

## TRANSCENDALIST RHETORIC AND THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR

by Barbara G. Tucker

America in the late 1800s saw many sweeping reforms that greatly changed the economic, religious and social fabric of the nation while leaving the constitution of the United States and the constitution of the American mind intact. The actual beginnings of these reforms go back to the ideals and goals of a relatively small group of New Englanders in the 1830 and 1840s.

Who were these people and what were their demands? Today we do not think of some of them as avid reformers, but as theologians, philosophers, or literary figures. Some of them were active abolitionists; all of them were anti-slavery. Some of them were religious, almost Puritanical; others had very little thought for organized religion. Some advocated less than earth-shaking reforms, like the Graham Cracker diet, while others advocated Fourier socialism. Their professions included ministers, newspaper editors, Lyceum lecturers, land surveyors, and literary giants.

It was a time when almost any thinking Bostonian was convinced the world could be remade at his doorstep . . . Boston, in fact, manufactured reform societies so efficiently that when an epidemic of smallpox broke out, one contemporary writer observed, a society was instantly organized to oppose it.<sup>1</sup>

These reformers, of whatever shade and texture in other opinions, had two things in common--a strong belief in the perfectability of man and in abolition.

Abolition was the all-consuming struggle. It gave purpose and direction to the age, unifying

every shade of reform and revolt.<sup>2</sup>

One very distinct and distinguished group of this general reform movement was the Transcendentalists. Their number included the members of a literary sect called the Transcendental Club that began in 1836 under the direction of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was centered in Boston and Concord.<sup>3</sup> Their most prominent members were Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, William Henry Channing, George Ripley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; Theodore Parker, though not a literary man but a minister, agreed and associated with them. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the public speaking of these last three--Emerson, Thoreau, and Parker--in relation to an important target of the reform movement, the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848.

In December of 1845, a long series of events between Mexico and the United States came to a head when Major General Mariano Paredes overthrew President Herrera. Of a nationalistic temperament, Paredes refused to receive John Slidell, who had been sent by President James K. Polk to negotiate for the disputed California and New Mexico territories. Paredes' refusal had been encouraged by Polk's sending of General Zachary Taylor to occupy the disputed land near the boundary of the Rio Grande River. When a Mexican general ordered Zachary Taylor to leave the area and Taylor would not, the war began on April 25, 1846. On May 11, Polk gave his war message to Congress, stating his side (and his side only) of the argument.

The cup of forbearance has been exhausted . . .  
 As war exists, and notwithstanding all our efforts  
 to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself,  
 we are called by every consideration of duty and  
 patriotism to vindicate the honor, the rights,  
 and interests of our country.<sup>4</sup>

The problem existed in that neither country really knew where their boundaries were. Nevertheless, war existed, whether or not slavery and expansionism were obscured by Polk's war cries. The American war goals were not the Rio Grande, but New Mexico and California; but while Congressional leaders realized that, their vision was blurred by sectionalism. New Englanders and Northern Whigs protested the war in terms of slavery and possible harm to industry (in that there would be more Western and agrarian votes). Although it is widely assumed that Southerners favored the war, only a majority of the Democrats actually supported it. Even John C. Calhoun, while he had desired Texas, attacked the conquering and holding of Mexico and the Mexican territories.

Actually, those who favored the war and acquisition of California and New Mexico as a unit were Westerners and Southern Democrats. Politically, the war was not helpful to either party. Because slavery was such an inherent issue, it served to push Southerners and Northerners in both parties farther apart so that it was difficult to get them to agree on anything.<sup>5</sup>

If the war caused divisions in political parties, it tended to do the same in religious denominations.

Although numerous ministers and some outstanding clergymen (opposed the war), religious opposition was neither whelming nor unanimous. Only the Unitarians, Congregationalists, and Friends. . . wholeheartedly expressed outrage from the war's

beginning to end. . . . Religious opinion generally followed a regional pattern and reflected the composition of individual congregations."<sup>6</sup>

It is in the realm of religious and moral dissent that one can discuss the arguments of the Transcendentalists, because they opposed slavery and the war on moral grounds, and because:

They saw the war as never primarily an evil in itself; the war embodied a virulent malady afflicting American society as a whole. They feared the model republic of justice and freedom had forsaken its true mission.

Transcendentalism was imported from Germany by Emerson via his associations with English writers Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth.<sup>8</sup> Kant, a meditative, quiet man by nature, had addressed himself to answering the same questions as Locke's Essay on Human Understanding. In his Critique of Pure Reason (1781) he presented his study, not of what the mind studies and deals with, but how the mind does so.<sup>9</sup> It is basically a philosophy of idealism.

Kant, perceiving the confusion of making man a satellite of the external world, resolved to try the effect of placing him in the position of central swing.<sup>10</sup>

Kant used the term "Transcendentalism" to mean the study of those qualities which are "the fundamental conceptions which transcend the sphere of experience and at the same time impose the conditions tributary to knowledge."<sup>11</sup>

Kant believed that time and space were a priori to any perceptions. He divided the mind's operations into impressions, which fall within the time-space framework; thoughts, which are classified sensations/impressions; and reasons, which link the thoughts and arrive at ultimate principles, God being the ultimate ultimate

principle. Therefore, the ideals of the mind are reality; virtue, ethics and morality exist very really within the mind. "If a man cannot pass beyond the confines of his own mind, he still has a temple there."<sup>12</sup>

Transcendentalism was better fitted for New England than even Unitarianism, which Emerson later called a "corpse-cold religion," because Transcendentalism placed its emphasis on pure reason and the moral knowledge and perfectability to be found in it.<sup>13</sup> New England's greatest contributions to Transcendentalism were its literature, its men, and the concept of "higher law" -- that the moral teachings of the individual's mind were superior to and to be followed before those laws of the government. This concept was highly important to New England Transcendentalism and proved to be a recurring theme.

Ralph Waldo Emerson began his career as a minister in 1829 after graduation from Harvard Divinity School. In 1832 he left his congregation at Boston's Second Church because of doctrinal differences, particularly the Lord's Supper. At this time he was a Unitarian. Already a widower, he took a trip to England and Europe and there met the English advocates of literary Transcendentalism and was converted himself.

Although he opposed the war for a variety of reasons, Emerson did not actively speak out against it.<sup>14</sup> In his portrait of Emerson in relation to public affairs, Raymer McQuiston perhaps answers why Emerson was quiet. In many respects, Emerson at this

time had not really developed a strong philosophy of politics integrated with Transcendentalism. He did not even speak out against slavery until the Fugitive Slave Law of 1851, which he openly defied.<sup>15</sup> Emerson was growing, something necessarily a part of Transcendentalism, but because of this growth, some of these statements seem inconsistent and he was more conservative than some of his radical philosophical brethren.<sup>16</sup>

One of these brethren is the second subject of this paper, Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau is an intriguing American literary figure because of his utter lack of interest in being a literary figure. In the summer of 1846, while Thoreau was living along at Walden Pond, he went into Concord on the mundane chore of getting a shoe repaired. The constable stopped him and demanded that he pay his state poll tax (which he had not paid in three years.) Thoreau refused on the grounds that he would be supporting the unjust war in Mexico, as he believed, to extend slavery. He spent the night in jail for his refusal, but a "veiled woman" paid the tax for him that night.<sup>17</sup>

Elizabeth Peabody published his essay "Resistance to Civil Government," today known as "Civil Disobedience," in Aesthetic Papers in 1849. Most sources seem to think that was the date of its origin, but the essay was actually a speech that Thoreau gave to the townspeople at the Concord Lyceum in 1846 not long after the incident.<sup>18</sup> It is a conversational and communicative composition. Johnstone considers the essay a rhetorical paradox

because the supreme individualist, who believed that moral action must come from one's own conscience, was trying to persuade others and justify himself.<sup>19</sup> However, this writer thinks the charge is taken too far. After all, Thoreau was still a man, and a man who knew he had to live with others; the content of his speech does not negate the efficacy of rhetoric, it just attempts to defend the superiority of civil resistance over rhetoric.

Paradoxical or not, Thoreau's speech is an interesting piece of persuasion. His subject is not the jail incident--he deals with that lightly. It is not slavery nor the Mexican War--he mentions the latter only to accuse the United States of being the aggressor in an unjust war. The purpose of his address was to explain his act of "declaring war with the State"--to be the things that causes friction and thus the obstruction of the State's unjust actions.

I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion . . . This is my position. . . Let him see that he does only what belongs to himself and to the hour.<sup>20</sup>

Thoreau had taken the individualism of Transcendentalism and made it into a form of political activity within the democratic state.<sup>21</sup>

What Thoreau felt most strongly about was individual actions based on individual thought, not many of the issues with which he is associated. As far as being a persuasive act of immediate social impact, Thoreau's refusal to pay his taxes was probably pointless--

as Emerson pointed out, it was a state, not a federal tax he refused to pay.<sup>22</sup> His speech to the Lyceum of tiny Concord, dealing with individualism and with the war only peripherally, seems to have had little impact because it is not even remembered as a speech, and his attitude toward the rhetorical situation was somewhat laissez faire. The real impact of Thoreau's act and rhetoric was not seen until it was read and put into practice several years later by Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, Emma Goldman and Black civil rights advocates.<sup>23</sup>

Like Thoreau, Theodore Parker has a compelling historical personality and biography. He supported himself while he received his formal education at Harvard College and Divinity School, but his real education took place every day as he spent more than a dozen hours in his extensive library. Frothingham calls Emerson the seer of Transcendentalism and Alcott the mystic, but Parker was its preacher.<sup>24</sup>

In the pantheon of the Transcendentalists, historian Perry Miller places him second only to Emerson himself in giving shape and meaning to the movement. But in "the world of action" Miller places him even above Emerson.<sup>25</sup>

Originally a Unitarian, Parker's famous sermon "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity" showed ideas about life and religion that would ally him with the mystic, individualistic Transcendental Club early in his career.

Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Parker was more interested in applying his ideas to social reforms like abolition, temperance,



woman's rights, capital punishment and prison reform.<sup>26</sup> His Boston "Melodeon" was one of the few churches that welcomed Negro members.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it is understandable that he would be most outspoken and eloquent about the Mexican War. He gave several notable addresses on the War, but that of June 7, 1846, not long after Polk's declaration, expresses his thoughts especially forcefully.

Parker was incensed over the declaration of war, but he had postponed giving this sermon for a month in order to approach the subject with a cool head. His sermon had four distinct parts. First, he dealt with the nature of God as revealed in the Old Testament as opposed to that shown in the New Testament. He re-established a basis already present in his non-orthodox audience, that of a loving God of Moral example who has both written his precepts (the higher laws) in the Bible and on men's hearts. He then dealt briefly with man, especially the type of man who goes off to war--the base, cowardly sort. Parker asserts that it takes a brave man to resist war's evils. Herein lies an incongruity with the Transcendentalists--although the individual was the source of moral knowledge and action, they had a prejudice against the masses. Parker then stated his thesis--"If war be right, then Christianity is wrong, false, and a lie." The converse of the statement was also true.

His third section dealt with the nature of war at length. The sermon is thirty-one printed pages long in all, which says a

great deal for Theodore Parker's power as an orator and his congregation's power as listeners. War is a three-fold evil--a waste of property, a waste of human life, and a breeder of crime and other corruptions. In dealing with the first evil, Parker showed some extensive research and a remarkable ability to deal with statistics. He explicitly appealed to his Bostonian audience--city "whose most popular Idol is Mammon, whose God is Gold." He broke the figures down to their effect on each citizen--for it is the humble citizen who paid the price and who received nothing in return. In relation to the second evil, he stated that war is nothing but murder--and here again, the humble classes were affected the most. To illustrate the third evil, he envisioned the Apostle John as a chaplain on the deck of a battle ship, showing the absurdity of war in a Christian context.

To preface his discussion of the Mexican war specifically, he vividly depicts a fictional war between the cities of Cambridge and Boston. Here his power with words and imagery is closely akin to that of Jonathan Edwards. A war between Cambridge and Boston as he described would have been like the one with Mexico. The present war was "iniquitous" and Mexico was clearly the innocent victim. This is the reverse of most presidential war oratory, which places the foreign power clearly in the wrong and America as the victim.<sup>28</sup> The North's sin in it all was that they did not oppose it. "Your mouth is gagged with Cotton." Mexico, an inferior race, did not even have slavery, and slavery was the

basic reason he assigned to the war.

Parker ended with a solution and challenge for dealing with this massive evil. "Resist it, do not support it . . . follow your sense of right." He feared that this war showed that the American people now believed that majorities and force determine what is right and wrong. His conclusion is a striking comparison of the sad but wise Old World Giant and the mocking, young New World Giant.

This sermon shows a variety of things about Parker the orator. The style is vivid, plain, direct and active. Parker skillfully blends authoritative, motivational and substantive appeals in equal amounts. He uses classical and Biblical allusions. He shows a genuine concern for his people and the nation, calling out emotionally to God at times. We find an oratory molded of concern, knowledge, conviction, and skill.

John H. Schroeder makes the following statement about the Transcendentalists in his book Mr. Polk's War. The Transcendentalists

were distressed that the democratic virtues and idealism of an earlier age had now been set aside by a tide of pervasive materialism, grasping expansionism, and proslavery politics. Thus, their dissent is not notable because these individuals were outspoken or effective public critics, because they were not.<sup>28</sup>

Because of Parker's sermon it is hard to fully accept Schroeder's criticism that the Transcendentalist speakers had little effect on

their contemporary audiences. However, the true impact of Schroeder's statement and their speaking in general might be that the rhetoric must be seen in the broader historical context. They were concerned with trends they saw in America, and wanted to offer their Transcendental solutions of individualism to political problems. Seeing the broader context, their ideas and expressions appealed to a broader audience as well. Plato thought that rhetoric was only an art when it was based on truth, and thus more enduring. Perhaps being ahead of their time, these three speakers and their less vocal colleagues generated messages that were received and interpreted with greater understanding and appreciation by succeeding generations than by their contemporaries.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Lawrence Lader, The Bold Brahmins (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1961), pps. 106-107.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, pps. 107-108.

<sup>3</sup>Sculley Bradley, editor, The American Tradition in Literature (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1974), p. 1038.

<sup>4</sup>James R. Andrews, "They Chose the Sword: Appeals to War in 19th Century American Public Address," Today's Speech (September 1969) 17:5.

<sup>5</sup>Roy F. Nichols, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography," Mississippi Valley Historical Review (1956) 43: 187-212.

<sup>6</sup>John H. Schroeder, Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), pps. 107-108.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Harter Fogle, editor, The Romantic Movement in American Writing (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1966), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Transcendentalism in New England (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1965), pps. 1-10.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pps. 12-21.

<sup>13</sup>Lader, Brahmins, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup>Bradley, American Tradition, p. 1039.

<sup>15</sup>Raymer McQuiston. The Relation of Ralph Waldo Emerson to Public Affairs (Lawrence, Kansas: Kansas University Press, 1923), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup>Lader, Brahmins, pps. 205-216.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, editor, American Primer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 317-318.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 318.

<sup>19</sup>Christopher Lyle Johnstone, "Thoreau and Civil Disobedience: A Rhetorical Paradox," Quarterly Journal of Speech (October 1974) 60:313-322.

<sup>20</sup>Boorstin, American Primer, pps. 333-334.

<sup>21</sup>Herbert L. Carson, "An Eccentric Kinship: Henry David Thoreau's 'A Plea for Captain John Brown,'" Southern States Speech Journal (1961) 27:152.

<sup>22</sup>Schroeder, Mr. Polk's War, p. 117.

<sup>23</sup>Boorstin, American Primer, p. 338.

<sup>24</sup>Frothingham, Transcendentalism, pps. 302-321.

<sup>25</sup>Alice Kessler Harris, Sermons on War by Theodore Parker (New York: Garland Publishers, 1973), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pps. 6-7.

<sup>27</sup>Lader, Brahmins, p. 140.