

**The Attitudes of Leading New England  
Transcendentalists Toward Healthful  
Exercise, Active Recreations and  
Proper Care of the Body: 1830-1860**  
By: **Roberta J. Park,**  
**University of California, Berkeley**

**INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:**

Mid-twentieth century America, it would seem, is experiencing a period of deep social, intellectual, moral and spiritual discontent. Critics proclaim what they see to be an obsession with material values, rampant commercialism in all areas of life, excessive competition, a deteriorating environment, violence, intemperance and the like. Many commentators plead for a more natural, a more humanistic, a more sympathetic approach to life — toward what is sometimes referred to as “the inner quality of life.” This is not, of course, the first time that such concerns have been voiced. There have been other occurrences in America’s history. One arose in the 1830s with a small but influential group of New England thinkers who are known to history as the American Transcendentalists. The views which members of this group expressed regarding the nature of man — and the role of the “body” in helping man achieve his fullest potential — are reflective of many of the concerns which present critics of traditional American values are proclaiming. The nineteenth century New England Transcendentalists wrote a considerable amount which would seem relevant and valuable for those who are interested in learning more about the current debate centering upon the more highly rationalized, overly materialistic, intensely competitive aspects of American sports and the need to seek alternative programs which foster more humanistic, intuitive, natural and less fiercely competitive values in sports and physical education.

**THE IDEOLOGICAL MILIEU:**

America of the period from 1830 to 1860 has been characterized as a country experiencing deep social, religious and intellectual agitation.<sup>1</sup> In the social sphere Jacksonian

<sup>1</sup>See for example Alice F. Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944); Frederick J. Turner, *The United States: 1830-1850* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935); Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., *The Idea of Progress in America, 1815-1860* (New York: Peter Smith, 1951).

democracy raised the banner of the “common man” as Americans were spurred on by what Van Deusen has called a conviction that their young country “. . . was the pioneer in forging a new era of mankind . . . .”<sup>2</sup> In the religious sphere the movement which became known as “Revivalism” rejected the Calvinistic philosophy of predestination — (the belief that man was powerless to contribute to his own salvation) — a legacy of the early New England colonists. The 1830s and 1840s were decades which witnessed the founding of numerous communitarian settlements which sought to foster a more humane form of social organization.<sup>3</sup> In the intellectual sphere the movement which has come to be known as Transcendentalism arose in New England and flourished there among a small circle of writers whose influence on American thought far exceeded their numbers. The Transcendentalists, like the Jacksonian Democrats, Schlesinger contends, “. . . shared a living faith in the integrity and perfectibility of man . . . . Both aimed to plant the individual squarely on his own instincts, responsible only to himself and to God.” But where the political democrats were concerned with social, political and economic issues, the Transcendentalists were concerned with the perfection of the individual human being.<sup>4</sup> They believed that the source of all truth was to be found within the nature of man. It was in the inner reform of the individual human being that true social reform would be achieved. Where the intellect failed to supply knowledge, spiritual intuition was to be relied upon.

The Transcendentalist group was comprised of a loosely amalgamated number of individual thinkers located in the northeast section of the United States. They were, for the most part, middle class, well-educated and Unitarian in religious background. The group never adhered to a single doctrine, nor did its members hold a single unified philosophy; they were basically eclectic in their views. There were, however, two important beliefs which they shared in common: a) a rejection of what they believed to be an overly materialistic (some might say dehumanized) emphasis in the American way of life; b) a firm belief in the power and sanctity of the human spirit. Van

<sup>2</sup>Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era: 1828-1848* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>See for example Arthur E. Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins of the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1825* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), for a discussion of recreation and physical education in some of these communitarian settlements see Roberta J. Park, “Harmony and Cooperation: Attitudes Toward Physical Education and Recreation in Utopian Social Thought and American Communitarian Experiments, 1825-1865,” *Research Quarterly* (October, 1974) 45: 276-292.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1946) pp. 381-382.

Wyck Brooks, summing up the feelings of this imaginative and impressionable younger generation of the 1830s, has said — they were displeased with the direction in which they believed the world was heading; they viewed the barons of trade as overly materialistic; they were interested in neither size nor quantity nor money, but in the “inner life” and the depths of thought and sentiment; they felt that the world had fostered a cold and unfeeling civilization which was obsessed with commercial interests and “taught the mind of the young to aim at low objectives . . . .” They were also absorbed with what sometimes almost amounted to a “mania for the natural.”<sup>5</sup> Perry Miller, one of the leading interpreters of the American Transcendental movement, has described theirs as “the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization.” Miller considers their views to be valuable because they occupy an important place in the intellectual history of America and, even more, because “they speak for an important mood in the spiritual life of a Republic; . . . a few bold American spirits made a gallant effort to introduce this mercantile and pragmatic nation to some of the deeper currents in the intellectual life of the West — and the East.”<sup>6</sup> The questions which they asked, Boller suggests, “continue to challenge America’s more conventional wisdom.” Their most fervent conviction was that individual men and women could learn to rise above the commonplace, and by so doing, might “to their surprise see beauty, dignity, grandeur and miracle where before had only been convention and routine.”<sup>7</sup>

It is generally held that the rise of New England Transcendentalism can be traced to the importation of German idealism, facilitated by the availability of an English translation of Mme de Staël’s *de l’Allemagne* (1813) and by Thomas Carlyle’s commentaries upon German idealist thought. (Vogel<sup>8</sup> contends that this interest in German culture can be located as early as 1815, when a small group of young Americans decided to study at the University of Göttingen. These four — George Ticknor, Edward Everett, George Bancroft, Joseph Cogswell — were influential in attracting such German refugees as Charles Follen,

<sup>5</sup>Van Wyck Brooks. *The Flowering of New England: 1815-1865* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1936), pp. 180-181.

<sup>6</sup>Perry Miller, ed., *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* [New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1957], pp. x-xii.

<sup>7</sup>Paul F. Boller, Jr., *American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry* (New York: C. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1974). pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>8</sup>Stanley M. Vogel. *German Influences On the American Transcendentalists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955). pp. 26-28. The extent of German influence upon American education in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century has been summarized in John W. Walz, *German Influences in American Education and Culture* (Philadelphia: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1936).

Charles Beck and Francis Lieber to the United States in the 1820s. These early emigres combined a deep interest in both the philosophy of idealism and physical training. Fallen's lectures on Kant and Fichte were attended by many of the Transcendentalists).<sup>9</sup> It would be incorrect to imply, however, that American Transcendentalism was a direct descendant of the philosophies of Kant and Fichte — or of the literary thought of authors like Goethe and Schilling. It was, as Parrington maintains, as much, if not more, a product of the rejection of rigid Calvinism (with its emphasis upon subjugating man's evil nature) and of the materialism of Unitarianism. On this point Parrington is emphatic: "Transcendentalism, it must be remembered, was a faith rather than a philosophy; it was oracular rather than speculative; affirmative rather than questioning; and it went to Germany for confirmation of its faith not to reexamine its foundations."<sup>10</sup> American Transcendentalism also borrowed from such antecedents as Platonic idealism and the speculative thought-systems of the Orient.

By the 1830s many Americans seem to have been anxious for a philosophy which had broader moral, aesthetic and spiritual appeal. An anonymous pamphlet (usually believed to have been written by Charles Mayo Ellis) entitled *An Essay on Transcendentalism* (1842) set forth the most commonly held principles of the group: "Transcendentalism . . . maintains that man has ideas, that come not through the five senses, or the powers of reasoning; but are either the result of direct revelation from God, his immediate inspiration, or his immanent presence in the spiritual world . . . . We have laws for the body; . . . by giving to each its proper food and exercise, we keep that harmony which is health . . . ." The fundamental doctrine of Transcendentalism was, however, ". . . the substantive, independent existence of the soul of man . . . ."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the Transcendentalists were interested, above all, in man's "spiritual" nature. However, since the physical body provided the home for the spiritual body, it merited its own attention and care. Cared

<sup>9</sup>The significance to physical education of Bancroft's, Cogswell's and Beck's work has been discussed in Bruce L. Bennett, "The Making of Round Hill School," *Quest* IV (April 1965), pp. 53-63. It should be noted that the article points out that "outdoor education" (e. g., hiking and camping) received considerable attention. For a statement of Cogswell's and Bancroft's estimate of their success in employing physical education in their school see Joseph G. Cogswell and George Bancroft, *Some Account of the School for the Liberal Education of Boys Established on Round Hill, Northampton, Massachusetts, March 25, 1826*. For a direction of Follen's and Lieber's contributions to the Harvard Gymnasium and to physical education in America see for example Fred E. Leonard and George B. Affleck, *A Guide to the History of Physical Education* (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1947), pp. 231-254, and Vogel, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-60.

<sup>10</sup>Vernon L. Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America: 1800-1860* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1927), p. 374.

<sup>11</sup>*An Essay On Transcendentalism* (Boston: Crocker and Ruggles, 1842), pp. 11-19.

for properly, the physical body provided a vital means for the attainment of higher consciousness. Consequently, most of the leading Transcendentalists placed a considerable emphasis upon healthful exercise and elevating recreations. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Ellery Channing, Amos Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller (Ossoli) all expressed a marked interest in such topics as health, play, exercise and recreation. Frothingham, an early biographer of the American Transcendentalist movement, has aptly summed up their views on the matter: "Their idea was that as the body was, for the time being, the dwelling-place of the soul, . . . it must be kept in perfect condition for these high offices. They honored the flesh in the nobility of their care of it."<sup>12</sup>

In general, the Transcendentalists took a considerable interest in education, seeing in education a vital means to the full development of each human being. In 1837, when Horace Mann, a close acquaintance of Transcendentalist authors, assumed the position of secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, the common schools were in a deplorable condition. Many children had no opportunity to attend, teachers were often ill-trained, emphasis was on drill and passive conformity. In contrast, the Transcendentalists — along with such educational reformers as Mann, Henry Barnard and James Carter — saw originality and creativity to be necessary ingredients of an education which would enable each child to develop his uniqueness. In the battle for public school reform in the 1840s and 1850s the opinions of the Transcendentalist authors often reached a wide audience through their popular essays and other writings and, thereby, helped to shape contemporary thought.<sup>13</sup>

## EMERSON: THE SPOKESMAN:

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is usually acknowledged to have been the leading spokesman of the New England Transcendentalists. Having graduated in 1826 from Harvard Divinity School, he began to teach, but soon found it necessary to give this up for reasons of health. Although his career as a teacher was brief, Emerson continued to be interested in educational efforts throughout his lifetime. Many historians

<sup>12</sup>Octavius B. Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (New York: Putnams, 1876) pp. 150-151.

<sup>13</sup>For an indication of possible influences of Transcendentalists upon public school reform see for example V. T. Thayer, *Formative Ideas in American Education: from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc., 1965), pp. 89-91; 106-107; 140-166, and Abraham Blinderman, *American Writers on Education Before 1865* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975).

believe that his ideas anticipated twentieth century progressive pedagogical thought. On a trip to Europe in 1832 Emerson met Thomas Carlyle, the leading interpreter of German eighteenth century idealism, and formed a lifelong friendship with the Scottish author. Upon his return Emerson and friends began to gather at his home in Concord, Massachusetts, to discuss philosophy, literature, theology and other subjects of mutual interest. In 1836 he published *Nature*, which set forth the substance of his thought. A statement which appears in his extensive *Essays* aptly summarizes Emerson's fundamental belief: "There is one mind common to all individual men."<sup>14</sup> Each human being is an expression of this one, eternal mind. Concerned that the Unitarianism and Lockian sense realism which were widespread among New Englanders in the early nineteenth century had produced a cold intellectualism, Emerson proclaimed the superiority of intuitive wisdom.

The balanced and full development of all the human powers was important to Emerson. He viewed the body as the instrument through which man could attain all the benefits of the material world. Therefore, a sound body must be seen as a prerequisite to each individual's total development. Nature, he claimed, endeavors to put "a symmetry between the physical and intellectual powers; . . . all kinds of power usually emerge at the same time; good energy and bad; power of mind with physical health; . . ." He was critical of American culture for failing to make men all that they could become and for neglecting to give them the kind of training which would develop all their capacities harmoniously. "Genius is health, and Beauty is health and Virtue is health, he declared."<sup>15</sup> Holding that the law of nature dictated that everything tends toward its highest manifestations, Emerson believed that "bodily vigor becomes mental and moral vigor."<sup>16</sup> Sound health was clearly important.

As did the other Transcendentalists, Emerson believed that education was the most important force in human progress but that traditional forms of education had generally failed their most important mission: "Education should be as broad as [man] . . . commensurate with the object of life." The secret to education, he felt, could be found in respecting the individual

<sup>14</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays* (London: James Fraser, 1841), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Works* (10 vols.; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), VI, 53-64; X, 41-43. The concept of unity of all the human faculties appears repeatedly in Emerson's thoughts. See also William H. Gilman *et al*, general eds., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (9 vols.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1965-1971).

<sup>16</sup>*Works*, VI, 126.

child. The wise parent and teacher understands that books — as important as they are — cannot be the child's only means of instruction. In fact, if real learning is to take place the child must be brought to it by natural activities. The parent or teacher who fails to provide for the proper physical education of the child, Emerson maintained, is sadly in error: "you are not fit to direct his bringing up if your theory leaves out his gymnastic training. Archery, cricket, gun and fishing-rod, horse and boat are all educators, liberalizers, and so are dancing . . . football . . . swimming, skating, climbing, fencing, riding, [camping-out], lessons in the art of power which is his main business to learn . . ." Such activities are not to be valued as amusements, however, but because they help to develop understanding and self-reliance.<sup>17</sup> The development of self-reliance (or inner strength), so vital in Emerson's philosophy, can only be learned by actual experiencing. A good place for children to begin to learn life's lessons is in play. "I like boys, the masters of the playground and of the street . . .," he wrote. "Their elections at baseball or cricket are founded on merit, and are right. They don't pass for swimmers until they can swim, nor for stroke-oar until they can row . . ."<sup>18</sup> In their naturally active games children may learn important lessons.

Emerson also extolled the virtues of walking and other exercises for adults: "Walking has the best value as gymnastics for the mind . . . . In the English universities, the reading men are daily performing their punctual training in the boat-clubs, or a long gallop of many miles in the saddle, or taking their famed 'constitutionals', walks of eight and ten miles."<sup>19</sup> To know how to play was, he believed, "a happy talent."<sup>20</sup> What was good for the boy was, likewise, good for the man.

## CHANNING: THE THINKER:

William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), a leader of the Unitarian movement in New England in the early 1800s, viewed the task of humanity to be moral improvement of the individual. He was a staunch advocate of public education and worked to implement educational reforms in Massachusetts. Real

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, VI, 140-144; X, 130-144. Emerson was very concerned that there was a tendency in America to make children into adults too soon. He saw simple games and natural outdoor activities as one way to help avoid this. See for example *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1913), pp. 40-41.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, X, 138-140.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, X, 141.

<sup>20</sup>Gilman, *op. cit.*, V, 32.

knowledge, Channing believed, was derived from the apprehension of eternal truths and an awareness of the nature of the soul, not from sense experience. Although he saw the development of the spiritual self to be the true end of man's endeavors, a healthy and vigorous physical body was needed to achieve the fullest potential. Human intelligence was to be turned to ways to improve health as well as to elevate the spirit. In a speech delivered February 11, 1840 entitled "On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes," Channing spoke out against the evils of intemperance, which wasted men's earnings, their health and their minds. He saw in robust health the working man's fortune, and believed that his ignorance on the subject of health had contributed to the worker's depressed condition. He was encouraged that the public press of the 1840s was beginning to make available inexpensive books and pamphlets which discussed the structure, function and laws of the human body. "It is in no small measure through our own imprudence," he held, "that disease and debility are incurred, and one remedy is to be found in knowledge."<sup>21</sup>

Channing was convinced that people would become more temperate if they were more cheerful: "physical as well as moral education [should] receive greater attention." There is, he declared, a "puny, half-healthy, half-diseased state of the body too common among us . . . ." He considered physical vigor to be valuable not only for its own sake, but because it could render the mind more receptive to cheerful impressions. "I have pleaded for mental culture," he wrote, "but nothing is gained by sacrificing the body to the mind. Let not intellectual education be sought at the expense of health . . . . Our whole nature must be cared for; . . . our systems of education should provide for the invigoration of both body and mind."<sup>22</sup> He was of the opinion that no human endeavor was more worthy than that of the teacher, for the end of education was the proper unfolding and development of the whole nature of the individual — physical, spiritual, intellectual.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to many of his contemporaries, Channing did not believe that relaxation and pleasure were necessarily evil. While he opposed those temptations which might debase man's nature,

<sup>21</sup>*The Works of William E. Channing, D. D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1891), pp. 59-60; 867-68; 976.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112. The value of Channing's insights for those who are interested in the philosophy of physical education has been suggested by John Williams, "William Ellory Channing's Philosophy of Physical Education and Recreation," *Quest* IV (April 1965), pp. 49-52.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 121.

he advocated “elevating pleasures and amusements.” In fact, innocent pleasures would fill needs which were too frequently given over to intemperate activities. The types of amusements and recreations which should be sought were those which would produce a cheerful frame of mind, refresh the individual and permit him to return to his daily duties “invigorated in body and spirit.” Channing thought that dancing was the best of all physical activities, with the gracefulness of its motions. He recommended that it become a regular activity to which families would resort for “exercise and exhilaration,” that it be taken up by the laboring classes, and that it be part of all gatherings where youths were involved. Under no circumstances, however, was dancing to be carried to the excesses of extravagant balls.<sup>24</sup> In response to objections that religion and amusements were incompatible, Channing declared that it was useful to neither piety nor morals to fight against nature. It was a loving God who had created man, and a beneficent God had not intended for man to lead a dull and monotonous life. It was, in fact, entirely possible to reconcile amusement with duty, he held; for it was an all-knowing God who had “constituted the nature of man of both mind and body—, . . . implanted a strong desire for recreation after labor . . . [and] sent the child fresh from his creating hand to develop its nature by active sports . . . .”<sup>25</sup> God, in his immanent wisdom, could not be wrong. Therefore, the proper care of the body was a vital concern.

## THOREAU: THE MAN OF NATURE:

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1868) became acquainted with Emerson while a student at Harvard. He lived in Emerson’s household from 1841 to 1843 and again in 1847-48. After leaving Harvard, Thoreau taught briefly, notably at the Concord school, where he attempted to appeal to the play-instinct of children and incorporate field trips and nature hikes into the school experience.<sup>26</sup> He then worked for a while in his father’s pencil manufacturing business, but soon turned to what seems to have been his life’s ambition — writing, communing with nature and supporting himself by means of such light manual labor as was necessary for survival. A confirmed individualist, his withdrawal to live alone at Walden Pond produced his best-

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p.112.

<sup>26</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau* (New York: W. Sloane Associates; The American Men of Letters Series, 1948), p. 29.

known work. Thoreau, a prolific writer, left many journals. His special concern was with the *quality* of experience and with finding a way back to nature and to the discovery of the real self.

For Thoreau, the “man of nature”, health was to be attained through man’s harmonious relationship with nature. His *Journals* repeatedly express his belief that “all Nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. She exists for no other end. Why ‘Nature’ is but another name for health. . . .”<sup>27</sup> The free and equal development of all the human faculties was the way to health. Although the farmer may be the toughest, he wrote, he is not necessarily the healthiest human being, having lost his elasticity and ability to run and jump.<sup>28</sup> For Thoreau, as for other Transcendentalists, the body existed for the highest development of the soul; therefore, men should, “strengthen, and beautify and industriously mould [their] bodies to be fit companions for the soul . . . .”<sup>29</sup> He postulated an intimate relationship between body and mind, declaring: “I never feel that I am inspired unless my body is also . . . . They are fatally mistaken who think, while they strive with their minds that they may suffer their bodies to stagnate in luxury and sloth.”<sup>30</sup> When reflecting upon his own ill health, Thoreau stated: “The care of the body is the highest exercise of prudence . . . .”<sup>31</sup> His *Journals* are filled with notations of swimming, paddling his boat, sailing, skating on the river and walking. Of rowing, he said: “This exercise of the arms and chest . . . is perhaps the greatest value of these paddling excursions . . . .”<sup>32</sup> Emerson, who was well acquainted with Thoreau’s fondness for exercise and the out-of-doors, noted: “Mr. Thoreau was equipped with a most adapted and serviceable body; . . . there was a wonderful fitness of body and mind. He could pace sixteen rods more accurately than another man could measure them . . . . He was a good swimmer, runner, skater, boatman, and could probably outwalk most countrymen in a day’s journey. And the relation of body to mind was still finer than we have indicated.”<sup>33</sup>

Thoreau’s works also contain numerous comments expressing his views on proper diet and other cares of the body — all of

<sup>27</sup>Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, eds., *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (14 vols. bound as 2 vols.; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), I, 395.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 160.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 176.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 147.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 221.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 380-381.

<sup>33</sup>Emerson, *Works*, *op. cit.*, X, 461-462. See also Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp. 126-127.

which can be summed up under the heading *simplicity*. He rarely used meat, tea or coffee — not so much because of any ill effects which they might cause, but because their use was not agreeable to his imagination.<sup>34</sup> Many pages of *Walden* are devoted to the discussion of naturalness and simplicity in clothing, food, shelter and life style. In an essay entitled “Walking” Thoreau lamented: “I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understand the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, — who had a genius, so to speak for *sauntering*.” He criticized stylized exercise forms, however, stating: “But the walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called, as the sick take medicine at stated hours, — as the swinging of dumb-bells or chairs . . .”<sup>35</sup> Thoreau, it is clear, preferred to obtain *his* exercise in the pursuit of activities more in tune with nature, and he recommended the same procedure for others.

### ALCOTT: THE TEACHER:

Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) is, perhaps, best known to history for his educational innovations, inspired by Pestalozzian ideas as well as by his own liberal and mystical attitudes. He conducted schools in Philadelphia and Boston, becoming Superintendent of schools in Concord from 1859 to 1865. Alcott also established an experimental community (Fruitlands), but as he was always more interested in theorizing than in practical endeavors it, like many of his other ventures, failed. From 1830 to 1834 Alcott conducted an experimental school in Philadelphia, then returned to Boston where he established his most famous experiment, the Temple School. (Elizabeth Peabody's *Record of a School*<sup>36</sup> has detailed his methods of instruction.) His educational views, unorthodox for their time, caused his dismissal from several posts.

Not content with the traditional rote learning of facts, Alcott's educational ideas centered upon the harmonious all-round development of the pupil: physically, morally, intellectually, aesthetically. Alcott was a pioneer in the development of the

<sup>34</sup>Brooks Atkinson, ed., *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: The Modern Library, 1937). pp. 3-71; 189-200.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 597-601.

<sup>36</sup>Elizabeth Peabody is considered by many scholars to have been a part of the Transcendental group. She met with them frequently. In her *Reminiscences of Rev. Wm. Ellery Channing, D. D.* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880) she stated: “In the fall of 1827 conversations of an informal character, on the general education of children, grew up between Dr. Channing, his wife, Mr. Phillips, Dr. Follen, my sister, and myself....” William Russell who served as editor of the *Journal of Education* also sometimes met with them. (pp. 250-251).

child-centered school, and it is claimed that he had a marked effect upon William Torrey Harris and John Dewey.<sup>37</sup> His influence upon his fellow Transcendentalists was not insignificant.

The true goal of education, Alcott held, is to perfect all the faculties so that perfection of the spirit may be attained. He viewed the mission of the age to be the restoration of “. . . nature to its rightful use; hallow the functions of the Human Body, and regenerate Philosophy, Literature, Art, Society.” Since it is the body which is the instrument of the spirit, to neglect it and deny it exercise result in “mak[ing] the body a grave for the spirit.”<sup>38</sup> The teacher was a major force in the child’s proper development. “In an institution so purely moral in its purposes as the Infant School,” he said, “much depends upon the character of the teacher.” The child’s instincts are innately good; the wise teacher does everything proper to enable the child’s true nature to unfold. He viewed play as a most natural and important means to human development, seeing in the playroom an indispensable aid to intellectual and moral progress and happiness. Since it is in their play that children’s character is most clearly revealed, the playroom became an integral part of his Infant School. Physical activity was not only beneficial for its own sake; it could be a useful tool for other aspects of the child’s development. It was, Alcott believed, through the “exercise of the animal functions” that the child learned to associate in harmony and love with other children and, thereby, develop the means to his own happiness.<sup>39</sup> For these purposes, Alcott introduced into his schools organized play and physical activities. Blinderman suggests that Alcott’s respect for the innately good child and his advocacy of play, personal experience and vocational education reflect the pedagogical beliefs of the New England Transcendentalists.<sup>40</sup> His daughter Louisa Mae Alcott’s *Little Women* and *Little Men* did much to bring Alcott’s educational views to a wide reading public and popularize his theories.

<sup>37</sup>Walter Harding, *Essays on Education—1830-1862—by Bronson Alcott* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprint, 1960), p. vii.

<sup>38</sup>Amos Bronson Alcott, *Record of Conversations on the Gospels, Held in Mr. Alcott’s School* (2 vols.; Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836), I. xxxiii; 6-10.

<sup>39</sup>Harding, *loc. cit.* Franklin B. Sonborn and William T. Harris. A. *Bronson Alcott: His Life and Philosophy* (2 vols.; New York: Biblo and Tanner, 1965) report that the children arrived at Alcott’s school “at eight o’clock in the morning, having an hour’s play in the yard, and enjoy a pleasant social intercourse until nine o’clock. . .” (II, 159-160).

<sup>40</sup>Blinderman, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-144.

## FULLER: THE LITTERATEUR:

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) author, literary critic, newspaperwoman, foreign correspondent and pioneer in the American feminist movement, assisted Alcott at his experimental school in Boston and later opened her own school at Providence, Rhode Island. She was intimately familiar with the writings of the leading German idealists, holding Goethe in the highest esteem. Through her friendship with Emerson, she came to participate in the activities of the New England Transcendentalists, becoming the first editor of the *Dial* (1840-1842). In 1846 she toured Europe as correspondent for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. Her most famous work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), enjoyed great popularity among advocates of women's reform.

Precocious, imaginative and intelligent, Fuller experienced the type of childhood which seems to have had a detrimental effect upon her health — long periods of reading, inactivity, late hours. Higginson, one of her several biographers, notes that “frequent references in her later journals show her deep sense of the wrong she suffered in mind and body by the mistaken system applied in her early youth.” In her diary she refers approvingly to the increasing emphasis which had been placed upon physical training since the days of her childhood: “If we had only been as well brought up in these respects! . . . I can't help but mourn sometimes, that my bodily life should have been so destroyed by the ignorance of *both* my parents.”<sup>41</sup>

As did other Transcendentalists, Margaret Fuller believed that a sound body was necessary for the proper development of the mind. It was the soul, of course, which was the source of man's (and *woman's* — for Margaret Fuller was a pioneer advocate of women's rights) highest evolution. Without a fit body, however, one could not attain full development of the soul. A being of “infinite scope” must not be impaired by limiting attention to just one facet, she wrote. “Give the soul free course, let the organization, both of body and mind, be freely developed, and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called.”<sup>42</sup> Only in a body which is strong and healthy might the soul “do its message fitly.” Any neglect or injury to one part of man's nature will have deleteri-

<sup>41</sup>Thomas W. Higginson, *Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885), pp. 22. See also Mason Wade, *Margaret Fuller: Whetstone of Genius* (New York: The Viking Press 1940).

<sup>42</sup>Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition and Duties of Women*, ed. by Arthur R. Fuller (Boston: Taggard and Close, 1860), p. 96.

ous effects upon his whole being.<sup>43</sup> Her diaries and other writings are dotted with references to her sometimes improved, sometimes depressed, state of health, to the various walks and rides which she enjoyed in the country and to the importance of devoting due attention to the care of the body. How long has it been, she wrote, “since a wiser era has dawned upon the world (its light not yet fully welcomed) in which attention first to the physical development to the exclusion of the mental, is an axiom in education?” Her brother Arthur, who edited her works after her untimely death, commented both upon Fuller’s childhood activities and the rising interest in physical education in the United States in the 1860s: “the simple fact [is] that the laws of physiology as connected with those of mind were not understood then [when Margaret was a child] as now [1860s], nor was attention so much directed to physical culture as of primary importance as it is now regarded.”<sup>44</sup>

Margaret Fuller’s *Life Within and Life Without, or Reviews, Narratives, Essays and Poems* contains a chapter entitled “Physical Education” which consists of her commentary upon a lecture given by John C. Warren, M.D. on the subject of “Physical Education and Preservation of Health.” Here she specified that, “gymnastic exercises, especially in the open air, are needed by everyone who is not otherwise led to exercise all parts of the body by various kinds of labor.” America had made only a partial provision for proper exercise for boys, she lamented, but in “wiser nations” such healthful physical activities had been made “the care of the state.” Reiterating her belief that “everyone who possesses a strong mind in a sane body is heir presumptive to the kingdom of this world,” she insisted that if adults were not interested in their own health they should be in the health of children.<sup>45</sup> She seems to have taken such an interest in the health of her own child. Of her small son, she wrote: “At present my care of him is to keep him pure in body and mind . . . . Now he learns, playing, as we all shall when we enter a higher existence.”<sup>46</sup> She also realized that human beings needed enjoyment as well as work, and that life should not be all work and no play.<sup>47</sup> Higginson suggests that it was Margaret Fuller who wrote for the *Dial*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 163-169.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 353-354.

<sup>45</sup>Margaret Fuller, *Life Without and Life Within, Or Reviews, Narratives, Essays and Poems* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874), pp. 116-119.

<sup>46</sup>*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 380.

<sup>47</sup>*Life Without and Life Within*, pp. 294-300.

the long article entitled "Entertainments of the Past Winter," in which the value of recreation and physical activity is defended.<sup>48</sup>

## THE DIAL: THEIR JOURNAL:

Finding other literary outlets controlled by conservatives and often unreceptive to their views, the Transcendentalists established their own journal — *The Dial*. Sixteen issues were published, four a year, between 1840 and 1844. The first editor was Margaret Fuller; then Emerson, aided by Thoreau. It was in this journal that many of the writings of the leading — as well as lesser-known — Transcendentalists appeared. *The Dial's* literary influence far exceeded its circulation and, although there were many who found ample to criticize in its style and message, there were many others who found much to praise.<sup>49</sup> The July 1842 issue carried the article entitled "Entertainments of the Past Winter," which Higginson claimed was written by Margaret Fuller. If we are to take the author at face value, lively, healthful and pleasing recreations filled a substantial part of the time and interest of the Transcendentalists in and around Boston. "What would the Puritan fathers say," it was asked, "if they could see our bill of fare here in Boston for the winter? The concerts, the opera dancing . . . the desire for amusement, no less than instruction, is irrepressible in the human breast." The seeming obsession of the average New Englander for thinking only of money, theology and social reform was criticized by the author, who declared that the intellect alone had been esteemed for so long that it was little wonder that parents did not feel inclined to "snatch the ball and hoop from their children's hands and give their days to restoring to the body its native vigor and pliancy."<sup>50</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Although they developed no organized programs, no special systems, no formal philosophy of physical education, it is evident that during the first half of the nineteenth century the New England Transcendentalists devoted substantial attention to those human concerns which have come to be considered with-

<sup>48</sup>Higginson, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

<sup>49</sup>*The Dial* and other journals on discussed in Clarence L. F. Gohdes, *The Periodicals of American Transcendentalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1931). For an intensive investigation of *The Dial*, its origins and influence see George W. Cooke, *An Historical and Biographical Introduction to Accompany The Dial* (Cleveland: The Rowfont Club, 1902).

<sup>50</sup>"Entertainment of the Past Winter." *The Dial*, III [July 1842]. pp. 46-72.

in the purview of professional physical education. The literary accomplishments of Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, Alcott and Fuller introduced a wide reading audience to ideas which the Transcendentalists held regarding the body as a means to the attainment of "higher consciousness" and to their attitudes toward health, exercise, play and recreations. Their writings, especially those of Emerson and Thoreau, enjoyed a considerable popularity throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, there appears to be a renewed interest in some of the insights of the Transcendentalist movement. In their insistence upon the superiority of the natural over the artificially contrived, upon a wisdom which is as much — if not more — intuitive as intellectual, and upon the power and sanctity of the human spirit, one can find a continuity of thought between the New England Transcendentalists of the 1800s and those contemporary critics who warn against excessive materialism, commercialism, competition and de-personalization in twentieth century society. They would likely agree with Lewis Mumford's assertion that modern man is in desperate need of "breaking through the boundaries of culture and history, which have so far limited human growth" — and that to cultivate the much-needed sense of unity one must "have a vision of it before [one's] eyes."<sup>51</sup>

The Transcendentalists' convictions regarding the unified nature of existence obligated them to the position that *all* the human faculties (mind, spirit, body) must be fully and harmoniously developed. Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, Alcott, Fuller were unanimous in this belief, as well as in the belief that any education which neglected man's physical nature was surely deficient. They urged, therefore, that greater attention be devoted to what we would now call "physical education." The ultimate goal which they sought in all human activities was, of course, elevation of the individual spirit to attain oneness with universal spirit. Everything was to be guided toward this end. All experiences (play, exercise, recreation, sports included) were to be pursued in a manner which would be in harmony with both nature herself and, consequently, with the unified nature of the individual person. Moderation rather than excess, compassion and understanding rather than the contrived (as, for example, Thoreau's preference for walking rather than calisthenics) would be what they would seek in physical activity.

<sup>51</sup>Lewis Mumford, *The Transformations of Man* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1956), pp. 169-179. Donald W. Koster, *Transcendentalism in America* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975) has suggested that rebellious youth and social critics of the 1960s and 1970s can be viewed as "logical decedents" of some of the *Transcendentalists* ideas, (pp. 95-97).

Contemporary publications like George Leonard's *The Ultimate Athlete* have expressed concerns highly compatible with those expressed by the Transcendentalists: "The ideal unity of physical and spiritual, lost long ago in specialization, professionalism, the obsession with winning . . . ,” must be re-established. "We can learn to experience our bodies as modes of the environment, the world, the universe, as aides to the highest philosophical speculation.”<sup>52</sup>

Significant in their own right, the views of the New England Transcendentalists may also be seen as having provided an important part of the broad ideological background which was favorable to the establishment of organized physical education theory and programs in the later decades of the nineteenth century. It certainly seems reasonable to suggest that they may be regarded as antecedents of those authors of the 1960s and 1970s who maintain that play, games, sports, recreations and the like must strive to eliminate such things as over-specialization, excessive competition and an obsession with winning, and endeavor to re-establish the ideal unity of the physical, the intellectual and the spiritual.

Whether one ultimately concludes that the Transcendentalists were "ineffective perfectionists" or a continuing source of thought which may serve to set men's "creative powers in motion," there is surely merit in Whicher's claim that "differences of interpretation are the stuff out of which valid judgments are molded.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup>George Leonard, *The Ultimate Athlete: Re-Visioning Sports, Physical Education and the Body* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), pp. 8; 19.

<sup>53</sup>George F. Whicher, ed., *The Transcendentalist Revolt Against Materialism* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1949), p. ix.