

### 3 / Wildness and the Passing Show ✽

#### TRANSCENDENTAL RELIGION AND ITS LEGACIES

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” wrote the still-youthful Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>1</sup> If so, he had already practiced what he preached, for some five years previously Emerson’s book *Nature* had announced the virtues of inconsistency by embodying them. In this, the gospel of Transcendentalism, its leader proclaimed a message that inspired with its general principles but, with the opaqueness of its rhetoric, mostly discouraged analytic scrutiny. Yet Emerson’s *Nature* was to have a profound effect on many, even outside Transcendentalist circles. Still more, *Nature* was to reflect and express patterns of thinking and feeling that found flesh in two seemingly disparate nineteenth-century movements—that of wilderness preservation and that of mind cure.

In turning our attention to Emerson and other Transcendentalists, we turn to a question at the heart of mid- and later-nineteenth-century American religion. The question is this: What happens when the heirs of Puritanism, Platonism, the Enlightenment, and the Revolution seek answers to religious questions in a world in which traditional faith is unraveling? What do they discover, and what can they hold fast? How do they theologize, and how do they build meaningful religious worlds in a new era? In what ways do they enact their consciously constructed faiths, and—most important here—in what ways are these enactments expressions of nature religion or nature religions?

To answer these questions we need to move beyond Transcendentalism, to confront a broad popular mentality that could be found in key segments of American society. The mentality was compounded of a lingering Calvinism, with its deep sense of evil and sin; an idealist tradition that molded Platonism and Neoplatonism to modern times and purposes; a romanticism that turned to nature no longer contained (in the Enlightenment and early revolutionary mode) but more expansive to accompany the liberation of self and society; and an emerging “scientific” view in which mesmerism and Swedenborgianism became guiding intellectual lights.

To answer these questions, though, we turn, first, to the Transcendentalist gospel that reflected and, in some measure, shaped the popular mentality. Standing at the intersection of elite and popular worlds, Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau at once absorbed and created religious insight, giving ideas compelling shape and extended currency through their language. Emerson, especially, in his lectures to lyceum audiences faithfully proclaimed his new views, and dutiful newspaper reporters summarized for those unable to attend lyceum gatherings. “In the decade of 1850–1860,” Perry Miller wrote, “he achieved a kind of apotheosis,”<sup>2</sup>—an apotheosis, we may add, that continued to endure. Thoreau, the “sleeper,” did not engage in lyceum activity to nearly the degree that Emerson did. But in his writings he became a prophet to a later generation of seekers. Together the two and their disciples handed on an ambiguous heritage, bringing the Emersonian inconsistency into service to obscure a crack in the religious cosmos. Together they enabled variant forms of nature religion to discover their commonality.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson published *Nature* in 1836, he had constructed it from two previous and now loosely joined essays. As early as 1832, Emerson had stood entranced before the exhibits at the Parisian Garden of Plants, and, as he wrote about them for a lecture audience, he outlined the shape of things to come in the early chapters of *Nature*. In the way that Emerson conceived his work, an essay on “Nature” was to be followed by one on “Spirit,” the two together to make a “decent volume.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, as Ralph L. Rusk tells us, “Spirit” became the seventh chapter in *Nature*; but, before it could join the first five chapters of the essay, there was, as Emerson said, probably in reference to the problem, “one crack in it not easy to be soldered or welded.” The sixth chapter, on “Idealism,” evidently provided the weld, and—if James Elliot Cabot was right in the nineteenth century and Robert E. Spiller in our own—the sixth chapter brought together two essays that Emerson had turned into one.<sup>4</sup>

All of this might be dismissed as arcane textual history were it not for the far-reaching implications of the Emersonian patch. The importance of Emerson’s essay for the Transcendentalist movement can hardly be overstated, and its importance for understand-

ing a wider American culture is also primary. Thus, the problems of *Nature* in making a coherent statement suggest the dilemmas of later religious answers. For Emerson's rhetoric masked and revealed theological substance—and the substance of what Emerson said was rich in ambiguity. Textual history, therefore, provides clues for textual criticism, for insight into the confusion that followed Transcendentalists and other and later Americans. If, as Gail Thain Parker has acknowledged, popular faiths may have helped because they were “muddle-headed,”<sup>5</sup> Emerson and his friends had done their share to contribute.

Put briefly, the confusion was between—on the one hand—a view of matter as “really real,” the embodiment of Spirit and the garment of God, and—on the other hand—a view of matter as illusion and unreality, ultimately a trap from which one needed to escape. Nature, in other words, might be sacramental, an emblem of divine things that in some way actually *contained* the divinity to which it pointed. And nature might therefore have a quality of absoluteness about it. Or—to follow the logic to a conclusion not willingly admitted by Emerson—nature might be the subject of erroneous perception. In stronger terms, it might be an obstacle to bedevil those who would truly seek for higher things. And, at the very least, it might simply be part of the flux in the midst of which one needed to seek some sort of permanence.

As this last suggests, confused views of matter led to ambivalent programs for action. If nature was, indeed, real and sacramental, then corresponding to it became paramount. Harmony with nature became the broad highway to virtuous living and, more, to union with divinity. One discovered what was permanent and lasting precisely by identifying with the regular tides of nature's flux. If, however, nature was at best a passing show, a foil to obscure the Absolute behind and beyond it, then seeking the enduring truth of Mind became key. Mastery *over* nature through mental power became the avenue to a “salvation” that transcended, even as it managed, nature.

To understand how Emerson moved between the two conceptions of matter (or the first and a softened version of the second)—and between the two agendas that followed from them—is to explore the deftness of his rhetoric, to glance at its masking function. The Transcendentalist, like a master craftsman disguising an

imperfection, glosses Nature Real with Nature Illusory, telling us it isn't so even as he tells us that it is. The success of his craft in *Nature* may be measured by the success of his essay and by the long shadow of creative confusion it has cast.

Emerson began with a hymn of praise for nature with its living presence in contrast to the desiccated rattling of the past. “Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past?” He told readers that “the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul,” and that Nature is all that is “NOT ME.” If a person wanted truly to be alone, “let him look at the stars.” “One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. . . . If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown!”<sup>6</sup>

Surely there was no lack of reverence for nature in this rhetoric of exaltation—or in the ascending climax of delight that the first chapter of *Nature* continued to mount. “The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other,” Emerson informed his readers. And, with intimations of communion feast, he stated that “intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man.” “Crossing a bare common,” Emerson confessed, could bring him “a perfect exhilaration.” In the woods he found “perpetual youth,” and in the woods a return to “reason and faith.” The culmination was a mysticism of nature in a passage often cited: “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 eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”<sup>7</sup>

The agenda for action was not far behind. If, as Emerson said, “the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable,” realizing and strengthening the relation became the burden of the harmonial ethic he unfolded. In succeeding chapters he developed

a “higher” instrumentalism, expounding the “uses” of nature under the four headings of commodity, beauty, language, and discipline. What is important about all of them here is that they were expressions of the law of correspondence, expressions in which nature, as mother and teacher, nurtured humans and wrote large the lessons they needed to imitate. With material benefits, nature assisted life lived through the senses and flowering in the practical arts (commodity). With an attractiveness at once physical, spiritual, and intellectual, nature assuaged “a nobler want of man” (beauty), supplying an object for soul, will, and intellect. Likewise, nature pointed to the “radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts,” suggesting the words that were “signs of natural facts” and exhibiting the “particular natural facts” that were “symbols of particular spiritual facts” (language). And, finally, by its hard facticity nature trained the understanding to conform to the shape of things and taught the will to comprehend the moral law (discipline). “Every natural process is but a version of a moral sentence,” Emerson declared.<sup>8</sup>

While there is not space here for thorough exploration of Emerson’s pyramid of uses, we have seen enough to notice how embedded in the *material* of nature the spirituality of uses was. The mother and teacher could not be a trickster, for nature supplied the “fit” for every human loose end. The mother and teacher could not vend illusion and unreality, for, to the contrary, nature purveyed the true and good. In fact, as Barbara Novak writes, truth and beauty did not oppose the actual but were “of a piece” with it.<sup>9</sup>

What, then, are we to make of Emerson’s opening salvo in the sixth chapter, after the series of chapters on nature’s uses? Echoing the question that had already provoked Jonathan Edwards and centuries of Platonists, Emerson began to doubt. “A noble doubt perpetually suggests itself,” he uneasily acknowledged, “whether nature outwardly exists.” “It is a sufficient account of that Appearance we call the World, that God will teach a human mind, and so makes it the receiver of a certain number of congruent sensations, which we call sun and moon, man and woman, house and trade.” Of course, Emerson mused, natural laws were permanent and “sacredly respected.” But the question was whether or not nature possessed “absolute existence.”<sup>10</sup>

Faith in the absolute existence of nature was instinctive for “the

senses and the unrenewed understanding,” Emerson continued. “In their view, man and nature are indissolubly joined. Things are ultimates, and they never look beyond their sphere.” There was, however, another point of view (the ideal), for “the presence of Reason mars this faith.” The “despotism of the senses” was relaxed, and “causes and spirits” could be seen. “The best, the happiest moments of life, are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, just as nature had its uses, so did the ideal theory. “The advantage of the ideal theory over the popular faith, is this,” argued Emerson, “that it presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind.” The world was always “phenomenal” when “seen in the light of thought,” and, in fact, “virtue subordinates it to the mind.” Indeed, the same absorption in the present and rejection of a dead past that contemplation of nature brought (at the beginning of the essay) was also a function of idealism. “It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity, for the contemplation of the soul.”<sup>12</sup>

Atom for atom, though, Emerson had moved past the stuff—the matter—of the universe and its earthly incarnation in nature. And he was painfully aware of what he had done. “I own there is something ungrateful in expanding too curiously the particulars of the general proposition, that all culture tends to imbue us with idealism,” he had already admitted. “I have no hostility to nature, but a child’s love to it. I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons. Let us speak her fair. I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother, nor soil my gentle nest.”<sup>13</sup> Nagged by guilt and apology, he still could not escape the logic of the idealist stance. He had tried, as it were, to modulate from key to key; but in the shift from Nature Major to Nature Minor some wrong notes had been struck. And their echo would continue.

Similarly, action for action, Emerson had moved past the harmonial program that conformity to the laws of nature enjoined. Now, taking his stand on the ideal theory, he propounded an ethic that inverted the rule of harmony in an astonishing way. He thought that, after all, “a true theory of nature and of man . . . should con-

tain somewhat progressive." The ideal theory met this requirement (in Emerson's view, it was another "use" of idealism that it did so) because it led, precisely, to human mastery *over* matter. It brought that control over self and environment that rendered humans divine and lordly beings. If nature was "a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us," it was also true that the sun once emerged full force from the human. As Emerson said a "certain poet sang," "man" was "a god in ruins," now only "the dwarf of himself." "Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents. Out from him sprang the sun and moon."<sup>14</sup>

But the problem was that "man applies to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone. He lives in it, and masters it by a penny-wisdom." It was only by redeeming the soul that the world could be restored to its "original and eternal beauty." By using "ideal force," by acting on nature with "entire force," a person could inaugurate what to ordinary appearances seemed utterly extraordinary. Emerson supplied examples of the brief moments when Reason had momentarily grasped "the sceptre," of "the exertions of a power which exists not in time or space, but an instantaneous in-streaming causing power."<sup>15</sup>

Such examples are; the traditions of miracles in the earliest antiquity of all nations; the history of Jesus Christ; the achievements of a principle, as in religious and political revolutions, and in the abolition of the Slave-trade; the miracles of enthusiasm, as those reported of Swedenborg, Hohenlohe, and the Shakers; many obscure and yet contested facts, now arranged under the name of Animal Magnetism; prayer; eloquence; self-healing; and the wisdom of children.<sup>16</sup>

If self-healing was only penultimate in Emerson's list, he had made his point. There would be a "correspondent revolution in things" when life was made to conform to the "pure idea" in the mind; and "so fast" would "disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish." In a final affirmation of Transcendentalist and idealist faith, Emerson closed his essay. "The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation,—a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God,—he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight."<sup>17</sup>

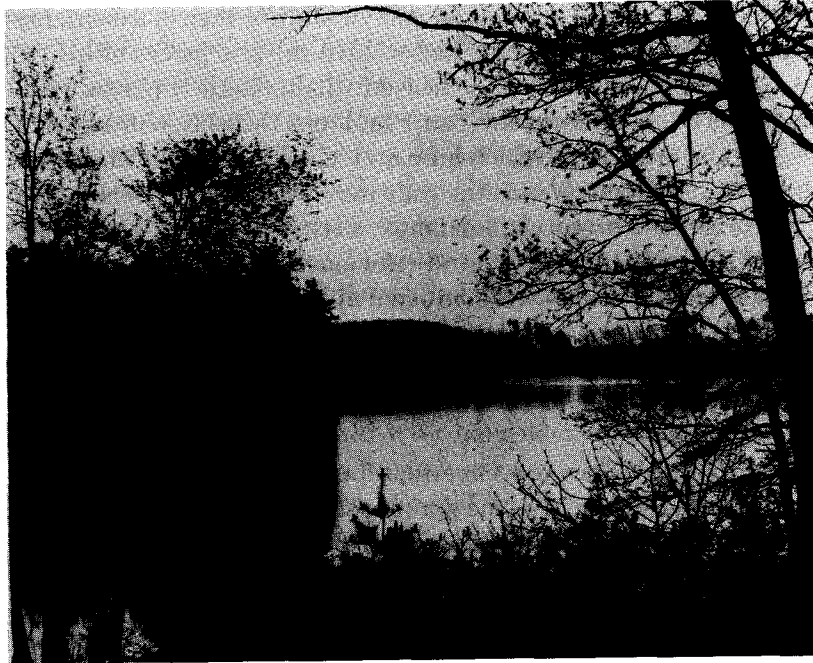
Emerson had begun by gazing in ecstasy at the stars, contemplat-

ing the works of God before him and yielding to their harmonizing influence, but by the time he had welded the two pieces of his essay together he was setting the heavenly lights in their places. Harmony between microcosm (man) and macrocosm (nature) had become the mastery in which humans claimed their true dominion and revealed themselves as the gods they were. Here, already, was a blueprint for a preservationist movement to hold onto wilderness and, at the same time, for a mind-cure movement to leave lower for "higher" nature. Emerson's confusion did not cause America's confusion, but it became America's confusion and, to some degree as well, the confusion of that second-generation Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau.

The author of *Walden* has sometimes been praised for his naturalism, for his attachment to the grainy particularities of the world of nature. Thoreau, in this reading, left behind the idealism of Emerson in an unchastened embrace of matter.<sup>18</sup> In short, Thoreau was a reconstructed heathen, one for whom, as Philip F. Gura has written, "man did not have to get anywhere; he was there already."<sup>19</sup>

There is, indeed, much to be said for this view of Thoreau: his commitment to the specificity of things separated him decisively from his mentor, if mentor Emerson was. Where Emerson saw corn and melons (or simply the landscape of parts blurring into parts), Thoreau saw a textured world filled with innumerable and distinguishable species, for many of which he could supply botanical names. Better able to name, Thoreau was better able to grasp the essential reality of what he saw, to experience the wilderness eucharist that brought him into sacramental relationship with the world.

In *Walden*, in one expression of the eucharist, Thoreau confessed how, as he returned from fishing after dark, he "caught a glimpse of a woodchuck" and then "felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw." "Not that I was hungry then," he added, "except for that wildness which he represented." And in milder vein, in the semicompleted "Huckleberries" Thoreau spoke of the fields and hills as "a table constantly spread." The berries invited to "a pic-nic with Nature." "We pluck and eat in remembrance of her," Thoreau said. "It is a sort of sacrament—a communion—the *not* forbidden fruits, which



Walden Pond in May. Photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason (1855–1937), ca. 1905. (Courtesy, Concord Free Public Library.) The photo captures some of the delicate sensuousness of the pond.

no serpent tempts us to eat.”<sup>20</sup> Here, surely, was an example of what Cecelia Tichi meant when she wrote that Thoreau’s wildness was held in a “domestic embrace.”<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the domesticity should not trick us into missing the wild for the tame, the uncontaminated purity of the communion for a household feast.

Traveling in the Maine woods in 1857, Thoreau found the communion by contemplating one specific phenomenon in what Mircea Eliade would call a hierophany. When Thoreau, encamped at Moosehead Lake, awakened unexpectedly at night, he saw “a white and slumbering light.” It came from phosphorescent wood; but “I was in just the frame of mind to see something wonderful,” Thoreau recalled, “and this was a phenomenon adequate to my circumstances and expectation.” He “exulted like ‘a pagan suckled in a creed’ that had never been worn at all, but was bran new, and adequate to the occasion.” He “let science slide, and rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow-creature,” believing that “the

woods were not tenantless, but choke-full of honest spirits” as good as he. He stood, in fact, in “an inhabited house,” in which, “for a few moments” he “enjoyed fellowship with them.” The revelation of the sacred was complete, and for Thoreau it brought, as Donald Worster has noted, “a community of love.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet, for all the eucharistic celebration, there was another side to Henry David Thoreau’s life in nature. He could not escape from his inherited knowledge that there were “higher laws.” The Calvinist affirmations of his Puritan forebears lingered on in him, transmuted into a quest for moral purity and purification of the senses.<sup>23</sup> It is in this light that Thoreau’s much-vaunted, if somewhat eclectic, Hinduism needs to be seen; and it is in this light, too, that we need to place his confessions of paganism.

If we return to Thoreau mentally feasting on the raw woodchuck, we follow a trail that leads, with Thoreauvian twists, not to carnivorous eucharist but to vegetarianism. The woodchuck incident opens the chapter in *Walden* entitled “Higher Laws”; and for Thoreau higher laws were laws of ascetic separation from the food of the communion table. “I have found repeatedly, of late years,” he mused, “that I cannot fish without falling a little in self-respect.” He found “something essentially unclean about this diet and all flesh” and owned that he objected to “animal food” because of its “uncleanness.” The fish had not fed him “essentially.” “Like many of my contemporaries,” Thoreau went on to admit, “I had rarely for many years used animal food, or tea, or coffee, &c.; not so much because of any ill effects which I had traced to them, as because they were not agreeable to my imagination.”<sup>24</sup>

Thoreau had more reasons for reserve than we usually associate with imagination. All of life, he said, was “startlingly moral.” In terms that seem almost Pauline (save for contiguous allusions to the Chinese philosopher Mencius and to the Indian Vedas), he declared that “we are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers.” In the associative logic that followed, thinking about the “animal” led to thinking about chastity, “the flowering of man.” “Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established.”<sup>25</sup>

All of this seems like an invitation to deliberate austerity—to a moral vegetarianism of some sort. But in the puzzling conclusion to Thoreau's meditation, the way to be chaste was not to deny the senses through self-conscious asceticism but rather to "work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a table." As if to underline the radical nature of his prescription, Thoreau recounted the cryptic fable of John Farmer, who "sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day's work, his mind still running on his labor more or less." Farmer had bathed and now wished "to recreate his intellectual man." "He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one playing on a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood." The notes John Farmer heard "gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to him,—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these."<sup>26</sup>

The results of the reverie point toward a complexity that Thoreau's "startlingly moral" discussion only opaquely reveals. "But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither?" the fable had John Farmer query. "All that he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect."<sup>27</sup>

Evidently, Farmer should have worked some new field—or should have worked his own field in a radically new and dedicated way. Here, indeed, were a program—and a questioning—that went beyond Emerson. And here was a purification of the senses, not to close them off but the better to engage them.<sup>28</sup> Still, even as Thoreau strove to play the pagan, the nature he worshiped led beyond itself. "Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open," Thoreau had said. The trail to vegetarianism was also the trail to a confused, but still operative, idealism. Beyond that, it was the trail to an idealism cast in moral (and Calvinist) categories, to a control of nature as much as to a harmony with it.

"I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail," Thoreau had written in a puzzling passage in "Economy," the first chapter of *Walden*. He had, he said, spoken to many travelers about them, "describing their tracks and what calls they answered to." But his queries brought no reclamation of his

own, only the reports of "one or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud." On the trail of the animal and the sensuous, Thoreau moved between the economic bite of loss and the other economy of quest. He could talk with a few travelers who "seemed as anxious to recover them [hound, horse, and dove] as if they had lost them themselves."<sup>29</sup> But—ironically, in a search for the tangibly real—Thoreau had to keep his eye on the far horizon, on the place that was high, cloudy, and ideal. And to transpose his own words about John Farmer, "all that he [Thoreau] could think of" was the need to repossess—and so to tame and control—the elusive animal power.

Nor was the Thoreau of "Higher Laws" and "Economy" anomalous. Take, for instance, his well-known essay "Walking," an emphatic witness to the religion of real earth. Thoreau reveled in the earthiness as he proclaimed the delights of the "saunterer." "In my walks," he announced, "I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?" This was no mere verbal formula, for there was something even scatological about Thoreau's nature religion. "When I would recreate myself," he wrote,

I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place,—a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength, the marrow of Nature. The wild-wood covers the virgin mould,—and the same soil is good for men and for trees. A man's health requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as his farm does loads of muck.<sup>30</sup>

We hear echoes of John Farmer's attempt to "recreate his intellectual man," and it is clearer how and why Farmer's meditation resolution was wrong. But if "life consists with wildness," as Thoreau said, and if, as he also insisted with creedal solemnity, he believed "in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows," his mucky swamp of wildness underwent a curious transformation as the essay progressed. Wildness, it turned out, was necessary to develop higher faculties: the nourishment of the watery swamp was the nourishment for a more elevated *mist*—and an attempt to reach beyond the still earthly mist to the sun. "My desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown

to my feet is perennial and constant," Thoreau declared. He sought "Sympathy with Intelligence," a "higher knowledge" that was "the lighting up of the mist by the sun." "With respect to knowledge," he owned, "we are all children of the mist." Indeed, "this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature," was also "a personality so vast and universal that we have never seen one of her features."<sup>31</sup>

We can suspect a Transcendentalist leap into at least the borderland of idealism here. And Thoreau did nothing to disconfirm the suspicion as he concluded the piece. "We hug the earth,—how rarely we mount!" he exclaimed. "Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more." Underlining the point in a narrative symbol, he told the story of the time he climbed a white pine tree tall on a hilltop. He found flowers no one else had seen: "on the ends of the topmost branches only, a few minute and delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward." But to gaze at the flowers of the pine, Thoreau—in a posture that subtly recalled the earlier Thomas Jefferson—was in the high place. From this perspective the moral character of the flowers was clear. "Nature has from the first expanded the minute blossoms of the forest only toward the heavens, above men's heads and unobserved by them." We might suspect that the lost hound, horse, and dove of "Economy," always on the farther side of the horizon, silently assented. Thus it was to a metaphysical religion of nature that Thoreau pointed when, in the final lines of "Walking," with swamp and wildwood behind him, he intoned: "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn."<sup>32</sup>

Thoreau had not found the world illusory, as the asceticism of "Higher Laws" and the vanished animal power of "Economy" in some ways suggested, but—in the move from swamp to mist to awakening sun—he had found it penultimate. What Donald Worster called Thoreau's "vacillation between pagan naturalism and a transcendental moral vision" was, even with its sharper emphasis on the naturalism, a muted version of the dilemma of Emerson's *Nature*.<sup>33</sup> Thoreau *did* move further than the older, more

conservative Emerson toward the spiritual paganism of one kind of nature religion. But he never fully got there. And even John Muir, his celebrated spiritual heir in the preservationist movement, never fully got there either.

Thoreau, in fact, had already pointed toward the preservationist path that Muir would walk. "In Wildness is the preservation of the World," he had written in "Walking." And in "Huckleberries," he had made his case for preservation in terms that were practical and compelling. "Let us try to keep the new world new, and while we make a wary use of the city, preserve as far as possible the advantages of living in the country," he urged. He went on to offer practical suggestions for other citizens. "If there is any central and commanding hill-top, it should be reserved for the public use," Thoreau wrote. "If the people of Massachusetts are ready to found a professorship of Natural History—so they must see the importance of preserving some portions of nature herself unimpaired." And, he continued, "I think that each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, either in one body or several—where a stick should never be cut for fuel—nor for the navy, nor to make wagons, but stand and decay for higher uses—a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation."<sup>34</sup>

"In God's wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness," John Muir would later write in his journal. Between the two men and before the two men, there was an environmental religion of nature that resonated with the first affirmations of Emerson's *Nature* and with the more pagan affirmations of Henry David Thoreau. It even resonated, in part, with their Puritanism, as Sacvan Bercovitch and Mason Lowance have pointed out. But, moving away from Puritanism to Thoreau's land of mists and vapors, nineteenth-century nature writers proclaimed a new gospel. Many were imbued with a romanticism that was "biocentric," seeing all of nature as alive and demanding a human moral response. Nature, as Barbara Novak has observed, became a "natural church" that fostered a sense of communion. If "from vernal woods" America could "learn more of good and evil than from learned sages," Perry Miller asked more than three de-

cares ago, "could it not also learn from that source more conveniently than from divine revelation?"<sup>35</sup>

Not that the nation would formally reject the Bible. On the contrary, it could even more energetically proclaim itself Christian and cherish the churches; but it could derive its inspiration from the mountains, the lakes, the forests. There was nothing mean or niggling about these, nothing utilitarian. Thus, superficial appearances to the contrary, America is not crass, materialistic: it is Nature's nation, possessing a heart that watches and receives.<sup>36</sup>

It was a heart, too, that expected the millennium of things to come; and the paradise of the natural world was a sign of perfection growing in the nation. Thoreau purified his senses to make a "perfect body," and Emerson recollected that from man "sprang the sun and moon"—both men fully of a piece with much in the popular mentality.<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, to turn to nature meant to share something of what was happening in the great revivals of the era, when men and women said they received new hearts and spirits, knowing themselves now perfect and without blemish. Perfectionism had become an American way to think; and, for those to whom God and nature were virtually one, preservation of the wild came to mean saving the space in which the human spirit could stretch to its limits. It came to mean, in short, the time of millennial dawn.

Moreover, even as the millennium dawned, new understandings of the sublime were at the disposal of nineteenth-century people. Now especially marking the presence of God in nature, the sublime lost some of its eighteenth-century trappings of fear and gloomy majesty, in a luminist perception of divine glory.<sup>38</sup> For a nation still at least partially under the spell of Calvinism and drawn continually to the evangelical message of the revival, the guilt of the embrace of matter could be assuaged in idealism. At the same time, the joy of the embrace could be celebrated in a religion of nature that reveled in field, hill, and stream. The sublime meant new revelation and, as Barbara Novak would have it, could even signal the apocalyptic moment of destruction or the more intimate moment of personal conversion. Under the aegis of romanticism, the sublime evoked distant pasts and beckoning futures, telling of freedoms in measureless space and canceling the societal present in the timeless present of nature.

In this context, the William Cullen Bryant whom we saw contemplating nature in "Thanatopsis" was harbinger of a new age of perception. It should be no surprise that throughout the nineteenth century, as Lee Clark Mitchell has shown, preservationists sounded the alarm as "witnesses to a vanishing America." As early as 1833, George Catlin had suggested the idea of a national park, predating by decades Thoreau's more modest exhortations for town and village forests. With the possession of a vast public domain to support the endeavor, it was possible for state and national governments to consider reserving land for its spectacular beauty or, later, simply because it was wilderness. Moreover, there was, as Mitchell noted, "ambivalence felt among even those who participated in the nation's triumphant conquest of the wilderness."<sup>39</sup>

But it was the presence of the religion of nature that gave to preservationism its vital force. And that presence was nowhere better expressed than in the life and words of John Muir, the man who, more than any other person, rallied public support and legislative votes to the preservationist cause. From 1868 to 1908, Lee Mitchell has written, Muir was "America's premier naturalist." And through it all, Michael P. Cohen has suggested, Muir was the man who "articulated for America just how important it was for men to live in and through a loving relationship to Nature."<sup>40</sup>

In Muir's complex response to wilderness we can find the inherited Calvinism he shared with Emerson and Thoreau (as well as so many others). And we find, expressly, the romantic Transcendentalism he learned from them, mingling idealistic and—more than they (especially, more than Emerson)—pantheistic-vitalistic strains. Certainly what distinguished Muir most from them and from other writers on the sublime in nature was that he joined a personal religion of nature to a rhetoric inspiring his readers to direct action to preserve the wilderness.<sup>41</sup> The rhetorical process began, however, in Muir's private religious experience. And so it is to Muir's personal life that we turn in order to understand the religious grounding of the preservationist movement he led.

Born in 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland, Muir immigrated to Wisconsin with his family when he was eleven years old. His father, Daniel, a Presbyterian turned Disciple of Christ, reared his children in what Linnie Marsh Wolfe has called "a stern heritage."<sup>42</sup> John Muir rebelled. After a stint at the University of Wisconsin,

he spent his time wilderness walking, botanizing, and odd jobbing. Then, when an industrial accident in Indianapolis nearly blinded him, Muir left for a southern walking tour and subsequently sailed for California and the valley of the Yosemite.

When he found Yosemite, Muir found himself. From 1868, his life achieved a growing sense of purpose, culminating in the series of articles and books he wrote, first on the glaciation theory as an explanation for the formation of Yosemite Valley and then, increasingly, on the grandeur and spiritual power of the mountain environment. By 1874 he was consciously working to publicize the human value of wilderness experience in the mountains, and his public career as a preservationist was launched. Its successes in the establishment of Yosemite National Park, in the foundation of the Sierra Club, and in telling Americans of the importance of wild land are too well-known to require more than mention here.<sup>43</sup>

The nature religion that undergirded this public expression was hardly so simple as a bit of “transcendental” mountain joy. Rather, this religion was an intricate act, an artful working of old and new that integrated past with present without any apparent self-consciousness on Muir’s part. Not to be dismissed was the lingering Calvinism that trailed him, and indeed, as for the Transcendentalists and others, Muir’s idealism provided a way to accommodate a former Calvinism without acknowledging it. If the world in all its alluring beauty pointed beyond itself to spirit, then, as we have noted, it could be safe to contemplate matter without guilt or stain. And so long as one held onto the emblematic theory that nature made sense as sacramental sign of spirit, it could be safe to relish the splendor of mountain and forest.

Moreover, close beside the lingering Calvinism and intrinsic to it came a biblically steeped witness to the glory of the land. The familiar language of nature as the book of God was comfortable for Muir, and, in fact, Michael Cohen has argued that Muir’s literal language of glory was cast in the mold of Old Testament usage, signifying the presence of God. As Cohen has also shown, the Yosemite experience that integrated Muir and gave direction to his life was one of religious awakening or conversion. The witness of Muir’s mountaineering narratives was the record of what happened. “If there is such a thing as a ‘wilderness experience,’” wrote Cohen, “these narratives attempt to say what that might be.

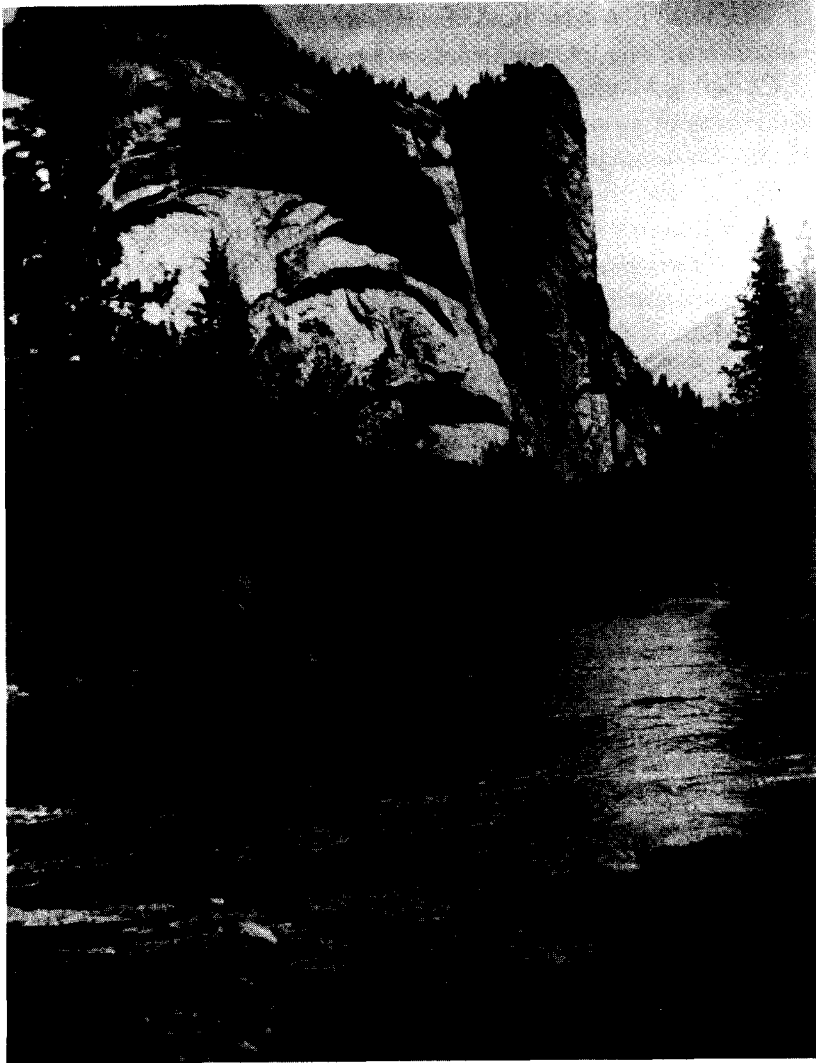
It is the most powerful kind of religious conversion, and is not to be seen as anything less than complete rebirth.”<sup>44</sup>

Climbing Mount Ritter in the High Sierra, Muir gave the public something of a sense of the inner drama. Gazing at the mountain seemed to be gazing at the Holy. “I could see only the one sublime mountain, the one glacier, the one lake.” Although Muir admitted that he could not expect to reach the top from the side where he was, he “moved on across the glacier as if driven by fate.” He was becoming “conscious of a vague foreboding of what actually befell,” when he found that he must climb a sheer cliff carved by an avalanche if he wanted to continue. “After gaining a point about half-way to the top, I was suddenly brought to a dead stop, with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down. My doom appeared fixed. I *must* fall.”<sup>45</sup> What happened next evoked in translation the revival rhetoric of deliverance.

When this final danger flashed upon me, I became nerve-shaken for the first time since setting foot on the mountains, and my mind seemed to fill with a stifling smoke. But this terrible eclipse lasted only a moment, when life blazed forth again with preternatural clearness. I seemed suddenly to become possessed of a new sense. The other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, or Guardian Angel,—call it what you will,—came forward and assumed control. Then my trembling muscles became firm again, every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope, and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do. Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete.

. . . I found a way without effort, and soon stood upon the topmost crag in the blessed light.<sup>46</sup>

Muir had been saved by his body’s assertion of its oneness with nature, and rescue came through somatic forces that assumed control. They were of the earth and yet transcendental, just as Muir’s religion of nature would always be both. But Muir had been saved to become what Cohen called “a fundamentalist of the wilderness.” If he saw the mountains dissolved in holy light, he must spread the gospel to the nation. John of the mountains was John the Baptist: “Heaven knows that John Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God’s mountains.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, it was a John-the-Baptist strategy that informed Muir’s public efforts, and it was a



Portrait of John Muir at Yosemite. (Courtesy, The Bancroft Library.) The photograph (author unidentified) suggests the numinous quality of Muir's pilgrimage to the Yosemite.

John-the-Baptist passion that he embodied after his wilderness baptism. The Calvinist-tinged Christianity of Muir's childhood, like the Puritanism of Emerson and Thoreau, did not vanish but, instead, played itself out in a different key.

To say that, though, is very far from saying all. For major aspects of Muir's religion of nature carried him well beyond what Christianity taught or could endorse. And if Muir left Christianity deliberately, he did not leave it for trailing vagaries but built upon conscious plan and purpose. "If my soul could get away from this so-called prison," he wrote in 1870, "I should hover about the beauty of our own good star."

I should study Nature's laws in all their crossings and unions; I should follow magnetic streams to their source, and follow the shores of our magnetic oceans. I should go among the rays of the aurora, and follow them to their beginnings, and study their dealings and communions with other powers and expressions of matter. And I should go to the very center of our globe and read the whole splendid page from the beginning.<sup>48</sup>

The physical sense of unity with nature that the Mount Ritter experience signaled made the study of Nature's laws akin to a mystical path. "Now we are fairly into the mountains, and they are into us," Muir wrote, in words that echoed Henry David Thoreau's once-confessed desire, "I to be nature looking into nature." "We are part of nature now," confided Muir to his journal, "neither old or young, but immortal in a terrestrial way, neither sick or well." All the wilderness "in unity and interrelation" was "alive and familiar." Indeed, "the very stones" seemed "talkative, sympathetic, brotherly." Out of a sense of sympathy with the animals, Muir would not hunt, and he often went hungry in the wilds.<sup>49</sup>

And if Muir was one with all of nature, so was God. In fact, as Linnie Marsh Wolfe tells, the maturing Muir began to substitute in his manuscripts the words "Nature" or "Beauty" for "God" or "Lord." Nature was "one soul" before God; but, more, nature was divinity incarnate. Muir would "fuse in spirit skies" and "touch naked God" because "all of the individual 'things' or 'beings' into which the world is wrought are sparks of the Divine Soul variously clothed upon with flesh, leaves, or that harder tissue called rock, water, etc." "All of these varied forms, high and low," he wrote, "are simply portions of God radiated from Him as a sun, and made

terrestrial by the clothes they wear, and by the modifications of a corresponding kind in the God essence itself.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, man was the highest, most godlike being because he contained the most of matter:

The more extensively terrestrial a being becomes, the higher it ranks among its fellows, and the most terrestrial being is the one that contains all the others, that has, indeed, flowed through all the others and borne away parts of them, building them into itself. Such a being is man, who has flowed down through other forms of being and absorbed and assimilated portions of them into himself, thus becoming a microcosm most richly Divine because most richly terrestrial.<sup>51</sup>

To promote things terrestrial, there were transcendental communion feasts. “Every purely natural object,” declared Muir, “is a conductor of divinity.” In language that evokes Thoreau’s purification of the senses, he owned: “We have but to expose ourselves in a clean condition to any of these conductors, to be fed and nourished by them. Only in this way can we procure our daily spirit bread. Only thus may we be filled with the Holy Ghost.”<sup>52</sup>

Muir had found that “the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness,” and in Yosemite he rejoiced at the sequoia sacrament he tasted. In an ecstatic letter to Jeanne Carr in the fall of 1870, Muir’s eucharist made Thoreau’s feast on woodchuck and huckleberry seem almost anemic. “Do behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia,” Muir began. What followed was utterly remarkable. “Behold! Behold! seems all I can say. Some time ago I left all for Sequoia: have been & am at his feet fasting & praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods; in the world.”<sup>53</sup>

I’m in the woods woods woods, & they are in *me-ee-ee*. The King tree & me have sworn eternal love—sworn it without swearing & I’ve taken the sacrament with Douglass Squirrell drank Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, & with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter. I never before knew the virtue of Sequoia juice. Seen with sunbeams in it, its color is the most royal of all royal purples. No wonder the Indians instinctively drink it for they know not what. I wish I was so drunk & Sequoial that I could preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world, descending from this divine wilderness like a John Baptist eating Douglass Squirrels & wild honey or wild anything, crying, Repent for the Kingdom of Sequoia is at hand.

There is balm in these leafy Gileads; pungent burrs & living King-juice for all defrauded civilization; for sick grangers & politicians, no need of Salt rivers sick or successful. Come Suck Sequoia & be saved.<sup>54</sup>

The letter continued, exuding sequoia rapture and closing with a reference to Lord Sequoia. Muir had successfully taken biblical language and inverted it to proclaim the passion of attachment, not to a supernatural world but to a natural one. To go to the mountains and the sequoia forests, for Muir, was to engage in religious worship of utter seriousness and dedication; to come down from the mountains and preach the gospel of preservation was to live out his life according to the ethic that his religion compelled. Millennialism and a sense of the sublime intertwined to praise an earthy paradise and, at the same time, to effect its salvation.

The note of rapture pervades John Muir’s personal writings, and it is clear that for him nature religion meant nature *worship* as consistent theme. Wolfe tells us that Muir tried to keep the “unutterable things” out of his articles, but Christine Oravec’s fine study of his language convinces that enough got past the censor to evoke something of his mood for countless other Americans.<sup>55</sup> But what direct connection, if any, does all of this have with Transcendentalism? Are we simply looking at a series of striking parallels, or is there any more proximate linkage? Did John Muir evolve his personal religion and spirituality in actual contact with Emerson or Thoreau or their writings? The answer is that he did and that the rhetorical echoes of Transcendentalism found in Muir’s writings are more than coincidental.

In his classic study of wilderness, Roderick Nash remarked that Muir steeped himself in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau during his first winters in the Yosemite. “When the high-country trails opened again, a tattered volume of Emerson’s essays, heavily glossed in Muir’s hand, went along in his pack.” And Wolfe has traced the lineage more thoroughly, beginning with Muir’s introduction to Emerson and Thoreau through James Davie Butler, his professor at the University of Wisconsin, and, especially, through Jeanne Carr, wife of his professor Ezra Slocum Carr. Jeanne Carr knew Emerson personally, and it was she who made possible a personal meeting between Muir and the now aging Concord sage when Emerson traveled to California in 1871. Whatever the disap-

pointments of the visit for Muir, (Emerson, “protected” by his friends, did not camp out in Yosemite despite Muir’s repeated urgings), he later remembered the incident as one of “the two supreme moments of his life.”<sup>56</sup>

Muir’s own account of the visit was tinged with sadness at the decline of the Eastern sequoia giant and at the effeteness of his friends. But, more, it spoke of awe and admiration for Emerson among the Sierra trees. “During my first years in the Sierra I was ever calling on everybody within reach to admire them, but I found no one half warm enough until Emerson came. . . . He seemed as serene as a sequoia, his head in the empyrean.” “Emerson was the most serene, majestic, sequoia-like soul I ever met,” an undated journal entry echoes. “His smile was as sweet and calm as morning light on mountains.” “He was as sincere as the trees, his eye sincere as the sun.” Indeed, Emerson was one of those who urged Muir to write; and, after the personal encounter with the Transcendentalist, he began to study Emerson’s essays the more seriously. He did not always agree with them, as Stephen Fox’s amusing account of Muir’s blunt marginal notes makes clear. But the two corresponded, and Emerson added Muir’s name as the last in his short list of those he esteemed “My Men.”<sup>57</sup>

Compared with this, Muir’s relationship to Henry David Thoreau was at once cooler and closer. It was cooler because Muir never knew or met Thoreau personally (Thoreau was already dead in 1862). It was closer because there was a nearer meeting of minds between the two and a clearer rhetorical dependency on Thoreau in some of Muir’s writings. Linnie Marsh Wolfe wrote that it was Thoreau, among the authors Muir best loved, “whom he came in maturity to regard as the wisest of them all.” More than that, Michael Cohen supplies details of how Muir modeled his language and literary strategy on Thoreau’s. Muir dubbed himself in later life “a self appointed inspector of gorges, gulches, and glaciers,” echoing Thoreau’s *Walden* confession.<sup>58</sup> Muir’s narrative account *My First Summer in the Sierra* likewise followed *Walden* in compressing several summers into one. Meanwhile, his rhetoric of wildness surely owed a debt to the New Englander.

There *were* differences between the two. Cohen has noted that Muir “neither believed that Nature was making certain parts of the earth for man, nor that she could be hostile.” And Thoreau’s

exposure to wild country, impressive as it was in the Maine woods, was mostly in the neighborhood of Concord. The “domestic embrace” of Tichi was both his gift and his limit. On the other hand, unlike Thoreau, Muir’s exposure to Eastern religious classics was severely limited. He read his first Hindu book (sent to him by Jeanne Carr) at Yosemite; and it was not until 1903 and a trip around the world that he traveled to India and recorded Hindu materials in his journal.<sup>59</sup>

Stephen Fox has argued that “evidently Emerson and Thoreau only corroborated ideas that Muir had already worked out independently.”<sup>60</sup> If so, they provided a powerful language for articulating these ideas. And, if we accept the force of words in evoking and elaborating thought, Emerson and Thoreau gave to Muir a profoundly important instrument for forging his own religious view. For the continuities between Muir and the older Transcendentalists were unmistakable. In fact, in spite of the missionary zeal for wilderness that fueled his life, as late as 1873 Muir, with Emerson and Thoreau, could recognize contemplation as his vocation. Muir would “stand in what all the world would call an idle manner, literally gaping with all the mouths of soul and body, demanding nothing, fearing nothing, but hoping and enjoying enormously. So-called sentimental, transcendental dreaming seems the only sensible and substantial business that one can engage in.”<sup>61</sup>

And what are we to make of such idealist intrusions as Muir’s “Rock is not light, not heavy, not transparent, not opaque, but every pore gushes, glows like a thought with immortal life”? How are we to read his reference to the “*grand show*” that was “eternal”? Or this equally transcendental utterance?

How infinitely superior to our physical senses are those of the mind! The spiritual eye sees not only rivers of water but of air. It sees the crystals of the rock in rapid sympathetic motion, giving enthusiastic obedience to the sun’s rays, then sinking back to rest in the night. The whole world is in motion to the center.

. . . Imagination is usually regarded as a synonym for the unreal. Yet is true imagination healthful and real, no more likely to mislead than the coarser senses. Indeed, the power of imagination makes us infinite.<sup>62</sup>

But, even as Muir praised the infinity of imagination, he embraced the harmonial vision that celebrated the concrete spirituality of nature. As early as 1869, at Smoky Jack’s sheep camp, he was

exclaiming on the "perfect harmony in all things here." In mountain thoughts on the Sierra, he heard the "pure and sure and universal" harmony of "the Song of God, sounding on forever." Later, as he described the mountains of California for readers, he told of "the arrangement of the forests in long, curving bands, braided together into lace-like patterns" and noted that the "key to this beautiful harmony" was the "ancient glaciers."<sup>63</sup>

That the vision was also an ethic was clear from Muir's gentleness in nature, from his unwillingness to do the violence that the life of a hunter demanded. In fact, Cohen faults him for the very reason that the harmonial ethic in general is often faulted: for not facing the realities of eater and eaten, of violence and vulnerable dependency, that make of life a savage, often destructive communion. Even so, harmony was a lived experience that seemed to rise out of deep levels of Muir's personality. There was the Mount Ritter experience with his "other self," some greater power in nature—external or internal—that took over in him, integrating all of his faculties in its service. And Muir told of a similar experience in 1873 on Mount Whitney, when the other self forced him to go back instead of trying, under perilous conditions, to scale the summit. He felt, he said, "as if Someone caught me by the shoulders and turned me around forcibly, saying 'Go back' in an audible voice." "Muir made no secret," observed his biographer Wolfe, "of his faith in guidance by the not yet understood forces of nature either within or without ourselves."<sup>64</sup>

Muir's empirical sympathy with these forces was revealed again in a series of telepathic incidents that followed him. He found the missing link to his glaciation theory, the evidence that he needed and had sought, because of a strong and overpowering intuition. On North Dome at Yosemite, he sensed with categorical certainty that his former professor James Davie Butler was below in the valley. He obeyed internal promptings to travel east in time for both his father's and his mother's death. Significantly, when asked once how he explained such events, his answer affirmed the transcendental harmony. "Anyone who lives close to the mountains is sensitive to these things," he said. Indeed, by the end of his life Muir had even made his peace with spiritualism, holding for it "a basis of truth" that was "founded on natural laws."<sup>65</sup>

Hence, as a latter-day Transcendentalist, Muir championed, for

the most part, the side of the Transcendentalist gospel that proclaimed the spiritual power in nature. His idealism—an apology to his once-and-former Calvinism—was a muted breed, more muted even than the idealism of Henry David Thoreau. Meanwhile, his embrace of nature went beyond Emerson and Thoreau in its sensuousness, in its sheer and unqualified delight in matter. Lord Sequoia and the sequoia sacrament had made of Muir a religious radical, seeing in the stuff of the earth the ultimacy that others had placed in the starry sky and in the God beyond the stars.

Muir had been a do-it-yourself theologian and, like a Wisconsin farmer, had grown his own creed and ethic out of various seeds supplied. Moreover, the preservationist movement he led found its life and strength, as Stephen Fox has so well argued, in amateurs. By the first decade of the new century, "back to nature" was becoming, for many, a national slogan. Natural history writers such as John Burroughs, James Oliver Curwood, Jack London, and Stewart Edward White were being avidly read, while Gene Stratton Porter was writing wilderness novels that were best-sellers. The Boy Scouts appeared in 1910, followed two years later by the Girl Scouts; more and more summer camps "rescued" urban children from their plight. Meanwhile, the publication in 1906 of the collected works of Henry David Thoreau brought a new generation of readers to real or imagined Walden Ponds. National park visitors, Fox tells us, climbed from 69,000 in 1908 to 200,000 two years later and to 335,000 in 1915.<sup>66</sup>

Even as the visitors filed through the gates of the national parks, however, other Americans (perhaps some of the same Americans) were pledging allegiance to a different, more ostensibly religious movement. Like preservationism, this, the metaphysical movement, drank from many streams, some of them centuries old. It drew sustenance, too, from popular contemporary ideas of science, as well as from mesmeric and Swedenborgian views. But, for whatever other reasons it succeeded (and there were many), metaphysical religion succeeded in part because the Transcendentalist confusion about the relative reality of matter and mind was, arguably, paralleled in the popular mentality.

We gain something of a sense of the confusion from a brief article that appeared in *Outlook* magazine in 1903. Manifestly a review

of Charles Goodrich Whiting's *Walks in New England*, the piece began by acknowledging the debt that Americans in a back-to-nature mood owed to Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalists in general. These New Englanders "early gave direction and impulse to a movement which has contributed immensely to the health, vigor, and joy in life of the American people," wrote the unnamed author of the article. *Outlook's* reviewer went on to reflect on the meaning of nature, telling readers that it was "more than birds and flowers, animals and trees." It was, instead, "a middle ground between God and man" and "the playground of the soul . . . full of marvelous analogies with the life of man."<sup>67</sup>

The ambiguity was already unmistakable, but what came next suggested an author with one foot in the preservationist camp and the other in a metaphysical class meeting. "There is no better approach to truth," observed the writer, "than going into the fields with the open mind and the quick imagination." "The gospel of nature that Emerson preached was the gospel of the personal relation of every man to the world about him, and through that world to God." Even so, the reviewer felt sufficiently threatened by the charge that Emerson might be "unscientific" to speak for the defense. "Emerson," he or she wrote, "was not unscientific; the view of the true poet is always scientific; for by science one means the recognition of all the facts of nature and not of a single order of facts." Weaving in dutiful references to the Whiting book, the author concluded with a lengthy quotation from its text. Significantly, the penultimate sentence hailed the valley of Paradise, out of which "flow the streams of healing for the discomforts of civilization."<sup>68</sup>

*Outlook* had provided a catalog of overlapping concerns that led, associatively, from preservationism to mind cure. Not that we can be certain that the same individuals to any great degree embraced both; but, in the mental climate that produced the Transcendentalist inconsistency, language for soothing a pervasive national trouble became available. "Mind cure, like the conservation movement which developed during the same period," Gail Thain Parker noticed insightfully, "gave thousands of Americans a way of expressing the fear that their personal resources were inadequate to the demands of the twentieth century. The All-Supply and the national park system, influx and the strenuous life—these were the

dreams of people who felt crowded and pinched."<sup>69</sup> And, we could add, they were also the dreams of those who felt the need for greater control and mastery.

For an American culture that, even in the middle years of the nineteenth century, had "stressed Mind—Mind raised to the level of divinity,"<sup>70</sup> the early manifestations of metaphysical religion in what became New Thought are not surprising. What may at first appear so, however, is that the New Thought movement (and, beside it, even in part Christian Science) expressed a form of nature religion. To understand what this statement may mean beyond a tour de force of the Emersonian logic, we need a longer look at American metaphysical religion. And there is no better way to gain a sense of its presence than to turn to its embryonic stages in the life and teachings of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. Like preservationism's John Muir, Quimby gave the metaphysical movement an identifiable leader as a do-it-yourself, amateur theologian. Not Elijah for Muir's John the Baptist, Quimby still profoundly influenced a generation of disciples. Indeed, before his death in 1866, he had been doctor and teacher to metaphysical leaders ranging from New Thought's Warren Felt Evans and Julius and Annetta Dresser to Christian Science's Mary Baker Eddy.

Quimby had been engaged in the practice of spiritual healing for the twenty-five years prior to his death. But he had begun as a clockmaker and had then become a stage performer in a demonstration of clairvoyance in healing.<sup>71</sup> Traveling the lyceum circuit with an inquiring and critical mind, he pondered how his healing partner, Lucius Burkmar, when mesmerized to reach a trance state, could diagnose and prescribe accurately for illness. Quimby became convinced that the real agent of both Burkmar's knowledge and each would-be patient's cure was the mental (neural) process in the individual or group involved. Burkmar read not merely the ailment but, more, people's beliefs about it. Burkmar's cures worked because of the power of suggestion. Then, in the midst of a continuing effort to test and try, Quimby discovered his own clairvoyant abilities. He parted ways with Burkmar to set up a healing practice that evolved, over the years, further and further from its mesmeric roots.

Mesmeric teaching had spoken of animal magnetism and explained that an invisible fluid provided the vehicle for the "mutual influ-

ence between the Heavenly bodies, the Earth and Animate Bodies." The fluid, permeating all living things, provided a medium for them, so that "the properties of Matter and the Organic Body depend[ed] on this operation."<sup>72</sup> His power to manipulate this "magnetic" fluid explained for Quimby his success in entrancing Burkmarr. But, more important, the presence of the fluid in a balanced ebb-and-flow pattern guaranteed health and vitality, whereas interruptions resulted in what we know as illness. Bathed in this fluid (and, thus, material) atmosphere, humans were always in touch with unseen forces that shaped their lives and destinies. Therefore, when illness struck, the magnetic doctor acted as heropriest, using his or her innate animal magnetism to alter the flow in the invisible fluid—to unblock obstruction—so that a steady supply of the life-force could reach the ailing person.

Quimby never forgot this magnetic cosmology. Assuredly, he moved into what should properly be called mental healing, but his *explanation* of disease and cure retained something of the mesmeric model. The power of the magnetic theory as a means of imaging the mysterious process of sickness and health continued to persuade in new ways. Thus, in writings that bear all the marks of their roughshod construction, Quimby hammered out a confused—but still commanding—*theology of healing*, forming a charter document for American metaphysical religion. Even in collated and edited form, Quimby's writings carry the imprint of a fresh and inquisitive mind, an American "original" constructing his world out of bits and pieces that culture supplied.<sup>73</sup>

Take, for example, Quimby's sometime reflections on the "odor" of illness. In a striking series of references, Quimby linked the invisible substance that was altered in the magnetic state to the odor or "atmosphere" of disease. "Now where and what was this invisible something that could pass in and out of matter?" he asked of mesmerism and clairvoyance. He thought the answer required going back to the "First Cause," "back of language," and he found there the primacy of the sense of smell for attracting man and beast to food. For Quimby it was only a small jump from the sense of smell to the power of speech. "The sense of smell," he argued, was "the foundation of language," and "as language was introduced the sense of smell became more blunt till like other instincts it gave way to another standard." Thinking, it followed, "came to

be as much of a sense as smelling." Hence, when Quimby confronted disease, he was able to diagnose by a process akin to smelling. When a woman brought her sick five-year-old son for him to help, Quimby observed that the boy's "feelings were as intelligent as any odor with which I am familiar."<sup>74</sup>

The associative links he had pointed toward, however imprecisely, were still clear. Magnetic fluid, as invisible attractive force, was like odor, which was also an invisible attractive force. And, similarly, thought, as an evolved and added human sense, was also like odor in being an invisible attractive force. "To every disease there is an odor, [mental atmosphere]," wrote Quimby, "and every one is affected by it when it comes within his consciousness. Every one knows that he can produce in himself heat or cold by excitement. So likewise he can produce the odor of any disease so that he is affected by it."<sup>75</sup>

Nor is this all. Elsewhere Quimby escalated more. The magnetic fluid—the life-force—must by implication be the living power of God upholding the creation. God was "the great mesmeriser or magnet," who spoke "man or the idea into existence." And odor assumed still greater meaning in its linkage with "Wisdom."

Now suppose that man calls Wisdom the First Cause, and that from this Wisdom there issues forth an essence that fills all space, like the odor of a rose. This essence, like the odor, contains the character or wisdom of its father, or author, and man's wisdom wants a name given to it, so man calls this essence God. Then you have wisdom manifest in God or the essence, then this essence would be called the Son of Wisdom. Then Wisdom said, "let us create matter or mind or man in our image," or in the likeness of this essence or God. So they formed man out of the odor called matter or dust, that rises from the grosser matter, and breathed into him the living essence, or God, and the matter took the form of man.<sup>76</sup>

Quimby had moved from magnetism to mind. His homespun theology had provided a muddled link between matter and spirit, achieving through the metaphor of odor a cohesion that hid as much as it revealed. Like Emerson and so many other Americans, Quimby was having things both ways and any way he liked. In fact, as he explained elsewhere, like Wisdom (or Truth) error was "an element or odor." And since, as he also said, "the minds of individuals mingle like atmospheres," it was clearly easy for error, like a noxious magnetic fluid, to spread. "Man, like the earth," was con-

tinually “throwing off a vapor,” and the vapor contained “his knowledge.”<sup>77</sup>

Quimby’s ability for original synthesis did not stop with the theories of Franz Anton Mesmer. His writings also suggest his acquaintance with the teaching of the eighteenth-century visionary theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, although neither in this case nor in the case of Mesmer can we surmise that he had firsthand knowledge. But certainly, at least through his patient and student Warren Felt Evans, who had left the Methodist ministry for the Swedenborgian New Church, Quimby would have come to know major Swedenborgian themes. The doctrine of correspondence, revived and reinterpreted by Swedenborg—and promulgated by the Transcendentalists—was not lost on the American healer. In fact, correspondence was key to Quimby’s understanding of illness. “I know that a belief in any disease will create a chemical change in the mind,” he declared, “and that a person will create a phenomenon corresponding to the symptoms.” “Every phenomenon that takes form in the human body is first conceived in the mind,” observed Quimby; and, more generally, “every idea having a form visible to the world of matter, is admitted by that world as matter.”<sup>78</sup>

Swedenborg’s view of divine influx in the natural world was, in general outline, not unlike Mesmer’s model of invisible fluid. Even further, in his copious reports of his visionary experience, Swedenborg had collapsed the distinction between matter and spirit in ways that could encourage a similar indistinction in the popular mentality. Swedenborg’s three heavens were filled with color and odor, with houses and gardens that strikingly resembled those of the Swedish nobility of his time. On the other hand, he taught that heaven and hell were essentially internal states. Swedenborg’s teaching on “conjugal marriage” told of nuptial bliss in the world beyond this one; and his doctrine of God waxed on the Divine Human and its role in making heaven human. “Heaven in its entire complex reflects a single Man,” Swedenborg had written, “and corresponds to all things and each thing in man.” And again, he had affirmed, spiritual or substantial things were “the beginnings of material things.”<sup>79</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to trace these conceptions in the writ-

ings of Quimby, but they were, to borrow his language, part of his odor and atmosphere. And perhaps that odor and atmosphere were most clearly expressed in Quimby’s allusions to “spiritual matter.” Here, at the heart of his understanding of his healing practice, he bequeathed his followers a confusion as ripe with ambiguity as Swedenborg’s—and the Transcendentalists’—had been. In his autobiographical reminiscences relating his work with Lucius Burkmar, Quimby owned that he thought of “mind” as “something that could be changed.” What followed for him is somewhat startling. “I called it [mind] spiritual matter, because I found it could be condensed into a solid and receive a name called ‘tumor,’ and by the same power under a different direction it might be dissolved and made to disappear.”<sup>80</sup>

Not to be identified with the First Cause, mind was matter, and so was thought. Disease, therefore, was “what follows the disturbance of the mind or spiritual matter.” Or, in an inverted expression of the same view, disease came from the “spiritual body,” while mind was “the spiritual earth which receives the seed of Wisdom, and also the seeds of the wisdom of this world of reason.” “Disease is the fruit of the latter,” he went on, explaining also that “the application of the wisdom of God or Science is the clearing away the foul rubbish that springs up in the soil or mind.” These innuendos suggest that for Quimby there was something—First Cause, Wisdom, the Christ (in many of his references)—that lay beyond even spiritual matter. And so, as with Swedenborg and the Transcendentalists, matter shaded off into another realm, and the inexpressible took on the familiar contours of idealism. Quimby’s *New Thought* editor, Horatio W. Dresser, tells us that the “true Science” or “wisdom” Quimby sought would “take into account man’s real as opposed to his apparent condition” and that its basis lay, in part, in “the discovery that the human spirit possesses senses or powers which function independently of matter.”<sup>81</sup>

In fact, if the mind was “spiritual matter,” Quimby thought the body “nothing but a dense shadow, condensed into what is called matter, or ignorance of God or Wisdom.” Writing to a patient from Portland, Maine, in 1860, he explained how he could affect her through absent healing. “You are as plain before my eyes as you were when I was talking to the shadow in Portland,” he assured

her. "For the shadow came with the substance, and that which I am talking to now is the substance." In another letter to a patient a month later, he identified eternal life with "Christ or Science," adding that "this teaches us that matter is a mere shadow of a substance which the natural man never saw nor can see, for it is never changed, is the same today and forever." "The wisdom of God," Quimby wrote again, "sees matter as a cloud or substance that has a sort of life (in the appearance)." <sup>82</sup>

But, tellingly, he called the substance "the essence of Wisdom" and declared it to be "in every living form." "Like a seed in the earth, it grows or develops in matter," he said. <sup>83</sup> There is no avoiding the ambiguity in the teaching—an ambiguity that dissolves into a total mixing of models when we confront the ethical practice that emerged from Quimby's thought. In brief, Quimby was advising, in clear and direct terms, the application of mind over matter. It was by destroying "error" in the "truth" that he would banish disease, by brushing away opinion and belief with true knowledge that, as for Emerson, "a correspondent revolution in things" would follow. Yet, when Quimby *spoke* about what he advised, without apology he identified it with laws of sympathy and harmony that evoke a different model.

Consider, for instance, Quimby's explanation of the genesis and treatment of disease. "There is a principle or inward man that governs the outward man or body, and when these are at variance or out of tune, disease is the effect, while by harmonizing them health of the body is the result. . . . This can be brought about by sympathy, and all persons who are sick are in need of this sympathy." Speaking very personally, he revealed details of his healing method. "When I am in communication with the patient, I feel all his pains and his state of mind, and I find that by bringing his spirit back to harmonize with the body he feels better." Or consider, again, this demonstration of the slipperiness of Quimby's logic:

Now as our belief or disease is made up of ideas, which are [spiritual] matter, it is necessary to know what beliefs we are in; for to cure the disease is to correct the error, and as disease is what follows the error, destroy the cause, and the effect will cease. How can this be done? By a knowledge of the law of harmony. <sup>84</sup>

In short, Quimby had effectively shown that there was no difference, for him, between harmonizing and being in charge. He

had proclaimed the same double message of the moral life as the Transcendentalists.

Like the Transcendentalists, too, Quimby had problems with the Christianity of the churches. For him, medical doctors and denominational clergy represented a professional establishment of gloom, broadcasting error in the world. "Truth has destroyed the power of the priests," he announced. "Yet it has not enlightened the people, but transferred the idea of disease to the medical fraternity." By contrast, Jesus had explained "where the people had been deceived by the priests and doctors, and if they learned wisdom they would be cured." And again, in language that would have gladdened Emerson had he read it: "The religion that Christ opposed consisted in forms and ceremonies." <sup>85</sup> Yet, as Quimby's identification of Wisdom with Christ or Science already suggests, explicitly Christian teaching figured prominently in his thought. In fact, it is impossible to read more than a few pages of his writing without confronting biblical rhetoric.

Consider, for instance, Quimby's report of Jesus's answer to the Pharisees who had said that he cast out devils by the power of Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24–28; Luke 11:15–20). According to the Quimby version, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees by saying: "If I cast out devils or diseases through Beelzebub or ignorance, my kingdom or science cannot stand; but if I cast out devils or disease through a science or law, then my kingdom or law will stand, for it is not of this world." <sup>86</sup> Nor was this language an exception. Like Thoreau's writings, Quimby's pages were steeped in scripture. Yet, also like Thoreau's writings, it was scripture that, decidedly, had been "doctored." For, Quimby misread the biblical text in blatant and creative ways, molding it into allegory that taught exactly what he wanted to say.

In his own way a theologian of liberal Protestantism, Quimby also allegorically replicated the evangelical and general cultural millennialism of his time. Through knowledge of his "Science" he would bring "new birth" in the perfect body Thoreau had earlier celebrated; and cured by Quimby, a former patient could expect to be a new being. Even more, Quimby was surely the harbinger of a new age. "Then will arise a new heaven and a new earth to free man from disease or error, for this old world or belief shall be burned up with the fire of Science and the new heaven shall arise

wherein shall not be found these old superstitions of bigotry and disease, but there will be no more death or sighing from an ache or pain which arises from the superstitions of the old world.”<sup>87</sup>

From this perspective, Quimby’s mysterious assumption of the pain of his patients assumed the formal character of a communion rite. With neither the huckleberry innocence of Thoreau nor the sequoia passion of Muir, he still enacted a eucharist that pointed toward the new order he would create. “I take upon myself all your feeling and see all your troubles,” Quimby wrote, in words that adumbrated the identification he had made. He was a Christ figure for his people, and it was fitting that his communion should now be a communion in pain. But a new age was dawning, and his own understanding of his role in its inauguration was not modest. “I stand alone, as one arisen from the dead, or the old theories, having passed through all the old ideas and risen again, that I may lead you into this light that will open your eyes to the truth of Him who spake as never man spake, and who spake the truth.”<sup>88</sup>

In sum, Quimby had managed to knit together major currents in the popular mentality, and in doing so he had shown himself strikingly similar to the Transcendentalists. To be sure, it seems inconceivable that Quimby would not have been aware of Emerson’s general teachings, if only through newspaper summaries of his lectures on the lyceum circuit. Indeed, without finding references to Emerson in Quimby’s writing, Charles S. Braden could assess that Quimby “was probably either consciously or unconsciously . . . affected by the religious ferment of his time represented by the Transcendentalist thinkers.” And, even further, Stewart W. Holmes more than forty years ago could call Quimby “the scientist of Transcendentalism” and argue that he “demonstrated visibly, on human organisms, the operational validity of Emerson’s hypotheses.” The largest difference Holmes noticed between Quimby and the Emersonians was that Quimby practiced what they preached.<sup>89</sup>

What Holmes did not go on to notice, though (and what has here already been suggested), was that Quimby also mingled in Emerson’s “odor and atmosphere” because he constructed an analogously flawed cosmology. In regard to the reality of nature, the doctor had been caught in the same conceptual ambiguity that had shadowed the Transcendentalist. Leaning hard on the idealist side of the equation, Quimby had yet managed to turn in a decidedly

physical reading of metaphysical reality; and he had managed a similar confusion in his ethical model. Quimby’s religion, like Transcendentalist religion, was caught in the crack: it was still a species of nature religion.

Horatio Dresser tells us that it was not until 1887, well over two decades after Quimby’s death, that those who emerged as leaders in the New Thought movement turned to Emerson’s writings. In his *Facts and Fictions of Mental Healing*, said Dresser, Charles M. Barrows noticed Emerson’s “idealistic wisdom,” which he identified with that of ancient India. Others began to follow his cue, and Emerson became prophet to a new generation of mental healers—so much so that by 1963 Charles S. Braden could write that it was “quite customary for New Thought leaders to claim Emerson as the Father of New Thought.” As talk of the All-Supply increased, the doctor from Portland was all but forgotten in the embrace of more learned ancestors such as Emerson and Swedenborg.<sup>90</sup> By this time, however, the ambiguousness of Quimby’s theology was less fashionable. New Thinkers cultivated idealism more consistently, even as they found ways to transform the material world with Truth. Still, something of Quimby’s “vapor” remained—consonant with Transcendentalist vapors and fogs—and New Thought continued to live, in some measure inconsistently, in the breach.

It remained for Mary Baker Eddy, former Quimby patient and student, to achieve the greatest clarity, given the inconsistencies of the heritage. More loyally Calvinist, truer to a Puritan and Congregational ancestry than were any of the others, she pushed the idealist cosmology as far as it would go. But even Mary Baker Eddy could not totally escape the allure of nature. Once, in a poem that evoked Philip Freneau and William Cullen Bryant, she had solemnly addressed an oak on a mountaintop:

Oh, mountain monarch, at whose feet I stand,—  
Clouds to adorn thy brow, skies clasp thy hand,—  
Nature divine, in harmony profound,  
With peaceful presence hath begirt thee round.

In the first edition of her textbook *Science and Health* (1875), Eddy could own her belief that “man epitomizes the universe, and is the body of God.” And she could repudiate “mortal man” as “a very

*unnatural* image and likeness of God, immortality,” while metaphors of harmonizing and governing chased each other in her pages. A decade later she could still tell her followers that Jesus “was a natural and divine scientist.”<sup>91</sup>

Even at the pinnacle of Eddy’s authorial career, as she taught that matter was a false belief and the error of “mortal mind,” the final, authoritative edition of *Science and Health* separated nature from matter and found ways to speak admiringly of what Emerson had called his “beautiful mother.” “The legitimate and only possible action of Truth is the production of harmony,” Eddy wrote. “Laws of nature are laws of Spirit.”<sup>92</sup> However inconclusively, Eddy had shown that nature religion could be inverted to coexist with the denial of matter. Idealism did not do away with nature: it simply killed nature’s body. Wildness had been outlawed and the passing show had been declared an error, but nature still remained.

Yet, while some Americans joined Mary Baker Eddy in the slaughter, more were content to cherish matter, living in the crack between Nature Illusory and Nature Real. In fact, for decades before Eddy came to Christian Science, other healers and their followers were preaching a nature religion that was decidedly physical. Not only present in the mountains and forests, the embodied deity of their version lived nearer still. The God of nature, they proclaimed, was the tenured inhabitant of the human body.

#### 4 / Physical Religion ✕ NATURAL SIN AND HEALING GRACE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In April 1843 a curious testimonial appeared in the *Health Journal and Independent Magazine*. One William A. Ghaskins, a committed follower of the health reformer Sylvester Graham, there confessed:

I knew nothing at all, then, of the principle that you, Mr. Graham and some others, are laboring to disseminate; yet, there was a something within me,—“a still small voice”—that incessantly whispered to my conscience, in accents too plain to be misunderstood, that I was in “the broad beaten path.” About this time, I obtained some extracts from the *Graham Journal*, or the *Health Journal*, respecting the laws of life and health. As I had partaken very fully of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” my eyes were opened immediately, and I forthwith began to work out my own salvation. . . . I subsisted on a quantity of coarse bread, so small that it was barely sufficient to sustain life. I at the same time paid particular attention to bathing, exercise, &c. I had not proceeded far, before I became as “a little child.” . . . My mind underwent a most surprising change, and a flood of light was poured in upon it. It appeared to me that I could see into almost every thing, and I was constantly led to trace effects to their causes. I was able to see into the real nature and moral bearing of the various institutions of Society, and the domestic and religious habits and practices of the busy world around me. . . . I took great delight in reading the Bible, and nearly every passage appeared to unfold some new physiological truth.

I had not long persevered in my new way of living, before my bodily health and social character improved greatly. . . . I was a new creature, physically, morally, and spiritually.<sup>1</sup>

The language of the “broad beaten path” and the “still small voice,” of the tree of knowledge and opened eyes, of working out one’s salvation and the millennial new creation—all of this, of course, recalls the pervasive evangelical culture of nineteenth-century America. By the early part of the century, the great collective revivals that had transformed Puritanism had swept the land at least twice, and the new evangelical religion of the times had put its premium on the direct experience of individuals as the test of true religion.<sup>2</sup> Now it was not enough to be told or to “believe” in an abstract sense: one had to know the truth by feeling and by doing. The awakening of the early nineteenth century was surely, as Donald Mathews has told us, an “organizing process,”<sup>3</sup> but the