

2015

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Recommended Citation

Ridlen, Kirsten (2015). Divining Very: Reconciling Christian and Transcendentalist Philosophies in the Poetry of Jones Very. *Undergraduate Review*, 11, 108-113.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol11/iss1/19

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Divining Very: Reconciling Christian and Transcendentalist Philosophies in the Poetry of Jones Very

KIRSTEN RIDLEN

On July 15, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave his address to the graduating class of Harvard's Divinity School. In it he boldly criticized the state of organized religion before a class of newly-minted religious leaders, and he impressed upon them a duty to reform churches that had fallen into comfortable routine, abandoning the pursuit of truth in favor of dated tradition. In effect, he called for the total reconstruction of religion as they knew it.

Though it was audacious of Emerson to suggest to a crowd of Harvard graduates that they should now begin to reconsider everything they had been taught—finding, as he did, religious culture in dire need of reform, and maintaining the pursuit of Truth as his primary goal—he believed that radical action was necessary. "Historical Christianity," Emerson says in his address, "has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion." He explains, "As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus" (Emerson 236). This is Emerson's primary criticism: that religious truth is compromised by Church rituals, which have been diluted by the tedium of going-through-the-motions, whose original meaning and intent has been lost to the ages. And yet worshippers come to rely on those rituals, as if in going through the motion they forget the spontaneity and sincerity of prayer. So the rituals that served as an intermediary between the soul and the Spirit have superseded their purpose and become the very root of worship. From this reliance on tradition—on what Emerson calls "historical Christianity," which is founded on scripture stories rather than the divinity Emerson believed to be inherent in every person—comes this "noxious exaggeration of the person of Jesus," whom Emerson believed to be a prophet, but not the God that Christians considered him to be. Rather than looking to Jesus as a true spirit of inspired faith, religion became dependent on him, for all intents and purposes, as a storybook character.

"Christianity," as Emerson writes, "became a Mythos as [did] the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before" (Emerson 235). Of this subjugation of the individual to a singular deity, Emerson says,

Once man was all; now he is an appendage, a nuisance. And because the indwelling Supreme Spirit cannot wholly be got rid of, the doctrine of it suffers this perversion, that the divine nature is attributed to one or two persons, and denied to all the rest, and denied with fury. The doctrine of inspiration is lost; the base doctrine of the majority of voices usurps the place of the doctrine of the soul. Miracles, prophecy, poetry, the ideal of life, the holy life, exist as ancient history merely; they are not in the belief, nor in the aspiration of society; but, when suggested, seem ridiculous. Life is comic or pitiful, as soon as the high ends of being fade out of sight, and man becomes near-sighted, and can only attend to what addresses the senses (Emerson 234-235).

Religion has effectively degraded the true spirituality of man, usurped the power of the individual—his divine inspiration and sanctity of his soul—in order to bestow that authority on one ethereal God. Here, Emerson establishes his—and generally the Transcendentalist—theory of spirituality: that divinity comes from within each person. He condemns religion as an institution much like any business or politic that likewise has corrupted the humanity of his society. Among the Transcendentalist community that Emerson founded and helped cultivate, religion was a primary target for reform.

Sitting in the audience for Emerson's "Divinity School Address" was a young poet named Jones Very. That address was not their first encounter, as Very had visited the Concord compound on April 4 of that year (just three months earlier); nor was it their last. Many critics have wondered how a man as religiously fervent as Jones Very became affiliated with the Transcendentalist Movement.

Jones Very was born on August 28, 1813 in Salem, Massachusetts. As his father died when he was just 11, he was raised mostly by his mother—an atheist whom Robert D. Richardson, Jr. describes in his book, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, as "a forceful, outspoken materialist" and "a disciple of Frances Wright" (302), so Very's aptitude for social reform, at least, was in his blood. But he did not become much involved with religion until he began his studies at Harvard in 1834, and there he spiraled straight into zealotry.

Richardson describes Very's stern countenance:

His 'tall angular figure' moved with a long, stately stride. His manner was solemn and fervent. His skin was stretched tightly over his face, which was thin and smooth with a high forehead. He wore a large black hat, a black suit and frock coat, and he carried a black walking stick. A photograph shows his small rigid mouth set in a straight line, his eyes locked in a stare and fixed on a spot just past the viewer's left ear. (302)

He was like something out of Hawthorne's *Black Veil*, and he was received with as much hesitation. Richardson notes that he was "The oddest, most compelling, and most trying of the new acquaintances" in Emerson's camp. Very had taken Emerson's "Address" very much to heart and now believed himself, "apparently literally--to be the 'new born bard of the Holy Ghost' Emerson had called for" (301).

By 1838, Very was at the height of his religious fervor. Having been fired from his position at Harvard as a Greek tutor for going off-syllabus and encouraging his students to "flee to the mountains, for the end of all things is at hand," like a prophetic doomsday prepper, he visited Elizabeth Peabody (on September 16, 1838), who recalled the encounter:

One morning I answered a ring at the door and Mr. Very walked in. He looked much flushed and his eyes very brilliant and unwinking. It struck me at once that there was something unnatural--and dangerousness in his air--As soon as we were within the parlor door he laid his hand on my head--and said "I come to baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire"--And then he prayed. I cannot remember his words, but they were thrilling--and as I stood under his hand, I trembled to the center. (Richardson 303)

Very continued to baptize several Salem ministers, leading to his prompt commitment to McLean's Asylum for a month. He was released on October 17 of that year, considerably more moderate thereafter (Richardson 304).

Very's fanatic behavior unsettled his Concord peers. Richardson suggests that Emerson's words fueled Very's belief in his own superlative divinity, and that "as a result he considered himself to be literally a vehicle for the Holy Ghost, to be the only such vehicle, and at the same time to be--personally--the second coming, the Messiah" (303). In this sense, Very seems to have missed the mark entirely.

The Transcendentalist movement was one founded on the principles of institutional reform. Naturally the focus on reform created tension between the movement and the institutions it

targeted. Chief among them were the rigid religious sects that had abandoned what Transcendentalists believed to be their true purpose in favor of empty tradition and blind faith--the sects which Very, with his fervent preachiness, seemed to represent. Growing Western interest in science and the will to question led the Transcendentalist movement's founders and followers to doubt religion, especially when it relied upon weak spiritual foundations. The Transcendentalist school of thought was set immediately at odds with religious sects that had fallen into a comfortable, though indefensible, routine.

In his article, "Nature as Concept and Technique in the Poetry of Jones Very," Anthony Herbold identifies a seeming blatant contradiction in the poetry of Jones Very: It is at once deeply reverent and undeniably Christian, and at the same time devoted to nature in a secular way, without any apparent conversation between the two. Herbold argues that this tension is evidence of a multiplicity in Very--that there were at least two identities, a wholly secular and a wholly sacred Very, and never was one cognizant of the other.

Herbold argues that there are two major forces of influence acting on Very's poetic voice, even creating, as Herbold suggests, "several Verys," distinct from one another and acting independently, such that one can discern precisely which state of "Very" the poet was in when he wrote each particular poem. Herbold even goes so far as to suggest that each voice acts autonomously, each one so contrary to the other that, "all the while Very the poet seems unaware of these disagreements." Herbold calls him "the will-less stenographer of the Spirit," as if he had no control over which of these two voices might erupt from his pen--each poem being just that incompatible with the next (244).

The first of these voices Herbold identifies as the Christian within Very. This voice typifies nature as "finite, contingent, imperfect [and] a poor teacher" (245). This Very regarded nature with a lower-case n, beloved as the creation of God, but insubstantial on its own. Herbold cites Very's "The Garden":

I saw the spot where our first parents dwelt;
And yet it wore to me no face of change,
For while among its fields and groves I felt
Is if I had not sinned, nor thought it strange;
My eye seemed but a part of every sight,
My ear heard music in each sound that rose,
Each sense forever found a new delight,
Such as the spirit's vision only knows;
Each act some new and ever-varying joy
Did by my Father's love for me prepare;
To dress the spot my ever fresh employ,

And in the glorious whole with Him to share;
No more without the flaming gate to stray, No
more for sin's dark stain the debt of death's to pay.
(Very 291)

Herbold suggests that "Very, himself a disciple, wanted only 'the spirit's vision,'" disavowing the senses, for "he believed not only that the sense perceptions give rise to an inferior sort of poetry ... but that unless we stop up the senses we shall not perceive the Unseen," which is exclusively where Christian Very believed spirituality existed (249). The speaker of this poem delights in the scene before him, but physically there is nothing remarkable about this particular encounter: "I saw the spot where our first parents dwelt; / And yet it wore to me no face of change." Rather, nature lends itself to poetry now because the speaker has been infused with the spirit of God: "Each act some new and ever-varying joy / Did by my Father's love for me prepare." Nature, then, according to this first incarnation of the poet, has no inherent spirituality within it, but only the meaningfulness that comes from the individual, inspired by the creation before him, placed there by the divine Will of God. This is the inverse of Emerson's belief that the source of the Spirit is within man, that "That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wren" (Emerson 236). Yet regardless of where each man believes the origin of the Spirit lies, both agree that it rests eventually within, and thus enlightens them in kinship with nature.

The second of these voices, more in line with Very's Transcendentalist education and community culture, was, as Herbold says, "infinite, self-generating, perfect" (246). These poems are alive with all the sense and feeling of the poet, personified in the natural landscape of the poem. He refers to "Autumn Leaves," where Very at last concedes that perhaps in nature there are "the unseen hues of immortality":

The leaves though thick are falling; one by one
Decayed they drop from off their parent tree;
Their work with autumn's latest day is done,
Thou see'st them borne upon its breezes free;
They lie strewn here and there, their many dyes
That yesterday so caught thy passing eye;
Soiled by the rain each leaf neglected lies,
Upon the path where now thou hurriest by;
Yet think thee not their beauteous tints less fair,
Than when they hung so gaily o'er thy head;
But rather find thee eyes, and look thee there
Where now thy feet so heedless o'er them tread;
And thou shalt see where wasting now they lie,
The unseen hues of immortality. (Very 293)

There is no mention of God in this poem. The leaves exist in their own right. Nature here is an autonomous, self-generating system: "The leaves though thick are falling; one by one / Decayed they drop from off their parent tree." The Father, here, is the tree. This is a clear admission of secular sovereignty.

Herbold is uneasy with this seeming contradiction of Very's previous philosophy, and so concludes that the poet must be in the throes of a "spiritual apartheid" (244). But Herbold wrongly assumes, as many critics do, that Very must be either a Christian or a Transcendentalist. His argument assumes that there is no place for a Christian among Transcendentalists, but in fact the defining character of the Transcendentalists was not that they were atheists, but reformers. And Jones Very was, most certainly, a reformer.

His poem "The New Birth" is all about the rejection of old ideals and the conversion to a new Enlightenment:

'Tis a new life--thoughts move not as they did
With slow uncertain steps across my mind,
In thronging haste fast pressing on they bid
The portals open to the viewless wind;
That comes not, save when the dust is laid
The crown of pride that gilds each mortal brow,
And from before man's vision melting fade
The heavens and earth--Their walls are falling now--
Fast crowding on each thought claims utterance strong,
Storm-lifted waves swift rushing to the shore
On from the sea they send their shouts along,
Back through the cave-worn rocks their thunders roar,
And I a child of God by Christ made free
Start from death's slumbers to eternity. (Very 290)

The opening lines signify a transition from the "slow uncertain steps" of blind faith to the "thronging haste" in pursuit of truth. What Very seems to be invoking here is the philosophical revolution that was the Transcendentalist movement. His language evokes the tempestuous nature of the moral conflict: "from before man's vision melting fade / The heavens and earth--Their walls are falling now-- / Fast crowding on each thought claims utterance strong." He does not renounce his faith, but suggests that he has been born into a new way of thinking—one that, in fact, has brought him closer to God and "by Christ made [him] free."

Herbold fails to acknowledge the fact that there can and must be some reconciliation of the voices. It is too simple for any literary critic to suggest that a worthy writer does not know exactly what he is doing with his work—that any stroke has

not been mulled over for hours in agony before meeting public scrutiny. The question, then, is not whether half of Very's poetry lends itself to the movement, but how his entire poetic approach aligns with Transcendentalist sensibility.

It was Very's essay, "Epic Poetry," that first caught the attention of the Transcendentalists in Concord. Elizabeth Peabody heard him deliver the lecture in Salem in December 1837 and encouraged Emerson to invite Very to Concord, which was the occasion of his April 4 visit the next year (Richardson 303). In his essay, Very argues that poetry has evolved simultaneously with the theology of the time. The poetry of the time when great Greek heroes ruled the world, for instance, was appropriately Epic.

Very observes that, "to men in the early stages of society their physical existence must seem almost without end, and they live on through life with as little reference to another state of being as we ourselves do in childhood." There was no study of the human condition or past implications on the future in those times, only the matters of the day. There was no emphasis on the afterlife as there is in modern Christianity, and so public interest was in external conflict: war and adventure and mischievous gods. Very suggests that, "if to these advantages possessed by Homer we add those which belonged to him from the religion of his times and from tradition, whose voice is to the poet more friendly than the plain written records of history, we must confess that the spot on which he built up his scenes of heroic wonder was peculiarly favorable" (1-2). In other words, Homer's epics were successful because his spiritual climate was especially hospitable to epic poetry.

Cultural theology later evolved into Christianity. Very argues,

As the mind advances, a stronger sympathy with the inner man of the heart is more and more felt, and becomes more and more the characteristic of literature. In the expanded mind and cultivated affections, a new interest is awakened, dramatic poetry succeeds the epic, thus satisfying the want produced by the further development of our nature. For the interest of the epic consists in that character of greatness that in the infancy of the mind is given to physical action, and to which the progress of man the greatness of the other becomes subordinate. For as the mind expands and the moral power is developed, the mightiest conflicts are born within--outward actions lose their grandeur, except to the eye, for the soul looks upon them but as results of former battles won and lost, upon whose decision, and upon whose alone, its destiny hung. (Very 10-11)

Religion became more introspective and man's perception of conflict began to focus on the internal rather than the external. Human conflicts were no longer only conflicts of action--of war and loyalty and honor--but of morality. And so reigned the dramatic poetry of the individual, of introspection, of the almighty senses.

With this discussion of Christianity as an evolution of Greek polytheism, Very not only gives credit to Emerson's criticism of historical Christianity as a Mythos of the same kind, but also argues reasonably for Christianity as a necessary tool of the poet. In order for their work to resonate with their audience, they need to have a working understanding of popular theology, which puts Very's religious tone in a fairly defensible position. Very's attitude toward Christianity throughout the essay is entirely pragmatic. He calls it the "ideology of the time," as if religion is a hazard of modern poetry, which must always be keen to public sensibilities. This is not to suggest that Very was not sincere in his faith, but that perhaps his faith was secondary to his craft, and that far from being overcome in his writing, as Herbold suggests, it is evident in this essay that Very was most certainly conscientious and deliberate in his approach.

It is not entirely fair, either, to say only that Very was a student of Emerson. Very arrived at Concord on the recommendation of his own lecture a full three months before Emerson gave his Address at Harvard, and Very's influence on the address is obvious. Emerson states that, "the intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance" (Emerson 232). The lines echo Very's own statements on the moral power at the root of all internal conflict. Richardson even goes so far as to suggest that, "the example of Very was one reason why Emerson could so confidently call for a new 'teacher' and could assure his audience that they were, each and all, newborn bards of the Holy Ghost" (303), which must, in itself, be enough to stake Very's claim as a Transcendentalist.

Critics have always struggled to discern exactly what defines a Transcendentalist anyway. In his essay, "Jones Very, the Transcendentalists, and the Unitarian Tradition," David Robinson points out that "many of the problems involved in Very's link with the Transcendentalists have their basis in the amorphous, many-sided nature of the Transcendentalist movement itself." He notes that "the members of the group never claimed cohesiveness, and resisted what they felt were the confusing connotations of the term 'Transcendentalist,'" and that "the group was unified more in spirit than technical philosophy" (Robinson 104). So Very, of course, cannot be

excluded merely on the grounds that he was too pious, though the struggle to place him remains.

Robinson's analysis of Very focuses on the poet's theory of the "will-less existence": the belief that man must live in order to remain close to God (105). Believing that a man's proud will is the force that separates him from God, Very argued that by surrendering oneself to the Spirit, one could be guided to righteousness. This surrender to Spirit is what Robinson believes to be behind the conversion depicted in Very's aforementioned poem, "The New Birth." He suggests that "the 'change of heart' is also a change of mind and perception which quickens and expands former thought" (106). He also notes Very's use of nature as a metaphor for the spirit, a token Transcendentalist habit:

Although "the heavens and earth" fade before him, he ends the poem with the extended natural metaphor of the sea, now changed externally by the storm winds which rush the waves to the shore. This wind is the wind of the Spirit, "the viewless wind" to which the poet must open the portals of his mind. Power lies with the Spirit. The place of man and nature is to surrender to that Spirit. (Robinson 106-107)

The passage speaks to the harmony Transcendentalists were always trying to find between external nature and their own inner nature. Whatever they believed independently to be the origin of life on earth, they could all agree that man was more akin to the organisms of nature than to the mechanisms of the industrial world, so in abandoning the agendas of modern infrastructure and giving themselves over to the natural Spirit, they could feel, at last, free. Emerson articulates the same philosophy in his "Divinity School Address":

The spirit only can teach. Not any profane man, not any sensual, not any liar, not any slave can teach, but only he can give, who has; he only can create, who is. The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach. Courage, piety, love, wisdom, can teach; and every man can open his door to these angels, and they shall bring him the gift of tongues. But the man who aims to speak as books enable, as synods use, as the fashion guides, and as interest commands, babbles. Let him hush. (Emerson 238)

Man cannot reach his fullest potential and understanding, cannot be actualized, unless he is open to the lessons of the spirit. This is the Truth that Emerson seeks. But perhaps the most compelling and effective resemblance between Emerson

and Very's poetic approach is in their application of Emerson's Theory of Correspondence, which Carl Dennis defines in his article, "Correspondence in Very's Nature Poetry," as "the theory that since mind and nature are made in correspondence, a proper natural instance can be found for any idea" (266). The theory explains the preoccupation of Transcendentalist poetry with nature metaphors. The mind, the soul, the spirit belong to nature. They speak the same language. And so when the poet sets about to articulate some truth, he will always find it demonstrated in nature. Of course Emerson explains this in his "Address" as well: "Speak the truth," he says, "and all nature and all spirits help you with unexpected furtherance. Speak the truth, and all things alive or brute are vouchers, and the very roots of the grass underground there, do seem to stir and move to bear you witness" (Emerson 233).

Very's poem "To the Canary Bird" is both a comment on the usurpation of nature and a metaphor for man's inherent desire to return, himself, to the freedom of the natural world:

I cannot hear thy voice with others' ears,
Who make of thy lost liberty a gain;
And in a tale of blighted hopes and fears
Feel not that every note is born with pain.
Alas! that with thy music's gentle swell
Past days of joy should through thy memory throng,
And each to thee their words of sorrow tell,
While ravished sense forgets thee in thy song.
The heart that on the past and future feeds,
And pours in human words its thoughts divine,
Though at each birth the spirit inly bleeds,
Its song may charm the listening ear like thine,
And men with gilded cage and praise will try
To make the bard, like thee, forget his native sky.
(qtd. in Dennis 261)

The titular bird represents both nature and man. The speaker cannot sympathize with those "who make of thy lost liberty a gain," who profit from the corruption of nature: industrialization and miserable office jobs, the lumber industry, paved roads, itchy starched collars and the pursuit of cash. All the while the bird longs for a return to its natural habitat--to freedom: "The heart that on the past and future feeds," against overwhelming efforts "to make the bard, like thee, forget his native sky." The will of the spirit to be reunited with its nature is relentless.

Dennis reads the canary as "the analogue of the soul's longing for heaven" and suggests that the poet "does not simply use the bird as a means to express his own predicament, but rather uses his own predicament to empathize with the bird" (261-

262). A symbiotic relationship exists between man and nature, and Very constantly finds himself returning to it. So even when his work calls him to the controversial service of God, the poet finds his Spirit manifest in nature.

Very was an imperfect Christian and an imperfect Transcendentalist: fired from Divinity School, dismissed by most of the Concord Elite, and yet his pursuit of both was steadfast. Perhaps finding hardly a foot in either school allowed him to explore both with untethered innovation--and there isn't anything much more Transcendentalist than that.

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