



BROOK FARM

CHAPTER I

THE TRANSCENDENTAL CLUB

THE distance seems wide between Immanuel Kant and the small group of social philosophers of the Transcendental Club in and about Boston fifty or more years ago; yet, but for him, and the schools of Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schleiermacher, which immediately followed or schismatically differed from him, there would have been no Transcendental Club, and very likely no Brook Farm, although Kant might have recognized with difficulty the progeny of his own genius. "German philosophy" had powerfully affected two men in England: Coleridge, who especially felt the influence of Schelling even to the point of plagiarism, and Carlyle, who, best of his generation, interpreted German thought in both philosophy and literature. Coleridge derived his inspiration at first hand, for he lived and studied in Germany. With his extraordinary powers of absorption, he became so full of every sort of learning that

his genius overflowed upon other minds of his generation, but he was not otherwise an originating force in his own country. Carlyle imbibed German philosophy mainly through German literature. Philosopher he never really was, however vigorous a thinker and man of letters. He announced opinions and followed convictions, but induction was often too slow a method. So far as he was inspirational and given to intuitions, he remained a Transcendentalist, in practice if not at heart, though the name grew to offend him. Emerson's calmness and fairness made him tolerant of Carlyle's later vicissitudes as the apostle of force and hero-worship, but the real impression of the more rugged genius on the gentler was made while Carlyle was yet interpreting Germany to England and America.

When Emerson introduced "Sartor Resartus" to America, a genuine interest in the best of German thought was already fully under way in this country. Few as were the hands into which the torch passed from Germany, through England and to America, it is easy to underestimate the number. Emerson takes pains to attribute the beginning of the change toward individualism — and this, after all, is the real form which Transcendentalism assumed in this country — to Edward Everett, and this beginning he sets at about the year 1820. Everett

and George Ticknor both studied in Germany, and both brought home wholesome traditions of learning; neither of them was, however, outside the limits of a refined and earnest scholarship, fitted by character to promote or to lead a new movement in thought, although in their respective chairs at Harvard College, and through their finished and academic writings, they affected American literature. Emerson also includes Channing as one who brought fresh spiritual forces to combat the grim front of New England theology, adding that, "His cold temperament made him the most unprofitable companion." At the same time also there began to be studied in this country various forms and schools of French philosophy and social reform — late children of the first Revolution. Saint Simonism, the philosophy of Cousin, Joubert, Constant, Leroux, and presently the huge elaborations of Fourier, all made their way into temporary favor, in part as counteractions against the purer Transcendentalism, but particularly as directing attention to the need of political and social regeneration.

The scholars, — for it was at first an affair of scholars alone, — who were centred in Boston, were busied with this French philosophy, mainly eclectic, and were also inquiring deeply into German philosophy on their own account, though inspired by Coleridge, Carlyle, and by our own

pioneers to German universities. Particularly were George Ripley, Margaret Fuller, W. H. Channing, Convers Francis, Felton, James Freeman Clarke—nor did these complete the number—then looking into the original sources, and not depending too much on the large claims which Carlyle had begun to make as early as 1827 for his intellectual attachment to Germany. Mrs. Dall, herself still living and a triumphant apostle of the Newness, assigns to Frederic Henry Hedge the leadership in this strong movement of New England scholarship. Hedge had been the private pupil of George Bancroft here and in Germany, and his learning was of the soundest; he was furthermore able to communicate his zeal to others. His influence was no less potent, because all his life a certain enviable obscurity attended him, which enabled him to build achievement, not reputation. It is of no importance, however, who was first or last, greatest or least; the galaxy was small, but it was brilliant, and each star helped to make it so. The literary activity of the group was most effectively shown in the series—the first of its kind in America and edited by George Ripley—entitled “Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature,” fourteen volumes in all, which began to appear in 1838. Miss Fuller, Felton, Dwight, James Freeman Clarke, Samuel Osgood, C. T. Brooks, and W. H. Channing contributed

to it. It was and still remains a creditable work, and some years ago it was republished in Edinburgh. There was by this means opened to a wider public a satisfactory approach to some of the names then influencing thought in France and Germany, and an interest was thus aroused here which had no parallel at the time in England.

Meanwhile other and native disturbances were taking place. The passing of a body of thought, in part directly from one country and in part through the medium of two others, might considerably sway a few minds, but would hardly affect any large mass of opinion, unless there were some internal dissatisfaction already at work; and this country, or that part of it then best representing its intelligence, was fully prepared for new gospels—a nidus ready for contagion. Unitarianism, having effectually divided the traditional church of New England, had already spread far beyond its early boundaries; and not destined to enjoy long, in its first integrity, the results of its wholesome accomplishments, had itself begun to fall apart. It was in the order of nature that the older Unitarians, who dared so boldly to sever from the parent stock, should themselves lament the departure of their own nurslings. Andrews Norton was not a man to let the Transcendentalists spread themselves like the green bay tree

without strong protest. His "Latest Form of Infidelity" was the boldest, most defiant, and most arrogant attack which they were called upon to sustain. Puritanism was, and is to-day, as robust in a Unitarian as in a Trinitarian, provided only that he has the blood of the early saints in his veins; and Transcendentalism was a reaction against the essential conservatism of both the Unitarian and Trinitarian forms of Puritanism, neither of which cherished any belief in the self-sufficiency of the human mind outside of revelation. The Transcendentalists of Boston were not perhaps so anxious to domiciliate the philosophy of Kant, Cousin, and their congeners as to assert the supremacy of man himself and of each and every man as well.

Under such conditions, native and foreign, the Transcendental Club came into being in no sudden or violent way. In fact its development and realization were so natural that even to-day it is a matter of doubt if there ever really was such a club. The name, if accepted by the members at all, was taken as a necessity, not as a deliberate choice. Since all Boston insisted that certain people who used to meet occasionally made a Transcendental Club, there was no escaping the obligation. "I suppose," says Emerson, "all of them were surprised at this rumor of a school or sect, and certainly at the name of Transcendentalism, given nobody knows

by whom, or when it was first applied." Dr. Hedge, writing forty years later, says that Ripley, Emerson, George Putnam, and himself called "the first meeting of what was named in derision the Transcendental Club," but he insists that this Club consisted only in occasional meetings of like-minded men and women, and that no line was drawn between those who were members and those who were not, except that due notification was always given to certain persons. Those who were to be looked for at such a coterie were Emerson, Alcott, Thoreau, Stetson, the Ripleys and Mrs. Samuel Ripley, Dwight, Miss Fuller and Miss Peabody, Parker, Robert Bartlett, Jones Very, Convers Francis, Weiss, Bartol, and Hedge. Now and again, Bradford, Samuel Osgood, and Ephraim Peabody would come. Putnam, who found that the meetings "took a turn unexpected to him," came no more after the first meeting at Emerson's. "Brownson," continues Hedge, "met with us once or twice, but became unbearable, and was not afterward invited." Of these choice souls, Dr. Cyrus Augustus Bartol is alone living to-day (1899), then one of the minor prophets, but always a thorough Transcendentalist, though after his own fashion, fearless, honest, and not overweighted with discretion.

The Club was often called by the members the Symposium, but the real name, if there was

any, was "Hedge's Club," inasmuch as a journey by him from Bangor to Boston insured a call for a meeting. The larger title, however, was foisted on these gatherings and was never repelled. Hedge has not been remembered so fully as he should have been in connection with the events of these few years; for he was an important factor, and was even asked to be an editor of the *Dial*, the most immediate result of the Club, when that periodical appeared in 1840. Among others identified with the Club were James Freeman Clarke, Thomas T. Stone, both the Channings, uncle and nephew, Samuel J. May, Samuel D. Robbins, C. P. Cranch, Hawthorne, George Bancroft, Clevenger, the sculptor, Dr. Charles T. Follen, Samuel G. Ward, William Russell, Caleb Stetson, Miss Sophia Peabody, who married Hawthorne in 1842, and Miss Marianne Ripley. Some of these were not members, yet all were within a fairly definite circle and followed a recognized cult. No trustworthy list of the members or meetings of the Club now exists. Though all shared to a greater or less extent the common fervor, and though discussion was as general as could be expected in such gatherings, the burden of talk and effort fell on the enthusiastic and willing few. It is understood that the first conference on September 8, 1836, considered the unhappy plight in which the Unitarian Church then

found itself; and the preponderance in the Club of clergy, settled or unsettled, was so large, that the early discussions were naturally theological. Revelation, Inspiration, Providence, Law, Truth, and other generalities were treated openly and candidly. Not without truth was the charge then made that the main tendencies of the new spirit were toward Pantheism.

The occasional meetings went on with a singular amiability, until Ripley, always a leading voice, became so dissatisfied with his own attitude toward the office of the ministry that he resigned his charge late in 1840, and urged that some practical application should be made of the fresh views of philosophy and life. Emerson says that Dr. Channing took counsel with Ripley in the year of the latter's withdrawal from his Purchase Street pulpit "to the point whether it were possible to bring cultivated, thoughtful people together, and make a society that deserved the name." There is mention of a conference at the house of Dr. John C. Warren, which ended "with an oyster supper, crowned by excellent wines." Not too much in support of Ripley's project was to be expected of the Club itself; in fact, none of the original members accompanied Ripley to Brook Farm, and of the later members only Hawthorne and Dwight followed him; but they were all ready enough to listen to Alcott — and it was no unexacting

task—while he read Plato “as an equal”; their features were composed and their minds attuned to the Immensities and Eternities when this discursive sage was asked “whether omnipotence abnegated attribute.” Indeed these Transcendentalists often found themselves enjoying seraphic moods. Philosophy, foreign and domestic, was only a part of what they considered. They were reformers in that they were dissatisfied with any ideal less exalted than their own, and though far from a contentious or unamiable set, they had the reformer’s capacity for making others feel a sense of ineptitude. The relative fewness of their numbers made this unconscious loftiness seem arrogance. But with all their tolerance of ideas, they had no ears for Ripley’s practical appeal. Emerson made the best known refusal, and it was noble and honest; in replying to Ripley’s letter of November 9, 1840, he said frankly that investments in Concord were securer than they were likely to be at Brook Farm. It was a favorite theory of Emerson that method was unnecessary—a theory due perhaps to a certain physical and mental inertness which the vulgar do not hesitate to call laziness. In the *Dial*, in speaking of the young men “who have been vexing society for these last years with regenerative methods,” he says that they “all failed to see that the Reform of Reforms must be accomplished without means.”

With the more cultivated and colder of the two sorts of Boston Transcendentalists this cheerful *petitio principii* found favor; but the younger and more radical, who said, according to Emerson, “I wish I was not I,” were not satisfied. In this way Emerson and Ripley parted, one to his life of continuing serenity and to what in another would have proved a fattening optimism, and the other, with his little caravan, across the untried desert which lies between mankind and every Utopia.

Brook Farm was a Transcendental movement without doubt, but only, after all, in that it was a speculation of pure idealists, and that its inspiration came from the sources here so imperfectly outlined. The germ of Ripley’s plan may have sprung from the “Neuhof” of Pestalozzi,—himself a genuine Transcendentalist,—concerning whom Ripley wrote an article for the *Christian Examiner* as early as 1832; or it may have been only one of the “private maggots” which Lowell, in his largest manner, said were then in everybody’s brain. Whatever the remote cause, nothing short of some kind of realization of an ideal would satisfy Ripley. He had no doubt pottered long enough, though he had no unkind word to say, with the “intellectuals” of Boston. To understand properly the true parentage of Brook Farm, and especially the relations of the Transcendentalists to

reform, some pains must be taken to read contemporary opinions. The *Dial*, in particular, was friendly to Transcendentalism and even to Brook Farm, but the balanced nicety of its good will is precisely typical of its passion for individualism in opposition to association. In the issue for January, 1843, Emerson boldly asserts that there is no such thing as a Transcendental party, there is no pure Transcendentalist. He insists that it is Idealism — that is, "Idealism as it exists in 1842"; then follow searching objections to the extravagance, the separateness, the fastidiousness, and the inactivity of these friends of his bosom. But at the close of this, one of his most coherent essays, he finds use for all such by reason of their fineness and discriminations. In a commendatory notice of "An Essay on Transcendentalism" (Boston, 1842), an enthusiastic little book, the authorship of which is attributed to Charles M. Ellis, son of the previous owner of Brook Farm, the *Dial* repudiates the notion that the new faith is reformatory; "it has higher, nobler, lovelier work than that of warring with the past or abusing the present."

On the other side, Hecker, writing as late as June, 1844, does not hesitate to say that "A Transcendentalist is one who has keen sight but little warmth of heart; who has fine conceits, but is destitute of the rich glow of love. He is

en rapport with the spiritual world, unconscious of the celestial one. He is all nerve and no blood — colorless. . . . He prefers talking about love to possessing it; as he prefers Socrates to Jesus. Nature is his church, and he is his own god." George Ripley, however, found no fault with the mental attitude of the Transcendentalists, but said that they desired "to reform the prevailing philosophy of the day," and that they relied on a faculty common to all men "to perceive spiritual truth when distinctly presented." It would be hard to find a closer explanation of the philosophy than that given by Nathaniel H. Whiting, a mechanic from South Marshfield, who, addressing a "Bible Convention," held in the Masonic Temple, Boston, on March 29, 1842, declared that "truths which pertain to the soul cannot be proved by any external testimony whatsoever." It was this sort of indoctrination among the supposedly unlettered which such men as Andrews Norton honestly feared, and which induced him to reprint in a pamphlet two all-important papers from the *Princeton Review*, written jointly by Drs. J. W. Alexander and A. B. Dod, both solid pillars of the Presbyterian Church. Dr. Dod took for his part an exposition of Cousin's philosophy, while Dr. Alexander arraigned the whole front of German transcendental philosophy. It was a sound and scholarly perform-