

Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History*. Hill and Wang (2008) 384 pp. \$10.20. Reviewed by Anna Heitmann

Philip F. Gura traces the Transcendentalist movement from its Unitarian beginnings through abolition until after the Civil War and the beginning of pragmatism. He shows how Transcendentalism emerged from theological debates over the language of Scripture, was shaped by early responses to America's market revolution, and turned to a different purpose and changed by the Civil War. *American Transcendentalism* seeks to answer how a movement beginning in widely debated theological and philosophical issues morphed into an individualistic method of discovering truth by experience. Gura follows the development of Transcendentalist thought as it divided into two different camps, and resulted in pragmatism.

Transcendentalism began with Unitarian clergymen and was at first a theological matter. Reacting against the emotionalism of the Great Awakening, Old Lights stressed reason in religion, were termed "liberal Christians" and eventually became Unitarians, rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinitarians and Unitarians were caught up in debates over the language of Scripture, and whether the Scriptures supported a Unitarian or Trinitarian view of God. It was important for Unitarians and Trinitarians to determine how language works, since their interpretation of the language of Scripture directly affected their theological conclusions.

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* argued that language as a social construct did not have any transcendent power or meaning. This led to a relativistic mode of interpreting the language of the Bible, and in the end theologians rejected Lockean epistemology. If language could not communicate objective truth, then the truth of the Scriptures could not be deemed trustworthy. Nature was said to provide men with

language instead of each being born a *tabula rasa*. Transcendent meaning could be found in nature and in the self. There was naturally a break with tradition, along with a rejection of the institution and anything man-made. Transcendentalists were opposed to the materialism rampant in America as a result of the industrial revolution.

Their reactions differed, however, with Transcendentalists divided into two camps: the self-reliant, and those devoted to the betterment of society (republican virtue). Both were centered in the self, but the first was separatistic and the second communal. According to Emerson's definition, Transcendentalists were "few, and "lonely" in their habits, conversation, and writing. They tended to shun "general society"" (Gura, 15). But as Gura points out, this did not account for those who "at that very moment were assiduously laboring around Boston to remedy the plight of the poor and others disadvantaged by circumstance..." (Gura, 16). Emerson was not opposed to the improvement of society, but believed that "each man's heart must be pure for social change to occur" (Gura, 212). Transcendentalists' interest in social change stemmed from their belief in "universal divine inspiration" and a "democracy of the spirit" (Gura, 18). If each man or woman can receive truth directly from himself and nature equally, then each has equal rights and value. It was not long before Transcendentalists turned to the abolition of slavery.

During the Civil War, Transcendentalism formed a semi-cohesive movement in opposition to the horrors of slavery. The institution and practice of slavery did not square with the "democracy of the spirit" that Transcendentalists advocated. Even Emerson, who tended toward separatism, took up the cause of the common man. Henry Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax because it only contributed to the Mexican War—a war over the rights

to land for the expansion of the cotton industry and the institution of slavery. As the beliefs of Transcendentalism were put into practice, the ideal of an egalitarian society was held in higher esteem than the unjust laws of the land.

When the war ended, Transcendentalists had to pick up where they left off. The new generation learned from ante bellum ideals and worked them out in new contexts. For example, Dall followed after Fuller in the fight for equal rights for women. But with the new context in America after the war—and anti-dogmatism—there came a change in Transcendentalism. Since dogma had failed with the Civil War, experience was stressed as the means to finding truth. Those who kept Transcendentalism only preserved that which was in accord with the “philosophy of experience” (Gura, 302). Santayana preserved the self-reliance of Transcendentalism without the republican virtue, and “Frothingham’s scientific theism, with its respect for the varieties of religious experience, led, finally, to this: a world in which each person makes his own truth from what works for him” (Gura, 306). Self-reliance was preserved, and republican virtue lost.

In 306 pages Gura accomplishes what 3 pages cannot sufficiently describe or summarize. He provides detailed information about the different beliefs, actions, and changes within the Transcendentalist movement that help clarify its importance for American history and philosophy. *American Transcendentalism* also sheds light on the intimate relationship between philosophy and events—that such things as war have a measurable effect on how people think about the world around them. Although the volume deals mainly with Transcendentalism, it provides helpful background and clues to how pragmatist philosophy formed in America—as well as how the United States has become the country it is today.