

THE UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT

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EMERSON AND ROME

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

New England, in the opening years of the nineteenth century, was religious--very religious and very Protestant. I do not mean by this that the prevailing religious tendencies were necessarily anti-Catholic, but rather, that they were decidedly un-Catholic. For two hundred years dogmatic Calvinism had governed the beliefs of New Englanders. True, the name had been changed since the time of Jonathan Edwards to Congregationalism, but the Puritan influences were still there; and, indeed, the devout of the day were anxiously striving to keep them there, and to purge the church of such innovations as seemed to encroach upon the old doctrines. But the new liberalism could not be kept out. Unobtrusively but surely, it worked its way into the minds and hearts of the people. The Romanticism that was sweeping Europe was finding its counterpart in America. The cold and stern teachings of Calvinism were giving place to the gentle and benevolent doctrines of Unitarianism. Youthful ministers were beginning to teach salvation by character instead of by the predilection of God. According to the new religion God was a beneficent Being Who held man responsible for

his own salvation.

In the meantime, another religious force was making itself felt. This new force was Roman Catholicism. Until the eighteen-thirties, there had existed in America a feeling of opposition between Catholicism and democracy. As industrialism grew in New England, Canadian-French and Irish immigrants found work in the factories. The resulting opposition was two-fold, toward the immigrant labor and toward the Catholic religion professed by most of the laborers. The priests who came to care for the increasing Catholic population were frequently incapable of understanding the American way of life, and thus added to the feeling against the Church. Much of the opposition, too, was due to ignorance, especially to the failure to understand Catholic allegiance to the Pope. Meanwhile, Anglican ministers in America began to realize that the English church was collapsing. They decided that the only thing for them to do was to start an independent church, but the English bishops refused to ordain American bishops. Finally, however, they relented and Bishop Hobart and others were ordained. With Hobart's establishment of a seminary in New York, the Protestant Episcopal Church had its beginning in the New World. Hobart then became interested in tracing the history of the church back to its Apostolic origin. He became, therefore, a High Church Episcopalian. Many of his followers, especially among the older families

really traced the church's existence to the Apostles, found the Truth, and became converts to Catholicism. Thus was the fear that Catholicism offered a threat to democracy broken down. With the increase in the number of converts, thinkers of the day became more and more conscious of Catholicism as a dominant force in the lives of many of the people. Closely associated with the great minds of the period, a philosopher in search of truth, Ralph Waldo Emerson early became aware of the power of the Catholic Church. When he was but twenty-one years of age he recognized the worth of Catholic theology, although he found it impossible of acceptance.¹ This awareness of Catholicism was not a passing whim with him, for as the years passed, he mentioned it time and again. Sometimes he notes the conversion of a friend, as in a letter to his brother, dated January 9, 1827, "I saw George Reed the other day who was first scholar in the class before mine, and who is recently become a flaming Roman Catholic."² Again he frequently

¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals, II, 32-33. Emerson's attraction to Catholicism is here plainly evident, "I am blind, I fear, to the truth of a theology which I cannot but respect for the eloquence it begets, and for the heroic life of its modern, and the heroic death of its ancient defenders. I acknowledge it tempts the imagination with a high epic (and more than epic) magnificence; but it sounds like a mysticism in the ear of understanding."

²Ralph Waldo Emerson. Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I, 186. Edited by Ralph L. Rusk.

associated the Church and art and commends the Church for always putting the arts to good use in her services.³ Had there been no earlier interest the conversion of Orestes Brownson alone would certainly have brought him face to face with the power of Catholicism. Emerson's life-time covered a period of development for the Church in America, and while he did not delve deeply enough into her doctrines to merit the gift of Faith, he never lost interest in her.

Of Calvinistic ancestry, Ralph Waldo Emerson descended from seven generations of 'painful preachers.' The first of these was the Reverend Peter Bulkeley, who perhaps, was the one from whom Emerson inherited his non-conformist traits. Reverend Bulkeley, himself the son of a minister, had, in 1634, been reported to Archbishop Laud, the primate, for his objections to what he considered a too rigid adherence to ceremonial. He was promptly silenced. Rather than acquiesce to observances contrary to his ideas, the belligerent minister crossed the Atlantic and sought religious tolerance in a new land. In 1636, he founded the village of Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived until his death. It was his granddaughter, Elizabeth Bulkeley, who married

³Emerson, Journals, III, 501. Entry for July 4, 1835, "The arts languish now because all their scope is exhibition; when they originated, it was to service the gods. ...The Catholic religion has turned them to continual account in its services."

into the Emerson family when she became the wife of the Reverend Joseph Emerson. The descendants of this union of the two families were scholars and thinkers, men remarkable for their stanchness, their imperious and determined natures, and their decisive and resolute manhood.

One is interested to find in these progenitors of Emerson the combination of a strong individuality, bordering at times on the daring and the eccentric, with a great capacity and propensity for close and cordial relations with their fellow-men. Their willfulness suggested the autocrat rather than the rebel, and their power of imposing their peculiarities upon their associates was so great as to relieve them from the pitiful alternative of purchasing independence by solitude or social intercourse by subserviency.⁴

Such then, was the heritage of the man who was later to be known as the 'Concord Sage.' He was born in Boston, on May 25, 1803, the fourth child and third son of the Reverend William and Ruth (Haskins) Emerson. It was rather a cheerless world in which the young Emerson began his life. The narrow dogmatism of the Calvinists was not the sort of religion to promise a gay and happy existence. They were too orthodox in their beliefs, too stern in their discipline to admit of anything bordering upon a lighthearted enjoyment of the pleasures of this earth. Although the Emersons had by now adopted the new Unitarian religion, they

⁴O. W. Firkins, Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 3.

still ordered their lives quite in accordance with the old principles of conduct. Circumstances in their household soon cast an even more somber and gloomy shadow over the future for the Reverend William Emerson died in May, 1811. Mrs. Emerson was therefore left with the task of supporting six children, the eldest a boy of six years, and the youngest a little girl of a few months. This proved to be somewhat of a problem. It would have been more economical to live in the country, but the boys had to be educated for, as their aunt, Miss Mary Moody Emerson, put it, her nephews were 'born to be educated.' Consequently, any thought of a removal from the city was out of the question. Socially, the Emersons should have been mingling with the most aristocratic families of Boston. Abject poverty made this impossible. At times the children were without food, and on such occasions, their aunt Mary would regale them with stories of Spartan endurance. Sparse diet for growing boys! But there was not only the hardship of hunger. During this period Ralph and his brother Edward had but one coat between them, so that they had to take turns going out in the cold winter weather. This was the cause of many unkind jeers and taunts on the part of the neighborhood boys. Might not the aloofness so characteristic of Emerson in his later years have been, at least in part, the result of a withdrawal from companionship consequent upon such unhappy incidents

of childhood? Certainly, there are few evidences of his having engaged in the pursuits common among young boys. Rufus Dawes, a schoolmate of his at the Latin school describes him as

...a spiritual looking boy in blue nankeen... whose image more than any other's is still deeply stamped upon my mind as I saw him and loved him, I know not why, and thought him so angelic and remarkable.⁵

Another companion of his school days, the Reverend Dr. William Henry Furnace, writes of him,

We were babies and boys together, but I can recall but one image of him as playing, and that was on the floor of my mother's chamber. I don't think he ever engaged in boys' play, not because of any physical inability, but simply because, from his earliest years he dwelt in a higher sphere. My one deep impression is that, from his earliest childhood, our friend lived and moved and had his being in an atmosphere of letters, quite apart by himself. I can as little remember when he was not literary in his pursuits as when I first made his acquaintance.⁶

Another factor which exercised a tremendous influence on Emerson during these formative years was his association with his aunt, Miss Mary Moody Emerson. To her, more than to any other, may we trace his revolutionary attitude toward authority and his almost slavish adherence to non-conformist

⁵J. E. Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I, 6.

⁶Ibid., pp. 5-6.

principles. A woman of singular strength of character and dominant will

She hated an unreasoning obedience to custom to the point of being ready to replace it by an unreasoning disobedience; she thought everything complaisant that was not brutal, and the decorous fled at her approach. ...Her often quoted counsel to her nephews "Always do what you are afraid to do," with its plenitude of grandeur and its tincture of absurdity illustrates the mixture of elements in a nature where the virtues rather rioted than flourished.⁷

It was probably to this unusual person, also, that Emerson owed his early interest in literature. She had read much more widely than had most members of her sex in the early nineteenth century, and she introduced her nephews at an early age to the great literary figures. Even as a child, and under her tutelage, no doubt, Ralph tried his hand at verse-making. How successful he was, we do not know.

When the young Emerson was fourteen he entered Harvard. Apparently, financial conditions were still such that it was necessary for him to provide for himself in college. This he did in various ways. He acted as messenger for members of the faculty and he waited on table; he was also able to procure some minor scholarships. All in all, his days at Harvard were rather ordinary. There were many things he disliked, but there were others that were to his liking. He found Ticknor and Everett attractive and worth-

⁷Firkins, op. cit., p.8.

while. Then, there was Dr. Channing, too. He seemed almost like a beacon light leading him on to new endeavors. But his greatest pleasure was writing. Sometimes, he would copy passages from a favorite author, Ben Jonson or Beaumont or Fletcher; sometimes it was something of his own composition, an essay after the fashion of Bacon or a poem in the style of Byron; but most often he would write in his journal. He had been keeping this diary for some years now and it is here that we find the beginnings of his philosophical meanderings. He made for himself his own creed and his own bible. Some time later he wrote,

No man could be better occupied than in making his own bible by hearkening to all those sentences which now here, now there, now in a nursery rhyme, now in Hebrew, now in English bards, thrill him like the sound of a trumpet.⁸

As a young man this was his first concern. "His early journals are an ample nursery where cuttings of all philosophies grow into such plants as circumstances should permit."⁹

When Emerson was eighteen he received his degree. He now had to consider how he would make his living. His brother William had already established a school for young ladies in his mother's house in Boston. He offered Waldo, as he was now called, a post as assistant. The young man

⁸Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought. II, 387-8.

⁹Ibid.

was dismayed. The first obstacle was his natural shyness, especially in the presence of girls; the second, and more important as far as we are concerned, was his hatred of oppressive routine. He knew well that the life of a school-teacher was largely one of routine duties and he had no taste for it. But there was nothing else to do. He accepted William's offer and later the school was entrusted to his sole charge for a year. He continued in this profession for three years. Then, almost as if the habit were an inherited one, he decided to study for the ministry, and in February, 1825, he enrolled in the Cambridge Divinity School. Again his path seemed beset with difficulties and his aunt Mary's already grave fears about him grew steadily worse. He had hardly begun his studies when his eyes caused him such serious trouble that he was forced to withdraw for a time. It was not too long, though, before he was able to resume his work at Cambridge.

On March 11, 1829, Mr. Emerson was ordained as a Unitarian minister, the colleague of the Reverend Henry Ware of the Second Church in Boston. Not long afterward, Mr. Ware made a trip to Europe for his health, leaving Emerson in charge of the Church. When Mr. Ware returned to the United States, he decided to resign from his pastorate and to accept the chair of Divinity at Cambridge. Emerson was left as the sole incumbent of the Second Church. In the meantime, the new minister had been married to Miss Ellen

Tucker. There now began a period of almost unbelievable happiness and Miss Mary Moody Emerson's hopes soared. Emerson's parishioners seemed to enjoy his preaching and were apparently well satisfied. But he himself was not content. He soon found that his beliefs and theirs no longer coincided, and in the summer of 1832 he resigned.

Emerson's health had been impaired for some time and his condition having been aggravated by the death of his wife in February, 1831, he now suffered a complete breakdown. A sea voyage was recommended but he did not see fit to make it immediately. It was not until December, 1832, that he made his first European trip. He returned to the United States in October, 1833, a changed man. He had left America broken in health and spirit; he came home charged with new vigor and new faith. Two years later, on September 14, 1835, he married Miss Lydia Jackson, and took up his permanent residence in Concord.

For the first four years after his return, each Sunday found him preaching, by special invitation, in one or the other of the churches in the vicinity about Concord. By 1847, however, he had ceased preaching altogether, and little by little he finally discontinued attendance at church. But his interest in philosophical themes never wavered.

Emerson's first literary work, Nature, was published

in 1836. In this essay he gives expression to all the doctrines and beliefs that later became synonymous with his name. The Dublin Review for March, 1849, says of it, "His Nature is...the most graceful and accomplished statement and defense of the doctrines of Pantheism that has appeared: but it is no more. It is destitute of right aspirations and conclusive argument."¹⁰ Small praise for what is, perhaps, his most important work.

It was in this same year, 1836, that the "Transcendental Club" came into being. The group consisted of a number of thoughtful men and women who met for the express purpose of discussing such topics as mysticism, pantheism, and personality. The two concrete manifestations of its existence were "Brook Farm" and The Dial. Emerson acted as editor of The Dial for the last two years of its brief life, and it served as the medium of the full expression of his philosophical ideas.

Of all the persons who played an important part in Emerson's life at this time, one of the most influential was probably A. Bronson Alcott, who settled in Concord with his wife and daughters in 1840. He "appears to have effected, like Emerson, a fusion of Platonism and Christianity, in which the singleness of the world, the omni-

¹⁰"Emerson," Dublin Review, XXVI (March, 1849) 165.

potence of spirit, and the riches and sanctities of the human soul were the cardinal beliefs."¹¹ His service to Emerson was as great as it was distinctive, for he offered him both comradeship and a sympathetic understanding of and devotion to those principles which were such an essential part of both men. When Alcott was criticized for having so 'few thoughts' Emerson thus defends him,

But what were many thoughts if he had not this distinguishing Faith, which is a palpable proclamation out of the deeps of nature that God yet is? With many thoughts, and without this, he would be only one more of a countless throng of lettered men; but, now you cannot spare the fortification that he is.¹²

Two other names are important in any account of Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Thoreau. Although Hawthorne and Emerson never became intimate friends, Emerson seems to have felt real esteem for the author of The Scarlet Letter, in spite of the fact that he did not enjoy his books. His friendship with Thoreau, on the other hand, was deep and enduring. In fact, in 1841, Thoreau took up his residence in the Emerson household. He was writing diligently at this time, and when Emerson took over the task of editing The Dial his friend proved of invaluable assistance.

¹¹Firkins, op. cit., p. 85.

¹²Ibid., p. 87.

The even tenor of Emerson's life went on. He wrote, he entertained his visitors (and they were many), he lectured. The Lyceum had become popular as a means to further the cultural interests of the people. Emerson was frequently in demand as a lecturer and he was happy to have the opportunity to talk on the subjects nearest to his heart. It was not long until he was spending the greater part of the time lecturing in various parts of the country.

His lecture program took him to Europe in 1847, and he returned to America in 1848. During the following year he delivered a series of lectures in which he gave expression to his admiration for the English people. His essay, English Traits, reiterated these sentiments. The field of his labors now extended as far west as the Mississippi; and for twenty years he toured the western part of the country each winter giving lectures.

During the eighteen-fifties and early eighteen-sixties the chief occupation of his mind was politics. Slavery had become an acute problem and he advocated solving it by the out and out purchase of the slaves. Needless to say, his proposal was greeted with derision. Nevertheless, he continued in his efforts to abolish what was clearly the greatest evil of the period. At the beginning of the Civil War he remarked, "Sometimes gun powder smells good."¹³ and

¹³Dictionary of American Biography, VI, 139.

in 1862, in Washington, he was delighted to discuss the progress of the war with the President.

Meanwhile, he had become the center of a group known as the "Saturday Club." Among the members were Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, Hawthorne, Dana, and others, all literary men in whose companionship Emerson found great comfort, especially in his later years.

By 1866, though, age was beginning to take its toll. He continued to lecture, and he did some writing, but the old fire was gone. Harvard now bestowed upon him the honorary degree of LL.D., and thus effected a reconciliation with him. This was the first sign of friendship since the affair of the Divinity School Address. In 1870 he was invited to offer a course there and he complied with a series of lectures on "Natural History of Intellect." But his literary work was almost at an end. His memory began to fail him; he could not find words with which to express himself. In 1872 a crushing blow fell upon him when his old home in Concord was destroyed by fire. At the instigation of James Russell Lowell his friends collected a fund amounting to \$17,000.00. They then persuaded him to take a much needed vacation and he sailed once more for Europe. Again he saw Carlyle and he met Robert Browning and John Ruskin. He had long wanted to see the Valley of the Nile,

and after fulfilling that desire, he came back to Concord in 1873. In his absence, his house had been completely restored. His gratitude to these kind friends knew no bounds. The remaining years of his life were spent quietly and peacefully. In the early spring of 1882, he was stricken with pneumonia and died.

The life of the gentle Sage of Concord was ended. He died as he had lived, loved and honored by all, yet strangely apart from his fellowmen. He is known to every student of American culture, but he will be remembered as a philosopher rather than as a writer. As leader of one of the most significant philosophical movements in the history of our country, his name has become so closely associated with that of Transcendentalism that the mention of one recalls the other.

CHAPTER II

EMERSON'S EUROPEAN JOURNEYS

If a proper study of Emerson and Rome is to be made, the many factors that entered into the formation of his attitudes toward the Catholic Church must be considered. Most important of these factors, probably, were his European journeys. When he left America in the winter of 1833 for his first trip abroad, his soul was restive and unsettled, and his mind as open to conviction as it ever would be. His awareness of Catholicism was quickened to interest as he visited Catholic churches at each stop on his journey. In spite of his biased Puritanical prejudices, he found St. John Church at Malta worthy of admiration and praise.

I went to St. John's Church, and a noble house it is to worship God in, full of marble and mosaic and pictures and gilding; the walls are eloquent with texts and the floor covered with epitaphs...I went to the churches of St. Popilius and St. Thomas...

In all these churches there were many worshippers continually coming in, saying their prayers, and going their way. I yielded me joyfully to the religious impression of holy texts and fine paintings, and this soothfast faith, though of women and children. How beautiful to have the church always open, so that every tired way-faring man may come in and be soothed by all that art can suggest of a better world when he is weary with this. ...To be sure there is plenty of superstition. Everywhere indulgence is offered and on one convent on our way home I read this inscription over the gate, "Indulgentia plenaria,

quotidiana, perpetua, pro vivis et defunctis." This is almost too frank, May it please your holiness. ...

Visited St. John's again and attended mass. The bishop, a venerable old man, was present but did not officiate. ...The music of the organ and chaunting friars very impressive, especially when we left the kneeling congregation in the nave, and heard it at a distance, as we examined the pictures in a side oratory. I went into several churches which were all well attended. How could anybody who had been in a Catholic church devise such a deformity as a pew?¹

His attraction to the Catholic Church is here apparent, but equally apparent is the note of criticism. It is a faith "of women and children," and "to be sure, there is plenty of superstition," for "everywhere indulgence is offered," But he seems more favorably impressed than otherwise.

From Malta, Emerson journeyed to Syracuse where again the places most often referred to in the Journals are Catholic churches. He speaks often, too, of the Catholic monks. His visit to the church of Our Lady of the Pillar, once the Temple of Minerva, sets him to wondering about the strange practice that "confounds pagan and Christian antiquity and half preserves both."² In Syracuse he enjoyed the hospitality of the Capuchin monks whom he found quite delightful.

Went into the Convent, and the Fathers

¹Emerson, Journals, III, 30-33.

²Ibid., 39-42, passim.

set before us bread, olives, and wine. Our conductor then showed us the dormitories (over each of which was a Latin inscription from the Bible or the Fathers), the Chapel, etc., of the House. There is no better spot in the neighborhood of Syracuse than the one they have chosen. The air, the view, the long gallery of the chambers, the peace of the place quite took me, and I told the Padre that I would stay there always if he would give me a chamber. He said, "I should have his," which he opened, a neat little room with a few books, Theologia Thomae ex Charmes, and some others. My friend's whip-cords hung by the bedside. ...I am half resolved to spend a week or fortnight there. They will give me board, I am informed, on easy terms. How good and pleasant to stop and recollect myself in this worn out nook of the human race, to turn over its history and my own.

But, ah me!³

When he reached Catania and made the acquaintance of the Benedictine monks, the contrast between them and the Capuchins impressed him somewhat unfavorably. After commenting upon the grandeur of the Cathedral of St. Agatha, he says,

But what is even this church to that of the Benedictines? Indeed, my holy Fathers, your vows of poverty and humility have cost you little. Signor Ricciardi of Syracuse gave me a letter to Padre Anselm Adorno, the Cellerajo of this monastery, and this morn I waited upon his reverence in his cell, and the kings of France and England, I think, do not live in a better house. ...the church shall be St. Peter's to me till I behold a fairer shrine. Have the men of America never entered these European churches, that

³Ibid., pp. 44-45.

they build such mean edifices at home? ...
About 50 monks are laid up in clover and
magnificence here.⁴

And so he continued on his way to Rome, everywhere mentioning the Catholic churches he had seen, the Catholic people he had met. In Palermo, he again met the Capuchins and remarked, "I like these Capuchins, who are the most esteemed of the Catholic Clergy."⁵ In Naples he visited several churches and found them all well attended. He regretted that American churchgoers were not equally zealous.

Who can imagine the effect of a true and worthy form of worship in these godly piles? It would ravish us. I do not mean the common Protestant service, but what it should be if all were actual worshippers. It would have something of this Catholic ceremony, too, and yet not show a priest trotting hither and thither, and buzzing now on this side then on that.⁶

As always, he seemed attracted to Catholicism and at the same time repelled by it. Perhaps it was that he concerned himself only with the incidentals, without trying to sound the depths of Catholic doctrine.

This first European tour was climaxed at Rome, where

⁴Ibid., pp. 51-53.

⁵Ibid., p. 57.

⁶Ibid., pp. 70-71.

he spent Holy Week.⁷ He appears to have attended all the services assiduously. The pageantry of the ceremonies of this solemn season left a deep impression upon the mind of the visitor, but always his attention is centered on the externals. His superficial and slightly ironic description of Palm Sunday is particularly indicative of his feelings toward all things Catholic.

I have been to the Sistine Chapel to see the Pope bless the palms, and hear his choir chaunt the Passion. The Cardinals came in, one after another, each wearing a purple robe, an ermine cape, and a small red cap to cover the tonsure. A priest attended each one, to adjust the robes of their eminences. As each cardinal entered the chapel, the rest rose. One or two were fine persons. Then came the Pope in scarlet robes and Bishop's mitre. After he was seated, the cardinals went in turn to the throne and kneeled and kissed his hand. After this ceremony the attendants divested the cardinals of their robes and put on them a gorgeous cape of cloth-of-gold. When this was arranged, a sort of ornamental baton made of the dried palm leaf was brought to his Holiness and blessed, and each of the cardinals went again to the throne and received one of these from the hands of the Pope. They were supplied from a large pile at the end of the papal chair. After the cardinals came other dignitaries, bishops, deans, canons-- I know them not, but there was much etiquette,

⁷Emerson, Letters, I, 368. "In a few days I go to Rome. ...Everybody is crowding to Rome just now, for the Holy Week begins on the 1st April and that is the season of the great annual pomp of the Catholic Church. I follow the multitude and yet without curiosity. I go to see old Rome, not new, and if I were not satisfied with Naples, I would remain here until the show was over. Perhaps I shall think differently when I see the purple and gold, and hear the Pope and his monks chaunt the "Miserere" in St. Peter's."

some kissing the hand only, and some the foot also, of the Pope. Some received olive branches. Lastly several officers performed the same ceremony.⁸

His further account of the procession and his failure to appreciate the symbolism of the ceremony are characteristic. He was unable to comprehend how the Holy Father in all the pomp and splendor of his office could be reenacting Our Divine Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.⁹ In his closing comments about the service he became positively offensive.

All this pomp is conventional. It is imposing to those who know the customs of courts, and of what wealth and what rank these particular forms are the symbols. But to the eye of an Indian, I am afraid it would be ridiculous. There is no true majesty in all this millinery and imbe-

⁸Emerson, Journals, III, 81-83.

⁹Ibid. His remarks were as follows: "When this long procession of respect was over, and all the robed multitude had received their festal palms and olives, his Holiness was attended to a chair of state, and being seated, was lifted up by his bearers, and, preceded by the long official array and by his chanting choir, he rode out of the chapel.

It was hard to recognize in this ceremony the gentle Son of Man who sat upon an ass amidst the rejoicings of his fickle countrymen. Whether from age or from custom, I know not, but the Pope's eyes were shut or nearly shut as he rode. After a few minutes he reentered the chapel in like state, and soon after retired and left the sacred college of cardinals to hear the Passion chaunted by themselves. The chapel is that whose walls Michel Angelo adorned with his last Judgment. But today I have not seen the picture well."

cility. Why not devise ceremonies that shall be in as good and manly taste as their churches and pictures and music?¹⁰

The minute attention to detail, the notice of only the surface part of the ceremonies are a clear indication of failure to understand the true meaning of the services. To the Catholic, whose one desire is to give honor and glory to God, the rich ceremonial is but fitting tribute to the One Who has created him. He is appreciative of the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament, something of which Emerson had no conception. When we commemorate the triumphal entry of our Savior into Jerusalem we do so with the utmost humility realizing that the pomp and splendor are meagre substitutes for the magnificence which is His due. The irreverence of "millinery and imbecility" savors not of ignorance but of intolerance.

On Wednesday he was present at Tenebrae. Here he thought the music excellent but he could not refrain from the gentle criticism of a comparison to the sound of the Aeolian harp.¹¹ Again he mentioned Michael Angelo's paint-

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 86-87. "The famous Miserere was sung this afternoon in the Sistine Chapel. ...Surely it is sweet music and sounds more like the Aeolian harp than anything else. The pathetic lessons of the day relate the treachery of Judas and apply select passages from the prophets and psalms to the circumstances of Jesus."

ings describing them as noble representations.

Holy Thursday evoked an admission he did not like to make. He was moved by what he saw!

These forms strike me more than I expected, and yet how do they fall short of what they should be. Today I saw the Pope wash the feet of thirteen pilgrims, one from each nation of Christendom. One was from Kentucky. After the ceremony he served them at dinner; this I did not see. But Gregory XVI is a learned and able man; he was a monk and is reputed of pure life. Why should he not leave one moment of this formal service of fifty generations and speak out of his own heart--the Father of the Church to his children--though it were but a single word? One earnest word or act to this sympathetic audience would overcome them. It would take all by storm.¹²

Again that failure to understand the depth and magnitude of it all. And again that unreasoning stubbornness which will not acknowledge a Being superior to self. He cannot understand how a man of Gregory's calibre can bow in subjection to authority, even to the supreme authority of the Church. Emerson is like so many other spiritual people who go astray. They have zeal, but their zeal is directed into the wrong channels. They are not willing to listen to the wise counsel of others and they wish to impose their judgments on everyone as if they alone have the Holy Ghost; they are inflated with spiritual pride. But one can only

¹²Ibid., p. 86.

pity Emerson, not condemn him, as he constantly searches for truth and still refuses to see it.

The Miserere at St. Peter's did not have the same appeal as it had in the Sistine Chapel. But he was overwhelmed with the majesty of the Cathedral with its gilded arches, marble columns, and "rich-clad priests that look as if they were pictures come down from the walls and walking."¹³

The Tre Ore on Good Friday Emerson considered depressing and, to all appearances, uninteresting, for his description of the day is brief. He related nothing of the Holy Saturday services, but he mentioned that he did not attend the Baptism of the Jew.¹⁴ His remarks in this connection are most uncomplimentary and do not conceal the disdain in which he held the Church.

Easter Sunday brought relief to Emerson because of the joyous tone of the services. His account was again very detailed, still concerned only with externals, and still with a hint of derision, and a notable lack of ap-

¹³Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 88. "I did not go to the baptism of the Jew today. Usually it is a weary farce. 'Tis said they buy the Jews at 150 scudis the head to be sprinkled. This man was respectable."

preciation of the meaning.

This morning the Pope said mass in St. Peter's. Rich dresses, great throngs, lines of troops, but not much to be said for the service. It is Easter, and the curtains are withdrawn from the pictures and statues to my great joy. ... At twelve o'clock the benediction was given. ... The great bell tolled, drums beat, and the trumpets sounded over the vast congregation.

Presently at a signal, there was silence and a book was brought to the Pope, out of which he read a moment and then rose and spread out his arms gracefully to the north, south, east and west, pronouncing a benediction on the whole world. It was a sublime spectacle.¹⁵

Before leaving Rome he attended the investiture of some nuns at the Church of Trinita de Monte. His lack of understanding of the ways of the Church are strikingly brought out by his remarks upon this occasion. He felt only pity for the young girls and nothing but scorn for the Church which would accept such sacrifice.

I went this morn to the Church of Trinita de Monte to see some nuns take the veil. Can any ceremony be more pathetic than to see youth, beauty, rank, thus self-devoted to mistaken duty?¹⁶

From Rome Emerson traveled to Florence. Here again, he made the churches and things connected with them his first interest. He is especially impressed by the work

¹⁵Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 99.

of the Order of Misericordia and finds the Church of Santa Croce deserving of the highest praise.¹⁷ However, in a letter to Abel Adams written from Florence on May 28, 1833, he again displayed his innate prejudice toward the Church.

The way to learn the value of America, its churches, its government, its manners to all is to come hither. They say here that no nullifier holds to his nullification one month after he arrives in Europe, and surely the liberal Christian will value his light and hope the more for all the idolatry, the idolatry of Italy, producing as it does, of course, the other extreme of unbelief and loosest morals. Two days ago I saw in the Duomo or Cathedral a priest carrying a silver bust of Saint Zenobio which he put on the head of each person in turn of the kneeling crowd around the altar. This ceremony is esteemed a preservative against the headache for a year till Saint Zenobio's day comes round again.¹⁸

In June, he was in Milan and lavish with his praise of the

¹⁷Ibid., III, 114-123, passim. Entry of May 12, 1833: "I gladly hear much good of the Order of Misericordia. I see these philanthropists now with quite new feeling, when they carry by the dead with their hasty chaunt. This order is composed of men of all professions and ages and ranks, who, for a penance, or for love, enter into it for a longer or shorter period. They devote themselves to all works of mercy, especially to the care of the sick. They watch and tend them, but never speak, and their faces are never seen, being always covered with a silken hood. They are not known to each other. Cardinals and Princes sometimes take the dress of this order for a time. ...Is not Santa Croce a grand church? Nobody knows how good who only sees it once. Its tombs! Its tombs!"

¹⁸Emerson, Letters I, 384-385.

Cathedral there.

This cathedral is the only church in Italy that can pretend to compare with St. Peter's. It is a most impressive and glorious place, without and within. And its exterior altogether as remarkable and deserving minute attention as its interior. It was begun by Andrea Commodia in 1386 and is not yet finished, though always being built. When completed, it will have 7000 statues, great and small, upon the outside; there are now 5000. It is all built, to the minutest part, of white marble, and, as the showman asserted, would have cost a mountain of gold, but that the founder had left to it a quarry of marble. Forty-two artists are perpetually employed upon it. The walk upon the top of the church is delightful from the novelty and richness of the scene. Neighbored by the army of marble saints and martyrs, with scores of exquisitely sculptured pinnacles rising and flowering all around you, the noble city of Milan beneath, and all the Alps in the horizon,--it is one of the grandest views on earth. Then, inside the church, the grand Gothic perspective of the aisles, the color of the light which all enters through stained glass, the richness and magnitude of all objects,--truly it is good to be here.¹⁹

But his enthusiasm is short-lived, for the next day, in language just as forceful, he denounced all architecture as imitation. Even St. Peter's seemed to have lost its charm for him!²⁰

¹⁹Emerson, Journals, III, 142-143.

²⁰Ibid., 146-147. "Architecture--shall I speak what I think?--seems to me ever an imitation....We always call in the effect of imagination...and even St. Peter's, nor the frost-work cathedral at Milan, with its 5000 marble people all over its towers, can charm down the little Imp."

After Italy came England, where he made the acquaintance of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and then Scotland. Here he met Thomas Carlyle and the two became life-long friends. The influence of these three men upon Emerson was almost incalculable. He discovered that they, too, were disciples of Goethe and the German idealists and the first signs of his transcendental beliefs began to appear. By the time he reached Paris, in July, 1833, he was convinced that his mission in life was to free the world from the errors of traditional Christianity.

The errors of traditional Christianity as it now exists, the popular faith of many millions, need to be removed to let men see the divine beauty of moral truth. I feel myself pledged, if health and opportunity be granted me, to demonstrate...that no doctrine of God need appeal to a book; that Christianity is wrongly received by all such as take it for a system of doctrine,--its stress being upon moral truth; it is a rule of life, not a rule of faith.²¹

When he returned to America in the autumn, the old Puritan ties which had fettered him were broken and he sought new horizons with an enthusiasm he had never before experienced.

The Puritan moralizer became the transcendental seeker, the curious-minded loiterer in the gates of the temple, who had studied the moral winds by watching the tiny straws

²¹Ibid., pp. 159-160.

of circumstances--erecting unconsidered trifles into ethical signposts--calmly quitted the church and set forth on his intellectual quest. The ties had long been loosening but it was his year abroad where he discovered ways of thinking unknown to Concord and Boston, that effectively liberalized his mind and released him from the narrow Yankee provincialisms. On that momentous trip Goethe, Landor, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, set him speculating on new themes, stimulating afresh the love of Plato, in whom he had long found inspiration. Continental idealism with its transcendental metaphysics refashioned Emerson and put him upon his life work.²²

The interest in Catholicism, though, seemed to have waned, and his subsequent visits to Europe did little or nothing to rekindle it.

It was in 1847 that Emerson again traveled to Europe. He stopped first in England, where he was already famous. As the guest of the Carlyles, he spent a few memorable days in Chelsea. All of November and December were occupied with talks in the various English provinces. Always, he was treated with the utmost kindness, a fact which filled his heart with gratitude. His only reference to anything Catholic at this time is in a letter to his daughter, Edith, from Derby, England. He sent her a picture of All Saints Church, which he had visited and liked.²³

²²Parrington, op. cit., II, 389.

²³Emerson, Letters, II, 448.

From England he went to Scotland and in Edinburgh he met Thomas DeQuincy and Francis Jeffrey. March saw him back in England, and in May he crossed the channel and entered France. His Journals for this year offer many interesting tid-bits and reveal interesting glimpses of his character, but only once do they mention the Catholic Church. In 1848, he lamented, "The English Church, being undermined by German criticism, had nothing left but tradition, and flung itself into the Roman Church, distrusting the laws of the Universe. The next step is now the ruin of Christendom."²⁴ Such was his attitude fifteen years after his enthusiastic comments following the visit to St. Peter's, Rome, "I love St. Peter's Church. It grieves me to think that after a few days I shall see it no more."²⁵

Emerson was an old man when he paid his last visit to Europe in 1872. Although his Journals tell us of this last

²⁴Emerson, Journals VII, 425.

²⁵Ibid., III, 89. He continues in like strain: "It has a peculiar smell from the quantity of incense burned in it. The music that is heard in it is always good and the eye is always charmed. It is an ornament of the earth. It is not grand, it is so rich and pleasing; it should rather be called the sublime of the beautiful."

opportunity to meet European celebrities, and of the fulfillment of that long-cherished desire to visit the Valley of the Nile, there is absolutely no mention of Catholicism. The attraction felt during that first sojourn in foreign countries had gradually lessened until he had ceased to think about it entirely. This trip to Europe, of course, was Emerson's final chance to see his old friend Carlyle. This friendship between Carlyle and Emerson was a strange one. The two men had little in common; they were different in disposition, they had different tastes. But one thing they did share, their religious views. Of all the men in Europe there was no other whose philosophical beliefs were so in harmony with Emerson's. Both tended to be pantheistic, both rejected the formal in religion, both rebelled against the dogmatic and ritualistic. Throughout the years, they maintained a steady and regular correspondence, and a large portion of these letters discussed the status of Transcendentalism and its related cults both in Europe and America.

The Dial No. 1 came duly: of course I read it with interest; it is an utterance of what is purest, youngest in your land; pure, ethereal as the voices of the morning! And yet--you know me--for me it is too ethereal, speculative, theoretic: all theory becomes more and more confessedly inadequate, untrue, unsatisfactory, almost a kind of mockery to me! ...Do you know English Puseyism? Good Heavens! in the whole circle of History is there the parallel of that,--a true

worship rising at this hour of the day
for Bands and Shovel-hat?²⁶

One can imagine that in this last visit, the two friends passed many hours exchanging thoughts upon the religious trends of the day. Did they speak of Catholicism? If the silence of the Journals is a guide, they probably did not. Perhaps Emerson would not have been interested.

conversion of people what he regarded as a serious error
the criticism about this Church which would have been a
tremendous influence upon their lives. On the other hand
there were those who caused him to look upon the Church
with other feelings.

being those who were early into the Catholic Church, he
wanted to encourage his wife and family to do so. In his
Journal for June, 1842, he writes,

I hear with pleasure that a young girl in the
vicinity of this, desirous of entering the
Sisters, is well-suit prepared to join the
Roman Catholic Church. Her friends, who are
also my friends, looking to see the growth of
this institution. But I would have that I
think she is to be greatly congratulated upon
the event. She has lived in great poverty of
means. In four or five years a woman, she is

²⁶Thomas Carlyle, Correspondence of Carlyle and Emerson,
I, 304-305.

poor nature, but never yet found any worthy
object of attention; his soul was in love, but
was called out by his duty, except rarely by
music, and rarely seeing an adequate object. In
this church, perhaps, she shall find what she
needs, in a power to call out the slumbering
religious sentiment. It is unfortunate that

CHAPTER III

EMERSON AND HIS FRIENDS

It was not only his travel in foreign lands that shaped Emerson's attitudes. He was also affected by his friends and acquaintances who were members of the Roman Catholic Church. Just as Rome had intrigued him and at the same time repelled him, so with his friends. The conversion of people whom he respected and admired made him curious about this Church which could exert such a tremendous influence upon their lives. On the other hand, there were those who caused him to look upon Catholicism with utter disdain.

Among those whose entry into the Catholic Church he seemed to encourage was Miss Abby Larkin Adams. In his Journal for June, 1842, he writes,

I hear with pleasure that a young girl in the midst of rich, decorous Unitarian friends in Boston, is well-nigh persuaded to join the Roman Catholic Church. Her friends, who are also my friends, lamented to me the growth of this inclination. But I told them that I think she is to be greatly congratulated upon the event. She has lived in great poverty of events. In form and years a woman, she is still a child, having had no experiences, and although of a fine, liberal, susceptible, expanding nature, has never yet found any worthy object of attention; has not been in love, nor been called out by any taste, except lately by music, and sadly wants an adequate object. In this church, perhaps, she shall find what she needs, in a power to call out the slumbering religious sentiment. It is unfortunate that

the guide who has led her into this path is a young girl of a lively, forcible, but quite external character, who teaches her the historical argument for the Catholic Faith. I told A. that I hoped she would not be misled by attaching importance to that. If the offices of the church attracted her, if its beautiful forms and humane spirit draw her, if St. Augustine and St. Bernard, Jesus and Madonna, cathedral music and masses, then go, for thy dear heart's sake, but do not go out of this icehouse of Unitarianism, all external, into an icehouse again of external. At all events, I charged her to pay no regard to dissenters, but to suck that orange thoroughly.¹

Later in the summer, on August 11, he wrote to his brother, William Emerson, in much the same vein. The young lady's intention to embrace this new Faith made her all the more interesting to him and evoked strong words of praise for her strength of character. Although he was fearful that her attraction to the church might not endure, he tried in no way to influence her against taking such a step. To assure Miss Adams of his approval, he asked his brother to call upon her.

I write the more especially on this day to mention to you that Abby Adams who has been for some weeks at Saratoga with a Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlain of Boston will be in New York on Sunday and Monday probably, and if you are at leisure and so disposed I wish you would call at the Astor House (where I suppose the party will be) and let Abby see your face. She is a good child and lately the more interesting to me that she has a fancy for joining the Catholic Church a thing so shocking to her Aunt and Uncle who are devoted to her and to whom she is

¹Emerson, Journals, VI, 217.

also in her way devoted, that it calls out much character and really good behaviour on the part of Abby--She needs some experience, has had none, and I think this new freak, into which a lively forcible girl whom she knows has led her, will be a most valuable part of her education if it only holds long enough. ...When she comes home I mean to bring her here, if she will come, and we will talk, if she likes, of the Pope of Rome.²

He had been certain, as has already been pointed out, that the appeal of the Church was wholly external, and several months later, January 8, 1843, he intimated that his sentiments were still the same. He was, at the time, on a lecture tour, and had visited the Cathedral in Baltimore.

Today I heard high mass in the Cathedral here and with great pleasure. It is well for my Protestantism that we have no Cathedral in Concord, Abby Adams and I should be confirmed in a fortnight. The Unitarian church forgets that men are poets.³

Another friend of long standing, whose conversion to Catholicism stirred him deeply, was Mrs. Anna Barker Ward, the wife of Samuel Gray Ward. The Wards had gone to Europe, and while there, Mrs. Ward had become a Catholic. When the news reached Concord, Emerson regretted her action, yet he

²Emerson, Letters, III, 78-79.

³Ibid., p. 117. It is interesting to note that Van Wyck Brooks, in his Life of Emerson, says, in speaking of Emerson's visit to the Cathedral, that "...he and Elizabeth Hoar would be confirmed in a fortnight." Could Mr. Brooks have taken this from Cabot who quotes Emerson as writing, "E.H. and I should be confirmed in a fortnight."

found it easy to understand and excuse her. In writing to her in May, 1859, his words expressed little, if any, condemnation.

I must lament the chance wind that has made a foreigner of you--whirled you from the forehead of the morning into the medievals again...I suppose, to your taste for historic splendor, and poetic and mannered style, the old forms of your race looked cold and wanting. ...We must try to resign you, while the spell lasts, to your own pleasure. ...Farewell now, and peace and joy and possessions present and endless be yours!⁴

Three months later, Mrs. Ward's enthusiasm had not lessened and Emerson advises her husband to tolerance and patience,

...but for her church she shares the exaltation shall I say which belongs to all new converts in the dogmatic churches, and which gives so much pleasure that it would be cruel to check it if we could--which we cannot. The high way to deal with her is to accept the total pretension of the Roman Church, and urge her through the whole rococo to the sentiment of Fenelon and A Kempis in its cloister--which burns backward the whole church to foul smoke. ...But I hope she is already getting well,--then she will get well of this also.⁵

Always evident was the idea of external attraction, but underneath it all can be discerned the longing to know more of this faith, whose adherents were so staunch in their beliefs.

⁴Emerson, Letters, V, 143-144.

⁵Ibid., p. 169.

The Catholicism of others, however, had a quite different effect upon him. He had often reiterated his objections to the dogmatism of the Catholic Church. The Catholic writers of the day did little to counteract this feeling. In reaction to the Romantic tendency to paganism, they became too positive and dictatorial in their refutation of heresy. Here, then, was Emerson's quarrel with Orestes A. Brownson, who was, perhaps, the most remarkable figure of the period. Brownson's career had been a checkered one. From socialism to deism to transcendentalism; from Presbyterian to Universalist to Unitarian--such had been his path until, at last, in October 1844, he shocked his world by his conversion to Catholicism. He became at once a vigorous defender of the Church. Emerson had known Brownson while the latter was associated with the Brook Farm movement, but the two men were never in wholehearted agreement. They were, possibly, too much alike. Emerson once complained of him, "Brownson will never stop and listen, neither in conversation, but what is more not in solitude."⁶ Besides this, Emerson felt that intellectually he belonged to a class into which Brownson could never be admitted. Small wonder, then, that the writing of Brownson on matters pertaining to the Catholic religion served to turn Emerson away

⁶As quoted by Charles Charvat, Emerson and Catholicism, p. 27.

from the Church rather than toward it.

With Isaac Hecker it was the same. The disdain with which he considered Father Hecker is plainly brought out by Van Wyck Brooks. He cites incidents of the various visitors who came to Concord, concluding with an account of the Catholic priest and Henry Thoreau,

Isaac Hecker stayed. He rented a room at Mrs. Thoreau's. He was greatly taken with Henry--asked him to go on a walking-tour in Europe. (They could walk to Rome and join the Catholic Church together. Hecker was simple indeed if he thought he had found a fishing-pole that was long enough to catch Henry.)⁷

Father Hecker was always so inflamed with love for his new-found Faith that he wished to share his happiness with others. It seemed to him that the best way to do this was to convert them. To Emerson, this was most annoying.

Isaac Hecker, the Catholic Priest, came to see me and desired to read lectures on the Catholic Church in Concord. I told him that nobody would come to hear him, such was the aversion of people at present to theological questions; and not only so, but the drifting of the human mind was now quite in another direction than to any churches. Nor could I possibly affect the smallest interest in anything that regarded his church. We are used to the whim of a man's choosing to put on and wear a painted petticoat, as we are to whims of artists who wear a medieval cap or beard and attach importance to it; but of course, they must say nothing about it to us, and we will never notice it to them, but will carry on general conversation, with utter reticence

⁷Van Wyck Brooks, Life of Emerson, p. 155.

as to each other's whimsies, but if once they speak of it, they are not the men we took them for, and we do not talk with them twice. But I doubt if any impression can be made on Father Isaac. He converted Mrs. W_____, and like the lion that has eaten a man, he wants to be at it again, and convert somebody.⁸

Emerson's indifference must certainly have hurt Father Hecker. But his charity could rise above the coldness with which his request was received, and his zeal was great enough to overcome the obstacles put in his way.

⁸Emerson, Journals, IX, 467.

the Unitarian doctrines of revelation, miracles, and a belief in Christ as a supernatural man. At the same time he had found for himself a gospel in which nature and the divine voice in one's own heart supplanted the old teaching. As his personal creed increased in importance in his own mind, he became more and more aware that he could no longer accept and preach the tenets of Unitarianism, especially in the matter of the Communion service, which he felt should be purely spiritual. It was this conflict of his beliefs with those of his parishioners which caused him to preach the sermon on the Lord's Supper which culminated in his resignation as pastor of the Second Church of Boston. Of this address, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote,

He proceeds to give reasons which show it to be inexpedient to continue the observance of the rite. It was treating as authoritative that which, as he believed that he had shown from Scripture, was not so. It confused the idea of God by transferring the worship of Him to Christ. Christ is the Mediator only as the instructor of man. In the least petition to God "the soul stands alone with God, and Jesus is no more present than your brother or child."²

The change in his philosophy had been a gradual one.

He felt

a desire for a loftier spirit of devotion; for the forms of the church are challenged in the name of that inward spirit of truth in which alone religion consists. To him

²Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 59.

all true worship had come to be inward and it could only be hindered and corrupted by outward forms. The spirit can return to its own, and in interior vision behold the Nameless One in union with itself. Prayer must be spontaneous to be of any worth. It must be natural; the soul's impulses must be obeyed.³

Surely now, if ever, Emerson was searching for the truth. That search was to continue throughout his entire life. He was by no means indifferent to Catholicism. Although he seemed ever to be trying to convince himself that the Church held no attraction for him, his actions belied his words. At every opportunity he visited Catholic churches and invariably he found the experiences enjoyable. Certainly the Catholic atmosphere of Italy charmed him on his first European journey. With all his apparent objections to the Faith, he never explicitly attacked Catholic doctrines in themselves. His quarrel was chiefly with the ritual and with what he considered the dogmatism of the Church. He found real enjoyment in reading Catholic writers, often recommending Pascal, Fenelon, and A Kempis to others. He entertained high regard for many saints of the Church. St. Charles Borromeo, for instance, he found worthy of great esteem, for he appreciated his mental ability and deep spirituality. He recognized that he and the sixteenth century cardinal had some things in common, and he admired in him

³George William Cooke, Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 31.

qualities which he himself did not possess. In St. Bernard, too, he discovered a similarity of nature. Upon the saint's words, "Nobody can harm me but myself," he commented, "Keeping my mind on this, I understand all heroism, the history of loyalty and martyrdom, and of bigotry, the heat of the Methodist, the nonconformity of the Dissenter, and the patience of the Quaker."⁴ An entry in his Journal of 1857 would, indeed, indicate that at one time he was close to recognition of the Church as the true one.

How we failed to be Catholics. The other lesson we got from the lecture was the pathetic one, that the poor Goths or Germans must needs come into the empire when Valens was an Arian, and therefore all Goths and Germans must be Arians, and not the orthodox, Catholic prevailing Athanasian creed. In this first germ, one sees us nailed to the north wall of opposition, and foreordained to be pale Protestants, Unitarians, freesoilers, abolitionists.⁵

The note of sarcasm cannot be denied, but is there not, too, a bit of longing which, perhaps, prompts the sarcasm?

In spite of all this, though, Emerson rejected Catholicism. Why? Perhaps the best answer can be found in the fact that his interest in the Faith was not profound enough to warrant thorough investigation. As has been already stated, he saw only the external beauty of the Church, and his in-

⁴Emerson as quoted by Charles Charvat, Emerson and Catholicism, pp. 24-25.

⁵Emerson, Journals, IX, 114.

herited Puritanical prejudices would not permit him to go beneath the surface and find the essence of Catholicism. He was too self-sufficient and too complacent in his own beliefs. He recognized the shortcomings of Protestantism, its narrowness, its sham. His ignorance of the Catholic Church led him to believe that she was even more of sham.⁶

What, then, was Emerson's creed? It was the vagueness of Transcendentalism, which he himself defined as 'the feeling of the Infinite.' This cult had been gaining ascendancy in New England, and had exerted a tremendous influence upon Emerson. As a leader of the movement, he cast aside all objective considerations in the matter of religion, and centered all his thought upon the individual as the creator of his own gospel.

I have spoken of the creed of Emerson, but it is rather negative than positive. It very absolutely contradicts the Apostles' Creed, but gives us little in its place. It sweeps away the old faith and the old law, and heeds us not when we cry out for something instead. It casts a veil in front of our eyes and a mist over the sun. Yet, such as it is, there are not wanting disciples and advocates of Emerson

⁶Catholic World, XI: (May 1870) 203. "He saw that Protestantism is narrow, hollow, unreal, a sham, a humbug, and ignorant of the Catholic Church and Her teaching he considered that she must have less of reality, be even more of a sham or humbug than Protestantism itself."

nor will be so long as there are men who prefer twilight to sunshine, dreams to waking, and doubt to certainty.⁷

He considered the soul divine, not as the Catholic does when he believes in its immortality and that it is made to the image and likeness of God, but in the sense that it is a part of God. The gifted men of the world, in his estimation, had received more divinity than had others.

Emerson's main objections to Catholicism were made from the viewpoint of history. It will be recalled that at the time of Miss Abby Adams' conversion he warned her against being influenced by the historical arguments for the Faith. He would have no part with any religion that was tied up with historic beliefs. In 1834 he wrote,

History teaches what man can do, and not less what man can suffer and what he can believe. The slowness with which the stirps generosa, seu historica in Europe opened their eyes to the monstrous lie of Popery might startle us as to the possible depth of our own degradation through the sleep of Reason, and prompt a hope of what height we may yet attain.⁸

There was no doubt in Emerson's mind that the spiritual life of man was independent of history. This is his most persistent quarrel with Catholicism. He considered that

⁷Maude Petre, "The Emersonian Creed", Catholic World, XLVI (December, 1887) 380.

⁸Emerson, Journals, III, 365.

history existed solely to make man conscious of his own powers.

The release of man's spiritual and moral life from history is the chief motive and objective of Emerson's thought. ...All of Emerson's charges reduce themselves to one: the church in all its historical forms has sinned inexcusably against the individual by erecting under the guise of a machinery of mediation, an impenetrable wall between the soul and the absolute spiritual laws and reality toward which it is by nature oriented. By its exaltation of the historical person of Christ, by the machinery of the sacraments, by its dogmas of vicarious justification, and of grace, historical Christianity had obscured, indeed, almost obliterated, the profoundest truths of the spiritual life, namely, the indwelling of the divine in every soul, the universal Christhood of mankind, the natural and direct affinity of the soul with the divine and the good.⁹

He was clearly an intuitionist. He claimed that man was able to discern directly what was true, right, and beautiful without going through the slow process of inductive reasoning. Through this doctrine of intuition, he asserted that the soul enters the realm of spiritual laws. These laws define the absolute good by which an individual could regulate his life. Accordingly, man does not do good so much as he becomes good.

By his doctrine of intuition as a principle

⁹Robert A. Caponigri, New England Quarterly, XVIII (September, 1945) 368.

of nature, Emerson tries to render the individual independent of history on the level of Truth; by the doctrine of spiritual laws on the level of the Good; by the doctrine of causality on that of Being.¹⁰

As Emerson became more and more involved in the teachings of Transcendentalism he grew further and further away from the Church. What little possibility of conversion might once have existed was lost irrevocably. The truth which he had sought so earnestly was far beyond him. He was too entangled in the mazes of his own philosophical wanderings. Truth? He made his own truth; he interpreted everything according to his own whims. What he wanted to believe, that he believed; what he wanted to disregard, that he disregarded. He was his own God and he needed no other. He could have found the truth, but he would not. He was a thinker, a philosopher, a seeker for the truth, but above all else, he was Emerson.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 371.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to establish the thesis that there were many factors which determined Emerson's attitudes toward the Catholic Church. Chief among these were his European journeys, his friends who were converts to Catholicism, and his own character. Each one led him both to the Church and away from it. During his visits to Europe, especially to Rome, he was charmed by the beauty of the churches and the pomp and pageantry of the services which he witnessed. However, since he saw only the external glory, he failed to grasp the deep, inner meaning of it all. The intolerance born of Puritan ancestry and Yankee provincialism closed his mind to any understanding of Catholic teaching.

The conversion of his friends and acquaintances to Catholicism caused no lessening of the esteem in which he held them. At times, he even encouraged their entrance into the Church. But the dogmatic manner of Orestes A. Brownson and the insistent efforts of Isaac Hecker to convert anybody and everybody irritated him to the point of aversion for Catholicism.

His own character, too, played an important part in

the formation of his attitudes. He was a thinker and an earnest seeker for the truth, but his self-sufficiency and his rebellion against anything that savored of dogmatism militated against him.

All of these forces together, then, deeply rooted in his philosophical opposition to Catholicism, led him to a total rejection of Catholic doctrine.

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