon which Emerson's religious views were founded is admirably stated in a letter to Solomon Corner of Baltimore, written in 1842:

I count these to be low, sleepy, dark ages of the Soul, only redeemed by the unceasing affirmation at the bottom of the heart—like the nightingale's song heard all night—that the powers of the Soul are commensurate with its needs, all experience to the contrary notwithstanding.⁸⁵

"This way of thinking," he wrote in the same year, "falling . . . on prelatial times, made . . . Quakers; and falling on Unitarian and commercial times, makes the peculiar shades of Idealism which we know."⁸⁶

version with a Quaker acquaintance: "At Harrisburg, [last] April, I met W. L. Fisher. The good old Quaker believes in Individualism still: so do I. Fourierism seemed to him boys' play; and so indeed did money; though he frankly admitted how much time he had spent about it: but a vital power in man, identical with that which makes the grass grow, and the sweet breeze blow, and which should abolish slavery, and raise the pauper,—that he believes in against all experience. So we held sweet counsel together . . ." (*Journals*, VIII, 141-142). William Logan Fisher (1781-1862) was a leader among the Progressive Friends and a prominent anti-Sabbatarian writer.

⁸⁴ He liked the silent church before the service began better than any preaching ("Self-Reliance," *Essays, First Series*, p. 71). "It is not in the power of God," he said, "to make a communication of his will to a Calvinist. For to every inward revelation he holds up his silly book, and quotes chapter and verse against the Book-Maker and Man-Maker, against that which quotes not, but is and cometh. There is a light older than intellect, by which the intellect lives and works, always new, and which degrades every past and particular shining of itself. This light Calvinism denies, in its idolatry of a certain past shining" (*Journals*, VI, 377).

⁸⁵ *A Letter of Emerson*, ed. Willard Reed (Boston, 1934), p. 18.

⁸⁶ "The Transcendentalist," *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*, p. 339.