

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

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Chapter III

THE PERIOD OF NEWNESS.

The above was the high-sounding name which was claimed for their own time by the youths and maidens who, under the guidance of Emerson, Parker, and others, took a share in the seething epoch sometimes called vaguely Transcendentalism.

Went to college reading already English, French, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek.

Picked up later: German, Portuguese, Hebrew, Swedish.

77 [77] If this circle of bright young people was not strictly a part of the Transcendental Movement, it was yet born of “the Newness.” Lowell and Story, indeed, both wrote for “*The Dial*,” and Maria White had belonged to Margaret Fuller’s classes. There was, moreover, passing through the whole community a wave of that desire for a freer and more ideal life which made Story turn aside from his father’s profession to sculpture, and made Lowell forsake law after his first client. It was the time when Emerson wrote to Carlyle, “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform; not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his wastecoat pocket.” I myself longed at times to cut free from prescribed bondage, and not, in Lowell’s later phrase, to “pay so much of life for a living” as seemed to be expected.”

84 [84] I was but twice at Brook Farm, once driving over there in a sleigh during a snowstorm, to convey my cousin Barbara to a fancy ball at “the Community,” as it was usually called . . . But if I did not see much of Brook Farm on the spot, I met its members frequently at the series of



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exciting meetings for Social Reform in Boston, where the battle raged high between Associationists and

Communists, the leader of the latter being John A. Collins. Defenders of the established order also took part; one of the best of the latter being Arthur Pickering, a Boston merchant; and in all my experience I have never heard a speech so thrilling and effective as that in which Henry Clapp, then a young radical mechanic, answered Pickering’s claim that individuality was better promoted by the existing method of competition. . . .

The Brook Farm people were also to be met occasionally at Mrs. Harrington’s confectionery shop in School Street, where they took economical refreshments; and still oftener at Miss Elizabeth Peabody’s foreign bookstore in West Street, which was a part of the educational influences of the period. It was an atom of a shop, partly devoted to the homoeopathic medicines of her father, a physician; and she alone in Boston, I think, had French and German books for sale. . . . There was also Miss Peabody herself, desultory, dreamy, but insatiable in her love for knowledge and for helping others to it. James Freeman Clarke said of her that she was always engaged in supplying some want that had first to be created . . . She always preached the need, but never accomplished the supply until she advocated the kindergarten; there she caught up with her mission and came to identify herself with its history. She lived to be very old, and

with her broad benevolent face and snowy curls was known to many as “The Grandmother of Boston.” I best associate her with my last interview, a little before her death, when I chanced to pick her out of a snowdrift into which she had sunk overwhelmed during a furious snowsquall, while crossing a street in Boston. I did not know her until she had scrambled up with much assistance, and recognizing me at once, fastened on my offered arm, saying breathlessly, “I am so glad to see you. I have been wishing to talk to you about Sarah Winnemucca. Now Sarah Winnemucca” — and she went on discoursing as peacefully about a maligned Indian protegee as if she were strolling in some sequestered moonlit lane, on a summer evening. [87]

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[87] I have said that the influence wrought upon me by Brookline life was largely due to one man and one or two writers. The writer who took possession of me, after Emerson, was the oh hum

[94] The first of these influences was the renewal of my acquaintance with Lowell, which had been waived during my two years’ stay in Brookline. . . . To be sure, I could recall the time when my brother had come home one evening with the curt remark, “Jim Lowell doubts whether he shall really be a lawyer, after all; he thinks he shall be a poet.” Now that poet was really launched, and indeed was “the best launched man of his time,” as Willis said. I used to go to his room and to read books he suggested . . . We occasionally walked out together, late in the evening, from Emerson’s lectures or the concerts which were already introducing Beethoven. Sometimes there was a reception after the lecture, usually at the rooms of a youth who was an ardent Fourierite, and had upon his door a blazing sun, with gilded rays emanating in all directions, and bearing the motto “Universal Unity.” . . . [95]

[97] Another an yet more tonic influence, though Lowell was already an ardent Abolitionist, came from the presence of reforma-

tory agitation in the world outside. There were always public meetings in Boston to be attended; there were social reform gatherings where I heard the robust Orestes Brownson and my eloquent cousin William Henry Channing; there were anti-slavery conventions, with Garrison and Phillips; then on Sunday there were Theodore Parker and James Freeman Clarke, to show that one might accomplish something and lead a manly life even in the pulpit. My betrothed was one of the founders of Clarke’s Church of the Disciples, and naturally drew me there; the services were held in a hall and were quite without those merely ecclesiastical associations which were then unattractive to me, and have never yet, I fear, quite asserted their attraction. I learned from Clarke the immense value of simplicity of statement and perfect straightforwardness of appeal; but in the direction of pure thought and advanced independence of opinion, Theodore Parker was my teacher. To this day I sometimes dream of going to hear him preach, — the great, free, eager congregation; the strong, serious, commanding presence of the preacher; his reverent and earnest prayer; his comprehensive hour-long sermon full of sense, knowledge, feeling, courage, he being not afraid even of his own learning, absolutely holding his audience in the hollow of his hand. . . .

Under the potent influences of Parker and Clarke I found myself gravitating toward what was then called the “liberal” ministry; one very much secularized it must be, I foresaw, to satisfy me. Even in this point of view my action was regarded rather askance by some of my more strenuous transcendental friends, even George William Curtis expressing a little disapproval; though in later years he himself took to the pulpit, — in a yet more secular fashion, to be sure, — a good while after I had left it. I had put myself meanwhile in somewhat the position of that backsliding youth at Concord of whom some feminine friend said anxiously, “I am troubled about Eben; he used to be a real Come-Outer, interested in all the reforms; but now he smokes and swears and goes to church, and is just like any other young man.” Yet I resolved to risk even this peril, removed my modest belongings to Divinity Hall, and brought one of those very

Hebrew Bibles which my father had once criticised as having their title-pages at the wrong end.
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Chapter IV

THE REARING OF A
REFORMER

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Some years before the time when I entered the Harvard Divinity School, it had been described by the Rev. Dr. J. G. Palfrey, then its dean, as being made up of mystics, skeptics, and dyspeptics. This, being interpreted, really meant that the young men there assembled were launched on that wave of liberal thought which, under Emerson and Parker, was rapidly submerging the old landmarks. For myself, I was wholly given over to the newer phase of thought, and after a year of unchartered freedom was ready to concentrate my reading a little and follow a few appointed lines of study which the school then required. . . . [100]

He read Comte, Fourier, Strauus’s “Life of Jesus,” Mill’s “Logic,” a bunch of things I never heard of, Homer, Dante, Plato, Cousin, Kant,

[105] I met there such men as Thomas Hill, afterward President of Harvard; Octavious B. Frothingham; William R. Alger, Samuel Longfellow and Samuel Johnson, who compiled at Divinity Hall their collection of hymns, a volume called modestly “A Book of Hymns,” and more profanely named from its editors’ familiar names “The Sam Book.” Longfellow was one of the born saints, but with a breadth and manliness not always to be found in that class; he was also a genuine poet, like his elder brother, whose biographer he afterward became. . . .

[111] Thanks to a fortunate home training and the subsequent influence of Emerson and Parker, I held through all my theological studies a sunny view of the universe, which has lasted me as well, amid the storms of life, so far

as I can see, as the more prescribed and conventional forms of faith might have done. We all, no doubt, had our inner conflicts, yet mine never related to opinions, but to those problems of heart and emotion which come to every young person, and upon which it is not needful to dwell. Many of my fellow students, however, had just broken away from a sterner faith, whose shattered eggshells still clung around them. My friend of later years, David Wasson, used to say that his health was ruined for life by two struggles: first by the way in which he got into the church during a revival, and then by the way he got out of it as a reformer. This I escaped, and came out in the end with the radical element so much stronger than the sacerdotal, that I took for the title of my address at the graduating exercise “The Clergy and Reform.” . . . Probably it was crude enough, but Theodore Parker liked it . . . I was asked to preach as a candidate before the First Religious Society at Newburyport, a church two hundred years old, then ostensibly of the Unitarian faith, but bearing no denominational name. Receiving a farther invitation after trial, I went there to begin my professional career, if such it could properly be called. [113]

His ancestor is Francis Higginson

[114] It must be borne in mind that during all this period I was growing more, not less radical; my alienation from the established order was almost as great as that of Thoreau, though as yet I knew nothing of him except through “The Dial.”

It must be remembered that two rather different elements combined to make up the so-called Transcendentalist body. There were the more refined votaries, who were indeed the most cultivated people of that time and place; but there was also a less educated contingent, known popularly as “Come-Outers,” — a name

then as familiar and distinctive as is that of the Salvation Army to-day. They were developed largely by the anti-slavery movement, which was not, like our modern civil service reform, strongest in the more educated classes, but was predominantly a people’s movement, based on the simplest human instincts, and far stronger for a time in the factories and shoe-shops than in the pulpits or colleges. . . . All of these influences combined to make the Come-Outer element very noticeable, — it being fearless, disinterested, and always self-asserting. . . . Some of them, as Emerson says, “devoted themselves to the worrying of clergymen;” proclaiming a gospel of freedom, I have heard them boast of having ascended into pulpits and trampled across their cushions before horrified ministers. This was not a protests against religion, for they were rarely professed atheists, but against its perversions alone. [116]

[[116] All of us were familiar with the vain efforts of Garrison to enlist the clergy in the anti-slavery cause; and Stephen Foster, one of the staunchest of the early Abolitionists, habitually spoke of them as “the Brotherhood of Thieves.” Lawyers and doctors, too, fared hard with those enthusiasts, and merchants not much better . . .

[117] It was, like all seething periods . . . a time of high moral purpose; and the anti-slavery movement, reaching its climax after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, was about to bring such qualities to a test.

[121] It was in one respect fortunate that most of the early advocates of the Woman Suffrage reform had served previously as Abolitionists, for they had been thereby trained to courage and self-sacrifice; but it was in other respects unfortunate, because they had been accustomed to a stern and simple “Thus saith the Lord,” which proved less applicable to the more complex question.

[124f] Returning to Cambridge, I found the whole feeling of the college strongly opposed to

the abolition movement, as had also been that among my Brookline friends and kindred. My uncle, Mr. Samuel Perkins . . . thought, and most men of his class firmly believed, that any step toward emancipation would lead to instant and formidable insurrection. It was in this sincere but deluded belief that such men mobbed Garrison.

[125f] I know of no book except the last two volumes of Pierce’s “Life of Charles Sumner” which fully does justice to the way in which the anti-slavery movement drew a line of cleavage through all Boston society, leaving most of the more powerful or wealthy families on the conservative side. What finally determined me in the other direction was the immediate influence of two books, both by women. One of these was Miss Martineau’s tract, “The Martyr Age in America,” portraying the work of the Abolitionists with such force and eloquence that it seemed as if no generous youth could be happy in any other company; and the other book was Mrs. Lydia Maria Child’s “Appeal for that Class of Americans called Africans.” . . . This was, it must be remembered, some years before the publication of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

[127] The parish, which at first welcomed me, counted among its strongest supporters a group of retired sea-captains who had traded with Charleston and New Orleans, and more than one of whom had found himself obliged, after sailing from a Southern port, to put back in order to eject some runaway slave from his lower hold. All their prejudices ran in one direction, and their view of the case differed from that of Boston society only as a rope’s end differs from a rapier. One of them, perhaps the quietest, was the very Francis Todd who had caused the imprisonment of Garrison at Baltimore. It happened, besides, that the one political hero and favorite son of Newburyport, Caleb Cushing — for of Garrison himself they only felt ashamed — was at that moment fighting slavery’s battles in the Mexican war. It now seemed to me strange [128] that, under all these circum-

stances, I held my place for two years and a half. . . . It did not help the matter that I let myself be nominated for Congress by the new “Free Soil” party in 1848, and “stumped the district,” though in a hopeless minority. The nomination was Whittier’s doing, partly to prevent that party from nominating him . . .

He lives in Newburyport two years after leaving parish

[130] I supposed myself to have given up preaching forever . . . but a new sphere of reformatory action opened for me in an invitation to take charge of the Worcester Free Church, the first of several such organizations that sprang up about the time under the influence of Theodore Parker’s Boston society, which was their prototype. These organizations were all more or less of the “Jerusalem wildcat” description

[131] — this being the phrase by which a Lynn shoemaker described one of them — with no church membership or communion service, not calling themselves specifically Christian, but resembling the ethical societies of the present day, with a shade more of specifically religious aspect. Worcester was at that time a seething centre of all the reforms, and I found myself almost in fashion, at least with the unfashionable; my evening congregations were the largest in the city, and the men and women who surrounded me — now almost all passed away — were leaders in public movements, in that growing community. Before my transfer, however, I went up to Boston on my first fugitive slave foray, as it might be called, — not the Anthony Burns affair, but the Thomas Sims case, which preceded it, and which was to teach me, once for all, that there was plenty left to be done, and that Philip had not fought all the battles. [131] [end chapter]