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## THOREAU'S PHILOSOPHICAL APPRENTICESHIP

JOSEPH J. KWIAT

THE influence of the Oriental, Greek, German, French, and English types of philosophical idealism in aiding the New England Transcendentalists to react against the popular empiricism of Locke and the threatening skepticism of Hume has been widely recognized.<sup>1</sup> The possibility, however, of an earlier "transitional" philosophy to bridge the wide gap between the contrasting philosophies of Locke and Kant, for instance, has never been fully discussed.

This essay will attempt to indicate the nature of the effect of the Harvard curriculum in philosophy in general,<sup>2</sup> and the influence of the Scottish commonsense philosophy in particular, upon Thoreau during his college years. The philosophical instruction at Harvard from 1833 to 1837 (Thoreau's college years) included the study of William Paley, Joseph Butler, Dugald Stewart, and John Locke. In addition, the English and Scottish aestheticians and rhetoricians were introduced under Dr. Edward T. Channing's auspices. The reflection of Thoreau's reading, speculative, ethical, and aesthetic, is quite clear in his later college essays. Although the complexities and interrelations of the material will make it necessary to allude to the echoings of Locke, and also of Paley, for example, they will be subordinated to the main current of the philosophical influence at Harvard, Scottish Realism, represented by Dugald Stewart, who carried on the teachings of Thomas Reid. Thoreau's reaction against the materialistic aspects of Locke, as well as

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the general studies by Frothingham, Snyder, Goddard, Harrison, Wahr, Girard, Carpenter, Christy, and Gohdes; see also the special studies by Foerster, Thompson, Hotson, and Adams.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of the pattern of the philosophical instruction at Harvard, see Edgeley W. Todd, "Philosophical Ideas at Harvard College, 1817-1837," *New England Quarterly*, xvi (March, 1943), 63-90.

against Paley's commonplace ethics, by way of the Scottish philosophy will be stressed. His subsequent dissatisfaction with the limitations of the Scottish philosophy culminating in his emergence as a thoroughgoing Transcendentalist will be indicated.<sup>3</sup>

There is ample evidence of the popularity of the Scottish philosophy at Harvard; it was accepted in the curriculum for a number of reasons, and it was popular among the instructors themselves.<sup>4</sup> One of the major influences upon Thoreau among the faculty at Harvard was Edward T. Channing, whose *Lectures Read to the Seniors in Harvard College*, 1856, showed a decided preference for the Scottish common-sense philosophers.

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<sup>3</sup> The writer is indebted to Professor Leon Howard of Northwestern University for his suggestions.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Todd, *op. cit.*, 84. The prestige of the Scottish philosophers at Andover Seminary, Yale, Pennsylvania, and especially Princeton, should also be noted. See J. L. Torrey, editor, *Remains of the Reverend James Marsh* (Boston, 1843), 136; Freidrich Uberweg, *History of Philosophy* (New York, 1874), II, 451-453; Elizabeth P. Peabody, *Reminiscences of William Ellery Channing* (Boston, 1880), 140; I. Woodbridge Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* (New York, 1907), 18, 476; I. Woodbridge Riley, *American Thought From Puritanism to Pragmatism* (New York, 1915), 123-125; Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York and London, 1943), 236.

Summarizing the editions of Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* prior to 1828, Nina M. Edwards concludes: "Both volumes had a considerable vogue in America, if we may judge from the evidence concerning editions; for the first volume was printed three times, and the second, four, in this country." *The Literary Reputation of Dugald Stewart, 1792-1828* (University of Chicago Master's dissertation, 1942), 8-9.

James Marsh, the Vermont Transcendentalist who edited *Aids to Reflection*, read by the Transcendental Club, wrote to Coleridge in 1829. "It is," he said, "in consequence of the false and superficial notions to which the world is accustomed, rather than to their inherent difficulty, that your philosophical writings have been so generally considered mystical and unintelligible." He added that the Scotch writers, Campbell, Brown, and especially Stewart, had displaced Locke in American colleges and that Kant was practically unknown. Torrey, editor, *op. cit.*, 136-137.

Riley points out that "the Scottish realism was the most widely spread of any of the empirical influences, yet its influence varied greatly in different localities." *American Philosophy*, 18. Accounting for the success of the movement, he adds: "Not only was the common sense philosophy of Reid, Stewart, Brown, and Hamilton in harmony with the practical note of the country, but it was also an aid to faith, a safeguard to morality as against the scepticism of Hume and the atheism of the Voltairians." *American Philosophy*, 476.

osophy during Thoreau's junior year, carried on the philosophical tradition of Levi Hedge by employing Stewart's works as textbooks in his own courses. In Thoreau's senior year, the instructor in the same course, Francis Bowen, showed a wide familiarity with the Scottish school in his essays appearing in the *Christian Examiner* and the *North American Review*, which were collected under the title *Critical Essays* in 1842. He revised and abridged, with critical and explanatory notes for the use of colleges, Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* in 1854. Rev. Henry Ware, Senior, was the Hollis Professor of Divinity; and it should be mentioned that the "soundness and orthodoxy" which were the stipulations required by the Hollis endowment also were the distinctive virtues of the Scottish philosophy which made its great appeal to the instructors.<sup>5</sup>

In intellectual philosophy (*i.e.*, the philosophy of the human mind), Thoreau was taught from Stewart's *Elements* and Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding*.<sup>6</sup> In moral and political philosophy he studied Paley's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, and Jean-Baptiste Say's *Political Economy*. Under the religious branch of the philosophical instruction, Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* and Butler's *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (first part) were prescribed.

## I

Thoreau was born in 1817, "when Emerson (fourteen years his senior) was entering college at Cambridge, and Carlyle was wrestling 'with doubt, fear, unbelief, mockery, and scoffing, in agony of spirit,' at Edinburgh." But when Thoreau set out for Harvard College in 1833, Emerson had not come to live in

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Josiah Quincy, *The History of Harvard University* (Cambridge, 1840), II, 285.

<sup>6</sup> All references to the Harvard curriculum are based upon the Harvard Catalogue and the Annual Reports of the Presidents of Harvard University to the Overseers on the State of the Institution.

Concord, "nor had transcendentalism permeated to the village then."<sup>7</sup> In his first year at college Thoreau submitted himself to the restricted curriculum of the day and spent considerable time in the college library. In his second year he felt the influence of Channing, who tried to teach him "how to think out any proposition logically, and how to organize it in words."<sup>8</sup>

During his junior year, however, Thoreau studied Paley's *Principles* and Stewart's *Elements* under Giles, which were finished by the end of the first term. "After the end of the first term," the Harvard Catalogue states, "the Juniors did not recite in these branches during that year." Under Professor Ware, Thoreau, in the first term, studied Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*. This was followed by Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* (first part), which was finished during the second term. Composition of themes and forensics is listed for the three terms of the year. The college essays were usually written for Professor Channing as a regular classroom exercise, and would reflect to some extent the readings, interests, and attitudes of Thoreau during this period, although the subjects for the essays were, as a rule, assigned by the instructor. Thoreau was given topics, many of them aesthetic and ethical in trend; and, as Canby says, "he answered the implied questions out of the philosophy and ethics which were being taught at Harvard. All of his essays are comments on his study or reading."<sup>9</sup> These later essays in his junior and senior years may also be thought of as first attempts to integrate his formal Harvard studies, with their emphasis upon the Scottish philosophy, his efforts at self-culture, and the many contemporary influences, especially Emerson's,

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Adams, "Thoreau's Literary Apprenticeship," *Studies in Philology*, xxix (October, 1932), 617. Adams continues: "If Thoreau carried any of that philosophy with him to Harvard it was an innate rather than an acquired transcendentalism." To think in terms of an "innate transcendentalism," however, hinders any attempt to understand the movement intellectually. It is the purpose of this paper to indicate the role of the Scottish philosophy within the intellectual climate of the time and place, and to account for the philosophical transition which made transcendentalism possible.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau* (Boston, 1939), 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Thoreau*, 51.

into some sort of personal expression, a major preoccupation with Thoreau during his entire mature life.

The fragmentary essay, "Imagination as an Element of Happiness," mirrors young Thoreau's readings in the sections "Of the Influence of Imagination on Human Character and Happiness" in Stewart's *Elements*.<sup>10</sup> Thoreau writes,

If Reason was given us for any one purpose more than another, it was that we might so regulate our conduct as to ensure our eternal happiness. The cultivation of the mind, then, is conducive to our happiness. But this consists in the cultivation of its several faculties.<sup>11</sup>

The essay continues with a specific reference to Stewart:

What we call the Imagination is one of these faculties; hence does its culture conduce in a measure to the happiness of the individual. The Imagination, says Dugald Stewart, "is the power that gives birth to the productions of the poet and the painter"; whose province it is, says another, "to select the parts of the different conceptions, or objects of memory, to form a whole more pleasing, more terrible, or more awful than has ever been presented in the ordinary course of nature,"—a power by no means peculiar to the poet or painter. Whatever the senses perceive or the mind takes cognizance of, affords food for the Imagination. In whatever situations a man may be placed, to whatever straits he may be reduced, this faculty is ever busy. Its province is unbounded, its flights are not confined to space; the past and the future, time and eternity all come within the sphere of its range. This power, almost coeval with Reason itself, is a fruitful source of terror to the child. This it is that suggests to his mind the idea of an invisible monster, lying in wait to carry him off, in the obscurity of the night. Whether acquired or not, it is obviously susceptible of a high degree of cultivation. This fact goes to prove what was already so evident. In-

<sup>10</sup> See Dugald Stewart's *Works* (Cambridge, Mass., 1829), I, 375-394.

<sup>11</sup> F. B. Sanborn, *Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston and New York, 1917), 115. All references to Thoreau's college essays are, with one exception to this work (hereinafter, "College Essays"). Whenever possible the exact date is indicated. In doubtful cases Sanborn's approximate chronological arrangement has been followed.

deed, there are the same objections to the cultivation of any other faculty of the intellect as to the one in question.<sup>12</sup>

The allusion in question, of course, is to Burke's concept of terror as the ruling principle of the sublime. The important point, however, is that Imagination as one of the faculties of the mind, which had been suggested through his readings in Stewart, is seized upon by Thoreau to place him squarely in the midst of the two tendencies so intricately blended in eighteenth century philosophy, and particularly in the Scottish philosophy. Leslie Stephen has stated the problem:

Appeals to experience mingle with appeals to a *priori* demonstration. Common sense, in the vulgar acceptance of the word, is confused with the philosophical appeal to innate ideas and universal intuitions. . . . It is not an easy task to unravel these opposing currents of thought and feeling, or to discover the logic implied in unreasoning impulses, and the unconscious tendencies which would have been disavowed if plainly brought before the consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

But despite its eclectic character the Scottish philosophy points toward a possible connection with Transcendentalism through the principle of intuition. It prepared the way, at least, for young Thoreau to accept the doctrines which his master, Emerson, was about to set forth in *Nature* in 1836.

"The Story-Telling Faculty," one of Thoreau's college essays, reflects the influence of Locke. "By accident, through the medium of the senses first, the child is made acquainted with some new truth."<sup>14</sup> The essay continues: "Whatever is said or done, seen or heard, — is in any way taken cognizance of by the senses or the understanding, — produces its effect, contributes its mite, to the formation of the character. Every sentence that is framed, every word that is uttered, is framed or uttered, for good or for evil; nothing is lost."<sup>15</sup> Thoreau is following quite

<sup>12</sup> Sanborn, 115-116.

<sup>13</sup> *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1927), II, 334.

<sup>14</sup> "College Essays," 117-118.

<sup>15</sup> "College Essays," 119-120.

closely in the philosophical footsteps of Locke, although he adds his own strong and developing moral sense.

In the essay "National and Individual Genius," Thoreau writes of the "truth" of a philosopher who discovered that man is a bundle of habits. Thoreau notes, however, that of "the various bundles which we label French, English and Scotch *men* . . . the color and texture of these contents vary with different bundles; but the material is uniformly the same."<sup>16</sup> The Harvard junior may be suggesting the belief in the continued uniformity of the laws of nature, which Stewart regarded as one of the most important principles among the "fundamental laws of human belief."<sup>17</sup> Thoreau continues to develop his thesis:

I come now to speak of that peculiar structure and bent of mind which distinguishes an individual from his nation. . . . In a play or poem the author's individual genius is distinguished by the points of character he seizes upon, and the features most fondly dwelt upon, as well as the peculiar combination he delights in, and the general effect of his picture. Into his idea of his fellow enters one half himself; he views his subject only through himself, and strange indeed would it be, did not the original portrait betray the medium through which the original was observed. As the astronomer must use his own eyes, though he look through a *national* glass, not only are we to consider the quality of the lens, but also the condition of the observer's visual organs. A defect in his sight will not be made up for by distance—will be equally evident, whether it be the instrument itself or the star to which it points, that is subjected to his scrutiny. . . . Every one is differently impressed, and each impression bears the stamp of the individual's taste and genius. One seizes greedily upon circumstances which another neglects; one associates with an event those scenes which witnessed it—one grasps the ludicrous, another the marvellous; and thus, when the taste and judgment come to weave these conceptions into poetry, their identity is not lost. Here, then, surely, one's individual genius is fully manifested.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> "College Essays," 106.

<sup>17</sup> *Works*, II, 39.

<sup>18</sup> "College Essays," 108-109.



The probable influence of Stewart in aesthetics may be discernible here. Discussing the effect of the association of ideas on our judgments in matters of taste, Stewart says,

. . . it is obvious, that the circumstances which please, in the objects of Taste, are of two kinds: First those which are fitted to please by nature, or by associations which all mankind are led to form by their common condition; and secondly, those which please in consequence of association arising from local and accidental circumstances. Hence, there are two kinds of Taste: the one enabling us to judge of those beauties which have a foundation in the human constitution; the other, of such objects as derive their principal recommendation from the influence of fashion.<sup>19</sup>

In "Fate Among the Ancients" (Spring, 1836), Thoreau expresses an attitude which is a reaction, almost satirically, against the popular acceptance of Locke. "There appear to have been those, of every age and nation, who have risen above the sensuous conceptions of the multitude; who, satisfied if they could search out the causes of things, by the mental eye alone, have thus, from time to time, rescued small fragments of truth from the general wreck."<sup>20</sup> Thoreau is now attracted to Plato. And just as from the Cambridge Platonists may be traced relationships to the ethical doctrines of Kant and later idealists, Thoreau, following the Edinburgh type of Platonism — as Professor Schneider notes, "moralized and socialized by a strong tincture of 'common sense' " — is bound in the same general direction, namely, transcendentalism.

Plato's views appear to have been . . . correct. "All things," says he, "are in fate, i. e., within its sphere or scheme — but all things are not fated: it is not in fate that one man shall do so and so, and another suffer so and so; for that would be the destruction of our free agency and liberty: but if any one should choose such a life, and do such and such things — then it is in fate that such or such consequences shall ensue upon it."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Works*, I, 275-276.

<sup>20</sup> "College Essays," 175.

<sup>21</sup> "College Essays," 176.

Soon after writing this essay in the spring of 1836 Thoreau left college temporarily as an invalid. The prominent position of the Scottish philosophy in the Harvard curriculum, the Scottish philosophical inclinations of the instructors, Thoreau's direct references to representatives of the Scottish school, and the correspondence between his ideas and their own indicate a major influence, particularly in aesthetic and ethical matters, by the end of his junior year.

In the first term of Thoreau's senior year, Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding* was studied under Bowen.<sup>22</sup> The Harvard Catalogue for that year states, "a written analysis required of the student, and a commentary of the instructor [*sic*]; exhibiting the opinions of the other philosophers, on controverted questions." Themes and forensics for the entire year and Lectures on Rhetoric and Criticism were studied under Channing. In the second term, Locke was continued in addition to Say's *Political Economy* under Bowen, and Lectures on Theology with Ware. The senior year was concluded with Say.

In fragments of an essay written for a college society in January, 1837, "Milton's 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso,'" a popular subject for aesthetic inquiries, Thoreau echoes a familiar doctrine in his insistence upon thinking of poetry's pleasure-giving function. "Poetry is but a recreation. . . . That always

<sup>22</sup> William Charvat has called attention to the "barely perceptible tendency," in the third decade, to return to the philosophy of Locke. He cites A. H. Everett's statement in the *North American Review*, 1829, that "we are ourselves . . . fully satisfied with those parts of the theory of Locke which the Scotch and the Germans thought it necessary to abandon." That others thought likewise is evident in that Giles substituted Locke for Thomas Brown in the Harvard curriculum of 1833-1834. Cf. *The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835* (Philadelphia, 1936), 39-40.

Commenting on the notebook of quotations and outlines for his readings that Thoreau kept during his senior year, Adams says, "One page 124, three-quarters of the way through the book, there is a sudden inrush of Oriental and transcendental material. . . . There had, however, been no intellectual upheaval." *Op. cit.*, 619. But when confronted with Locke's work in his senior year, Thoreau, already dissatisfied with the limitations of Stewart's common-sense doctrines, and exposed to the new Transcendental movement in America, probably was motivated to react sharply against both Locke and the Scottish philosophers. This may have constituted the "intellectual upheaval" that Adams has not noticed.

appeared to me a contemptible kind of criticism, which can deliberately, and in cold blood, dissect the sublimest passage, and take pleasure in the detection of slight verbal incongruities."<sup>23</sup> On the same topic Stewart writes, "But to be understood, is not the sole object of the poet; his primary object is to please; and the pleasure which he conveys will, in general, be found to be proportioned to the beauty and liveliness of the images which he suggests."<sup>24</sup> Commenting on Thoreau's essay, Sanborn says, "Here is an essay on a complex subject, such as Professor Channing delighted to give, — one, too, that, if dealt with fairly, required much reading by the student." It may be suggested that this reading by Thoreau probably extended with interest into Scottish philosophy and aesthetic.

In "Provincial Americans" (February, 1837) Thoreau writes:

There are certain principles implanted in us which, independently of the will, teach us the consistency and inconsistency of things, when viewed in certain relations. By operating upon these principles, through the medium of certain definite propositions, corresponding invariable results in the mind of each one, of necessity follow. That these conclusions as invariably affect the conduct, I do not pretend. The feelings, on the other hand, are not at the mercy of any such definite law which regulates and disposes them.<sup>25</sup>

The influence of Stewart's *Elements*, as well as of Reid, indirectly, is evident, even to the extent of a marked verbal dependence. A law of nature has not necessity, according to Stewart, but consists only in stating that so it has been and so it will probably be. He distinguishes between *principles*, and *axioms* or primary truths: the latter are necessary presuppositions of our knowledge from which it is not possible to draw any consequences and are fundamental laws or barren forms; from the principles on the other hand it is possible to draw consequences, their foundations may be either hypothetical or cate-

<sup>23</sup> "College Essays," 104.

<sup>24</sup> *Works*, I, 372.

<sup>25</sup> "College Essays," 157.

gorical, and they have a content. Stewart's doctrine of correspondence between the fundamental laws of belief and the structure of the universe presupposes a harmony between our understanding and nature.<sup>26</sup> It is apparent that Thoreau incorporated the epistemological approach of Stewart although it is important to note, he found that emotional and ethical factors do not lend themselves as readily to analysis in this system.

In "The Sublimity of Death" (about March 15, 1837), Thoreau, still using Stewart as a springboard, reflects a growing concern with the various aspects of the "ruling principle" concept of the eighteenth century.

Burke has said that "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime." Alison says as much, but Stewart advances a very different theory. The first would trace the emotion in question to the influence of pain, and of terror, which is but an apprehension of pain. I would make that ruling principle an inherent respect or reverence, which certain objects are fitted to command; which reverence, as it is altogether distinct from, so shall it outlive that terror to which he refers, and operate to exalt and distinguish us, when fear shall be no more.<sup>27</sup>

Thoreau has gone along thus far with the Scottish school's assumption of "a benevolent God and of a benevolent principle in human nature." But as the essay continues, the increasing impingement of the Transcendental influence and particularly of Emerson's *Nature* may be seen. An excited sense of discovery is given expression in a heightened terminology and quickened rhythm, culminating in an impassioned affirmation:

Yes—that principle which promotes us to pay an involuntary homage to the Infinite, the Incomprehensible, the Sublime, forms the very basis of our religion. It is a principle implanted in us by our Maker—a part of our very selves. We cannot eradicate it, we cannot resist it; fear may be overcome, death may be despised; but the Infinite, the Sublime, seize upon the soul and disarm it. We may

<sup>26</sup> See Stewart, *Works*, II, 18-36, *passim*.

<sup>27</sup> "College Essays," 145.

overlook them, or, rather, fall short of them; we may pass them by—but so sure as we meet them face to face, we yield.<sup>28</sup>

The subtitle of Thoreau's college essay, "The Superior and the Common Man" (May 5, 1837), reads as follows:

"Paley, in his 'Natural Theology,' Chap. 23, speaks of minds utterly averse to 'the flatness of being content with common reasons,' and considers the highest minds 'most liable to this repugnancy.'

"See the passage, and explain the moral or intellectual defect."<sup>29</sup>

Thoreau follows Emerson's section "Idealism" in *Nature*, and quotes from Turgot: "He that has never doubted the existence of Matter, may be assured he has not aptitude for metaphysical inquiries."<sup>30</sup> The interesting point here is that Paley's more vulnerable and compromising ethics, rather than the real center of the conflict, the alleged materialism of Locke, was singled out to bear the brunt of the attack. Similarly, Dugald Stewart's function in England had been his use "in creating a philosophical spirit, where none existed before, and in checking the utilitarianism of Paley."<sup>31</sup> But Thoreau, unlike Stewart, whose "elegant style, his crowning good sense, and the moderation of his opinions, recommended him to many," refused to moderate his opinions. Emerson had made his impression. The Transcendental outlook was crystallizing rapidly in the young man's head. The embryo philosopher, Thoreau says, ". . . acknowledges but two distinct existences, Nature and Spirit; all things else which his obstinate and self-willed senses present to him, are plainly, though unaccountably, absurd. . . .

<sup>28</sup> "College Essays," 148.

<sup>29</sup> "College Essays," 137.

<sup>30</sup> "College Essays," 137.

<sup>31</sup> James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy* (London, 1875), 301.

"In connection with the argument from final causes, so effectively used by Paley, Kant has remarked that it involves a logical leap. Looking back along the series of phenomena as far as we please, we come to nothing but phenomena; and must, therefore, make a sudden spring from the phenomenal to the transcendental, or limit ourselves to an anthropomorphic deity. Paley declines to make the spring." Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought*, I, 413. Thoreau, using Emerson as a temporary crutch, does so willingly and with increasing facility.

He recognizes no axioms, he smiles at reason and common sense; and sees truth only in the dreams and superstitions of mankind."<sup>32</sup> Thus, Thoreau repudiates Stewart's barren axioms, or primary truths, and treats most patronizingly the whole common-sense school of philosophy. He continues to echo Emerson quite distinctly:

What is more common than error? Some seeming truths he [the embryo philosopher] has clung to, as the strongholds of certainty, till a closer investigation induced mistrust. His confidence in the infallibility of Reason is shaken; his very existence becomes problematical. He has been sadly deceived, and experience has taught him to doubt, to question even the most palpable truths. He feels that he is not secure till he has gone back to their most primitive elements, and taken a fresh and unprejudiced view of things. He builds for himself, in fact, a new world.<sup>33</sup>

In "Whether Moral Excellence tends directly to increase Intellectual Power?" (May 26, 1837)<sup>34</sup> Thoreau advances, with typically paradoxical thrusts, the reaction against the "vulgar" religiosity of the Scottish school. Moral excellence consists, he says, "in allowing the religious sentiment to exercise a natural and proper influence over our lives and conduct—in acting from a sense of duty, or, as we say, from principle." He cites Byron to bear out his thesis. "He [Byron] advanced just far enough on the road to excellence to depart from the religion of the vulgar; nay further, twelve lines, says Constant, . . . of his poetry, contain more true religion than was ever possessed by any or all of his calumniators." Thus Thoreau, like Byron, expresses the indignant revolt against the whole system of effete respectability and evangelical piety so characteristic of the Scottish ethical writings.

In the interesting Commencement Essay, "Conference on the Commercial Spirit" (August 16, 1837), his last work at

<sup>32</sup> "College Essays," 138.

<sup>33</sup> "College Essays," 139.

<sup>34</sup> This college essay may be found in *The Concord Saunterer*, compiled by Viola C. White (Middlebury, 1940), 60-61.

Harvard, Thoreau suggests that we cultivate the "moral affections," as opposed to Paley, who repudiated the existence of a "moral sense," and then, rhapsodically, presents his Emerson-inspired ideas. For "man and nature are indissolubly joined," says Emerson, and both are working toward some benevolent end. Thoreau adds:

Let men, true to their natures, cultivate the moral affections, lead manly and independent lives. . . . The spirit we are considering is not altogether and without exception bad. . . . We glory in those very excesses which are a source of anxiety to the wise and good; as an evidence that man will not always be the slave of matter — but ere long, casting off those earth-born desires which identify him with the brute, shall pass the days of his sojourn in this his nether paradise, as becomes the Lord of Creation.<sup>35</sup>

## II

Thoreau probably found himself, after his return to his native town, in Norman Foerster's words:

. . . impelled by currents of thought and feeling which he, unlike Emerson, had had no part in creating. The long hard way from orthodoxy to an emancipated devotion to the moral sentiment in all its naked beauty Emerson may be said to have traveled for his young friend, who reached the goal without having to fight his way to it . . . in a word, he inherited Transcendentalism.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Familiar Letters*, VI, 9-10. All references to the writings of Thoreau, other than the college essays, are to the Walden Edition, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston and New York, 1906), 20 vols.

<sup>36</sup> Norman Foerster, *Nature in American Literature: Studies in the Modern View of Nature* (New York, 1923), 75.

Adams writes: ". . . at the time he [Thoreau] walked out of Harvard yard in the summer of 1837 he seems to have created for himself very little that might be called transcendental. Yet he had begun to form a philosophy not incompatible with transcendentalism. In his first mature and public utterance, his Commencement Essay, Thoreau shows how far he had gone toward formulating the philosophy that served as a guide during the rest of his life. . . . His years at college, having rested lightly on Thoreau's shoulders and having given him, he says, only the ability to express himself . . . cannot be said to mark an epoch in his life." *Op. cit.*, 620-621. Recognition, however, of the role of the Scottish school of philosophy in the Harvard curriculum and its historical relationship to the Transcendental movement would tend to qualify and clarify the statement.

In April, 1838, an article appeared in Orestes A. Brownson's transcendental periodical, *The Boston Quarterly*, entitled "Thoughts on Unity, Progress, and Government" by Rev. Samuel D. Robbins, in which is to be found "the fundamental thought of the *Divinity School Address* couched in language strikingly Emersonian."<sup>37</sup> One month later (May 7, 1838) Thoreau expressed in the *Journal* his own faith in intuition (impulse), aligning himself with Plato against Aristotle: "Impulse is, after all, the best linguist, and for his logic, if not conformable to Aristotle, it cannot fail to be most convincing."<sup>38</sup>

In a letter to Helen Thoreau, October 6, 1838, he disparages the "poverty" of the systems of philosophy of Locke, Stewart, and Brown in comparison with the potentialities of the intuitive approach:

One of your young ladies wishes to study mental philosophy, hey? Well, tell her that she has the very best text-book that I know of in her possession already. If she does not believe it, then she should have bespoken another better in another world, and not have expected to find one at "Little & Wilkins." But if she wishes to know how poor an apology for a mental philosophy men have tacked together, synthetically or analytically, in these latter days — how they have squeezed the infinite mind into a compass that would not non-plus a surveyor of Eastern Lands — making Imagination and Memory to lie still in their respective apartments like ink-stands and wafers in a lady's escritoire — why let her read Locke, or Stewart, or Brown. The fact is, mental philosophy is very like Poverty, which, you know, begins at home; and indeed, when it goes abroad, it is poverty itself.<sup>39</sup>

And then, a little more soberly, he adds:

<sup>37</sup> See Clarence L. F. Gohdes, "Some Remarks on Emerson's *Divinity School Address*," *American Literature*, 1 (March, 1929), 30. Although it cannot be directly proved that Thoreau or Emerson had read the essay, perhaps, also, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Thoreau, like Emerson, read the magazine regularly.

<sup>38</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, 1, 35. (The *Journal* constitutes volumes VII-XX of the *Walden Edition*.)

<sup>39</sup> Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, VI, 25-26.



I should think an abridgment of one of the above authors, or of Ambergrombie [*sic*], would answer her purpose. It may set her a-thinking. Probably there are many systems in the market of which I am ignorant.<sup>40</sup>

Apparently the synthetic and analytical philosophy of Locke and the Scottish school serve their purpose in setting one “a-thinking,” Thoreau believes, just as they did for himself, but that they lack in his estimation the ingredients for a rich and expressive philosophical outlook, he leaves no doubt.

Thoreau’s questioning sympathy with the Transcendental approach is evident in the Journal for 1839. Writing on April 25, 1839, he asks: “If we see the reality in things, of what moment is the superficial and apparent? Take the earth and all the interests it has known, — what are they beside one deep surmise that pierces and scatters them?”<sup>41</sup> And again, on November 5, he explicitly expresses his dissatisfaction with the limitations of the common-sense philosophical approach:

We are accustomed to say that the common sense of this age belonged to the seer of the last — as if time gave him any vantage ground. But not so: I see not but Genius must ever take an equal start, and all the generations of men are virtually at a standstill for it to come and consider of them. Common sense is not so familiar with any truth but Genius will represent it in a strange light to it. Let the seer bring down his broad eye to the most stale and trivial fact, and he will make you believe it a new planet in the sky.<sup>42</sup>

On January 29, 1840, he writes, “Aeschylus had a clear eye for the commonest things. His genius was only an enlarged com-

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Thoreau is referring to John Ambergrombie (1780-1844), an eminent Scottish physician and author of *On the Intellectual Powers* (1830), which reflected the influence of Brown, Reid, and Stewart and which was soon brought out in America with great popularity. New texts in intellectual philosophy were introduced in Harvard by Professor Walker in 1840; these were Ambergrombie’s *Inquiries Concerning the Intellectual Powers* and Upham’s *Elements of Mental Philosophy*. Thus Thoreau in his letter of advice anticipates the short-lived change in the Harvard curriculum by two years.

<sup>41</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, I, 78.

<sup>42</sup> *Journal*, I, 93.

mon sense. He adverts with chaste severity to all natural facts."<sup>43</sup> On February 13, the distinction between talent and genius is equated in terms reminiscent of Coleridge's familiar distinction between Talent and Genius, the Understanding and the Reason, and the Fancy and the Imagination. "Duty belongs to the understanding, but genius is not dutiful, the highest talent is dutiful. Goodness results from the wisest use of talent. The perfect man has both genius and talent."<sup>44</sup> His affirmation of Transcendentalism on April 29, is especially interesting: "The universe will not wait to be explained. Whoever seriously attempts a theory of it is already behind his age. His yea has reserved no nay for the morrow."<sup>45</sup>

### III

Attention has been called to the second manuscript volume of the *Journal* which begins on June 14, 1840.<sup>46</sup> In the six weeks between that date and July 27, Adams says,

These highly introspective pages indicate a desire to become articulate about the concerns of the transcendental philosophers. Thoreau wrote them in the very month in which the *Dial* was launched, at the very time when he was first admitted to Alcott's "Conversations." It seems not unlikely that his natural interest in transcendentalism was quickening into a willingness to accept it as a way of life.<sup>47</sup>

Although any discussion of a "natural interest in transcendentalism" seems a dubious and unprofitable enterprise, it is evident that Thoreau was rapidly breaking away from the tyranny of the earth-creeping quality of the Scottish common-sense school and that he was arriving at a more complete acceptance of the intuitive principles of Transcendentalism

<sup>43</sup> *Journal*, I, 116.

<sup>44</sup> *Journal*, I, 119. Cf. F. T. Thompson, "Emerson's Indebtedness to Coleridge," *Studies in Philology*, XXIII (January, 1926), 64 ff.

<sup>45</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, I, 133-134.

<sup>46</sup> This section begins on page 139 of volume I of the printed *Journal* in the Walden Edition.

<sup>47</sup> Adams, 623.

which Emerson was then formulating.<sup>48</sup> A full-length discussion of Thoreau as a Transcendentalist, however, is not the purpose of this paper. It will limit itself to a few representative "ideas" expressed from 1840 to 1841, at about which time he became an "official" member of the Transcendental Club.

Thoreau postulates his design for living on June 17: "Our lives will not attain to be spherical by lying on one or the other side forever; but only by resigning ourselves to the law of gravity in us, will our axis become coincident with the celestial axis, and [only] by revolving incessantly through all circles, shall we acquire a perfect sphericity."<sup>49</sup> June 23 he writes: "I cannot see the bottom of the sky, because I cannot see to the bottom of myself. It is the symbol of my own infinity. My eye penetrates as far into the ether as that depth is inward from which my contemporary thought springs."<sup>50</sup> And July 27, when the 1840 Journal abruptly ends, he says: "A word is wiser than any man, than any series of words. In its present received sense it may be false, but in its inner sense by descent and analogy it approves itself."<sup>51</sup>

The year 1840 has been suggested as the date of Thoreau's decision to become a writer. It also indicates roughly the approximate period when Thoreau may be said to have become a thoroughgoing Transcendentalist, so that by August 1, 1841, after spending the summer reading Hindu philosophy in Emerson's library and becoming a member of the Transcendental Club he gives expression to the following Transcendental outpouring:

The best thought is not only without sombreness, but even without morality. The universe lies outspread in floods of white light to it. The moral aspect of nature is a jaundice reflected from man. To the innocent there are no cherubim nor angels. Occasionally we rise

<sup>48</sup> Cf. "The Transcendentalist," in R. W. Emerson, *Works* (Centenary Edition, Cambridge, Mass., 1903), I, 339-340, written in January, 1842.

<sup>49</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, I, 142-143.

<sup>50</sup> *Journal* I, 150.

<sup>51</sup> *Journal*, I, 172.

above the necessity of virtue into an unchangeable morning light, in which we have not to choose in a dilemma between right and wrong, but simply to live right on and breathe the circumambient air. There is no name for this life unless it be the very vitality of *vita*.<sup>52</sup>

Thoreau, it seems, has even transcended Emerson's Reason and has taken the "step beyond," which Emerson himself later attributed to Thoreau.<sup>53</sup>

#### IV

An attempt has been made in this paper to show that Thoreau was neither born nor destined to be a Transcendentalist. The Harvard curriculum and textbooks, rather, indicate the philosophical climate of the period to which Thoreau was exposed. The function of the Scottish common-sense school of philosophy in uprooting the potentially subversive and "wooden philosophy" of Locke has been stressed. And while this philosophy, too, had its limitations and soon proved unsatisfactory, it served its function in preparing for the transition from the materialism of Locke and the utilitarianism of Paley, to the idealism of the Germans, Coleridge, and others. The role of the Scottish philosophy, long neglected in the study of the intellectual history of New England Transcendentalism, deserves further exploration in the determination of its early transitional influence upon Emerson and other prominent Transcendentalists.

<sup>52</sup> *Journal*, 1, 265.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, editors, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1908-1914), 10 volumes, ix, 522. See also John Brooks Moore, "Thoreau Rejects Emerson," *American Literature*, iv (November, 1932), 250 ff.