

## ROMANTIC MODERNISM AND THE SELF

*John Steadman Rice*

---

*Conceptualizations of the self have been central to postmodern thought, but, John Rice asks, from what sources do these conceptualizations draw? In an historical analysis, he traces the roots of postmodern theorizing to one strain, the romantic strain, of modernist critique. While Romantic Modernism has a long history, it was only with its incarnation in the human potential movement after mid-century that it began its ascent to victory over another strain of modernist critique, what Rice calls “social scientific modernism.” The triumph of Romantic Modernism, he argues, has come in the form of the growing cultural authority of a therapeutic ethic, and it is this selfsame ethic that informs much postmodern thinking about the self. Rice explores the Romantic Modernist view of the self and early attempts to institutionalize it. Especially concerned with the relationship between the individual and his or her community, he discusses the various ways by which the Romantic self attempts to assert its authority over society.*

*John Steadman Rice teaches in the Watson School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. He is the author of A Disease of One’s Own: Psychotherapy, Addiction, and the Emergence of Co-Dependency, and a forthcoming book on the institutionalization of therapeutic culture.*

---

ROMANTIC MODERNISM ESPOUSES and rests upon a *distinction between formal rationality and emotion, intuition, spirituality, and individual expressive freedom*. This distinction is reflected in the Romantic Modernist view of the appropriate relationship between the individual and society, which is predicated upon a distinction between a true self and a false self, with the latter understood in terms of the social roles that society imposes upon and demands of the individual. This societal imposition, in turn, is seen as a violation of the self's integrity and the individual's expressive freedom. Indeed, a "feeling of being violated by an inimical society . . . lies at the root of Romantic alienation,"<sup>1</sup> an alienation born of the Romantic Modernist's apprehensive "consciousness of the void beneath the conventional structures of reality."<sup>2</sup>

This premise of the self's violation at the hands of an "inimical society," however, is but the dark side of the Romantic Modernist world view. This "negative Romanticism" is perhaps most clearly embodied in American literature by the work of Edgar Allan Poe, whose *oeuvre* repeatedly emphasizes the horrors of the age—horrors, in turn, that resonate with the Romantic Modernist convictions that rationalism is bankrupt and that the modern self is doomed to estrangement, isolation, alienation, madness, and so on. Nor are these uniquely American strains of Romanticism. Indeed, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is also a Romantic allegory as to the consequences of modernity's heedless reliance on scientific versions of rationalism.

Romantic Modernism, however, is not solely focused on or oriented by this negative view. In contrast both to rationalism and its bleak consequences, another theme in Romantic Modernism posits the self as the source of value in the world. As such, the dedicated

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Hoffman, *The Subversive Vision: American Romanticism in Literature* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1972) 46.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman 9.

(Romantic) individual bears special burdens and is presented with special opportunities as well: “a Romantic figure was first of all faced with discovering a way to project his will upon the external world in order to reassert the dominance of human value and thereby his own identity.”<sup>3</sup>

This more positive strand of Romanticism is most clearly embodied in the American Transcendentalist movement of the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Sharing in negative Romanticism’s dark assessment of the emerging social structures of bureaucratic industrialism, “the principal cause of human failure seemed obvious to [the Transcendentalists]: it was society, that mass of forms and conventions and institutions by which men were held captive, alienated from their true selves.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, “for a Transcendentalist all social structures can become oppressive institutions. . .that perpetuate themselves by restricting moral choice.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Hoffman 11. Rather than clutter up the text with excessive uses of “sic,” it seems more appropriate to simply point out that a number of the sources for this article antedate sensitivity to gender in language.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on Romanticism and Transcendentalism is, of course, voluminous. In addition to those cited, I have found the following to be especially insightful and informative: Morse Peckham, “Towards a Theory of Romanticism: II. Reconsiderations,” *Studies in Romanticism* I (Autumn, 1961): 1-8; Peckham, *Beyond the Tragic Vision: The Quest for Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Braziller, 1962); Peckham, *Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Braziller, 1965); Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism: Collected Essays* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1970); Catherine Albanese, introduction, *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists: Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, and Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Albanese (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988) 1-28; Arthur E. Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (1932; New York: Octagon, 1978); Perry Miller, ed., *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957); Francis O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941); Philip F. Gura and Joel Myerson, eds., *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982). For an excellent and explicitly sociological analysis of Transcendentalism, see Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement 1830-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> George Hochfield, “New England Transcendentalism,” *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, ed. Philip F. Gura and Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 461.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman 50, 54.

The assumption that conventional society and culture obstruct the self's natural development is coupled, in Romantic Modernism, with the assumption that humans contain within themselves all of the requisite capacities and impulses needed to construct and maintain a just and equitable social order. The Transcendentalists, for example, maintained that humans possess, by nature, a divine inner being, an innate and benevolent spirituality. As such, individuals must be free to develop these innate capacities through "a process of growth, unfolding and ripening, a gradual realization of inherent qualities latent in the organism from its very birth"—a process, again, believed to be "thwarted in its development by a . . . conformist society."<sup>7</sup>

These assumptions about human nature, and about the relationship between the individual and society, express a profoundly anti-institutional orientation. That orientation, moreover, translates into a clear course of action in which the self's expressive and experiential freedom receives ultimate priority over conventional social expectations. Thus, the Transcendentalists called for "the *liberation* of [hu]mankind, the release of a power everywhere latent but everywhere suppressed or unawakened."<sup>8</sup> The assertion of the individual's will—the projection, as noted above, of that will onto the external world—was, of course, an abiding theme in Transcendentalist essays and poetry. Thoreau, for one, repeatedly stressed precisely this theme. For example, in *Civil Disobedience*, he baldly asserts that "the only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right."<sup>9</sup> Emerson espoused precisely the same point even more succinctly: "The individual is the world."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Hochfield 462.

<sup>8</sup> Hochfield 461.

<sup>9</sup> Henry David Thoreau as quoted in Hochfield 477.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957) 5.

One mechanism for cultivating and releasing the individual's latent powers was expressed in Emanuel Swedenborg's concept of "correspondence," especially as that idea was interpreted and articulated by Swedenborg's student, Sampson Reed. Emerson, in particular, was much taken with Reed's *Observations on the Growth of Mind*, which, following Swedenborg, asserts that the basic endowments of self, when carefully and meticulously cultivated, correspond with a realm of divine truth. Reflecting this presumed equivalency between the divine and our true human nature, the moment at which correspondence ostensibly occurs is called "the experience of 'self-remembering,'" an experience in which "the perceiver not only records his perceptions but also experiences himself in the act of perception."<sup>11</sup>

For the Transcendentalists, correspondence could be realized in and through exposure to and contemplation of the divine truths of nature—a theme that plainly infused, for example, Thoreau's *Walden*, and that was also expressed in Emerson's famous "transparent eyeball," featured in the essay, "The Oversoul":

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.<sup>12</sup>

The Romantic Modernists' convictions regarding the divine essence of humankind were the basis for their antipathy toward social conventions and institutions. Conventional social structures merely sought to bring people into line with standards external to the self, rather than operating in ways that would facilitate the individual's

---

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth A. Meese, paraphrasing Robert S. De Ropp, "Transcendentalism: The Metaphysics of the Theme," *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, ed. Philip F. Gura and Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 514.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Oversoul," *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) 10.

“natural” process of development. Summarizing the inherent conflict between self and conventional society built into this convergence of convictions, Elizabeth Peabody contended that, “if there is a divine principle in man, it has a right, and it is its duty to unfold itself from itself. . . . A social organization, which does not admit of this, which does not favor, and cherish, and act with main reference to promoting it, is inadequate, false, devilish.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to concisely expressing Transcendentalism’s view of human nature, Peabody’s remarks regarding social organization also underscored a key challenge for Romantic Modernists: to devise institutions which facilitated rather than thwarted self-cultivation.

This effort to institutionalize Romantic Modernism was plainly the impetus for Bronson Alcott’s experiments with alternative education. In his journal of 1828, Alcott outlined some key tenets of Transcendentalist educational philosophy, all of which resonate with the presumptions underlying the Romantic Modernist world view. For example, reflecting that world view’s assumption that human talents and capacities are present from birth, Alcott believed that it was counter-productive to require children to learn, master, and remember lessons gleaned from books: instead, the instructor “should look to the child to see what is to be done. . . . The child is the book.”<sup>14</sup> Further reflecting his impatience with the view of education as a matter of imparting—and imposing, really—standardized knowledge to students, and then evaluating them as to the degree that they demonstrate understanding and mastery of that knowledge, Alcott maintained that the appropriate approach to education was to “let [the instructor] follow out the impulses, the thoughts, the volitions of the child’s mind and heart.”<sup>15</sup> As George Hochfield notes, with this approach:

---

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Peabody, “A Glimpse of Christ’s Idea of Society,” *The Dial* 2 (October, 1841): 499.

<sup>14</sup> Hochfield 464.

<sup>15</sup> Bronson Alcott as quoted in Hochfield 464.

The focus is shifted from subject matter or social outcome to the child as an end in himself; *the inner world takes priority over the outer; and the teacher's function is to stimulate the independent growth of his pupil rather than force upon him an extraneous burden of learning.*<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, Alcott's alternative school failed to survive, as have other attempts to transmute Romantic Modernism into enduring social form. The key point here, and one to which we will necessarily return, is that such failures reflect just how inordinately difficult it is to institutionalize a fundamentally anti-institutional world view—a point the Transcendentalists also learned in their unsuccessful attempt to construct an alternative society oriented around their shared premises. That attempt, of course, was the short-lived (1841-1847) Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education.<sup>17</sup> Brook Farm was to be an economically self-sufficient community, which, at the same time and more fundamentally, was also to serve as a context in which each member could pursue his or her own self-cultivation. The combination of these goals was reflected in, among other things, the original charter's stipulation that each person's contribution to the labors of the Farm was to be strictly on a voluntary basis (a provision which—not incidentally—proved hugely unsuccessful, as volunteers were few and irregular in their commitments). Ultimately, and despite the introduction of Fourierist principles in an attempt to salvage the Farm after the first three singularly unsuccessful years, Brook Farm failed, and the community disbanded.

Brook Farm's demise again illustrates the point with which we are concerned, as its failure was primarily the product of the anti-institutional premises upon which it was based. Because of the Romantic

---

<sup>16</sup> Hochfield 465 (emphasis mine).

<sup>17</sup> The discussion of Brook Farm draws upon Rose's excellent monograph *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement 1830-1850*.

Modernist's understanding of the relationship between self and society, the principal shared value among the Brook Farmers was that the self must not submit to group constraints. As such, although the Transcendentalists "may have had some sort of vague admiration for the vision of a cooperative community, . . . when it came to cooperating in fact, the members [of Brook Farm] tended to be excessively tender about compromising the integrity of their personalities."<sup>18</sup> This "tenderness," this unwillingness to submit to the expectations of others, issued from and reflected the core convictions of Romantic Modernism itself. Indeed, "the transcendental virtues . . . militated against [Brook Farm's] success,"<sup>19</sup> and those virtues were Romantic Modernist in nature.

---

<sup>18</sup> Duane E. Smith, "Romanticism in America: The Transcendentalists," *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, ed. Philip F. Gura and Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 497.

<sup>19</sup> Smith 497.