

**The Over-Soul
of Class
Consciousness:
Lydia Maria Child
and Friedrich Engels**

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Abstract: Friedrich Engels's first book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [1845] was preceded by a strikingly similar one: Lydia Maria Child's *Letters from New-York* [1843]. Both Child and Engels beckoned their readers to empathize with the plight of the victims of capitalist urbanization. Both insisted on the possibility of social progress through collective action. Both condemned the environmental degradation to which workers and the poor were subjected. Perhaps Engels was more insistent than Child that middle-class interests were "diametrically opposed" to those of the working class, yet Child grounded finite forms of struggle in an immeasurable ontological dimension that is implicit in Engels's book but requires proper (re) formulation. In all, reading Child and Engels together provides a fruitful encounter between Marxism and New England Transcendentalism.

Keywords: Class Consciousness, Class Struggle, Marxist Philosophy and Infinity, New England Transcendentalism, Lydia Maria Child, Friedrich Engels

In memory of David Herreshoff and Staughton Lynd

Child in New York City

In 1841 Lydia Maria Child, a popular New England writer, especially of children's literature, but also a committed abolitionist and newly appointed editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, moved to New York City to continue the work of that newspaper.¹ Her book *Letters from New-York*, published two years later, consists of reworked versions of forty of her columns published in that newspaper.² Child's definitive biographer sets the context for the letters and their compilation:

Child arrived in New York – the nation's largest metropolis – just as massive immigration and industrialization were transforming the urban landscape, producing extremes of luxury and misery on a scale never seen before in America's white population. Unlike her

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1 Thanks to Will Mittendorf and Riese Chacon for their thoughtful remarks on an earlier version of this article. Many thanks as well to Sandy Petrulionis, who directed a remarkable NEH Summer Institute on "Transcendentalism and Social Reform: Activism and Community Engagement in the Age of Thoreau," which gave me the rare opportunity to study in Concord, Massachusetts with leading scholars, engage with reform-minded colleagues, and undertake much of the research that has culminated in this article. What is more, at that Institute the session, led by Lance Newman, on the life and legacy of Lydia Maria Child triggered a spontaneous association for me between her *Letters from New-York* and Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England* – an association for which I have tried to provide adequate justification.

2 Child 1998 is a modern critical edition.

Transcendentalist contemporaries, Child did not shrink from the sordid scenes that confronted her in the streets of a noisy, crowded city, but set about chronicling the epic of capitalist development and proletarian destitution.³

Let us read closely Child's first letter, dated August 19, 1841, which introduces her readers to the city in its multi-dimensionality, through a guided tour or "ramble" that pulses with a lively dialectic of contrasts, high and low, poverty and wealth. Child opens her letter with an apocalyptic biblical metaphor: New York City, she proposes, is a "great Babylon."

You ask what is now my opinion of this great Babylon; and playfully remind me of former philippics, and a long string of vituperative alliterations, such as magnificence and mud, finery and filth, diamonds and dirt, bullion and brass-tape, &c. &c. Nor do you forget my first impression of the city, when we arrived at dawn, amid fog and drizzling rain, the expiring lamps adding their smoke to the impure air, and close beside us a boat called the "Fairy Queen," laden with dead hogs.

Well, Babylon remains the same as then. The din of crowded life, and the eager chase for gain, still run through its streets, like the perpetual murmur of a hive. Wealth dozes on French couches, thrice piled, and canopied with damask, while Poverty camps on the dirty pavement, or sleeps off its wretchedness in the watch-house. There, amid the splendour of Broadway, sits the blind negro beggar, with horny hand and tattered garments, while opposite to him stands the stately mansion of the slave trader, still plying his bloody trade, and laughing to scorn the cobweb laws, through which the strong can break so easily.⁴

But how does Babylon – whether ancient or contemporary – rule? Child maintains that Babylon's order is based on the relentless and remorseless accumulation of wealth:

In Wall-street, and elsewhere, Mammon, as usual, coolly calculates his chance of extracting a penny from war, pestilence, and famine; and Commerce, with her loaded drays, and jaded skeletons of horses, is busy as ever "fulfilling the World's contract with the Devil."⁵

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3 Karcher 1994, p. 302.

4 Child 1998, p. 9.

5 Child 1998, p. 9-10.

In three striking paragraphs, to which we shall return for careful analysis, Child “cuts the lines deep” as she plunges below the city’s surface variation to explore its ontological depths of infinite, irrepressible power⁶:

There was a time when all these things would have passed by me, like the flitting figures of the magic lantern, or the changing scenery of a theatre, sufficient for the amusement of an hour. But now, I have lost the power of looking merely on the surface. Everything seems to me to come from the Infinite, to be filled with the Infinite, to be tending towards the Infinite. Do I see crowds of men hastening to extinguish a fire? I see not merely uncouth garbs, and fantastic, flickering lights, of lurid hue, like a trampling troop of gnomes, – but straightway my mind is filled with thoughts about mutual helpfulness, human sympathy, the common bond of brotherhood, and the mysteriously deep foundations on which society rests; or rather, on which it now reels and totters,

But I am cutting the lines deep, when I meant only to give you an airy, unfinished sketch. I will answer your question, by saying that, though New-York remains the same, I like it better. This is partly because I am like the Lady’s Delight, ever prone to take root, and look up with a smile, in whatever soil you place it; and partly because bloated disease, and black gutters, and pigs uglier than their ugly kind, no longer constitute the foreground in my picture of New York. I have become more familiar with the pretty parks, dotted about here and there; with the shaded alcoves of the various public gardens; with blooming nooks, and “sunny spots of greenery.” I am fast inclining to the belief, that the Battery rivals our beautiful Boston Common. The fine old trees are indeed wanting; but the newly-planted groves offer the light, flexile gracefulness of youth, to compete with their matured majesty of age. In extent, and variety of surface, this noble promenade is greatly inferior to ours; but there is

“The sea, the sea, the open sea;
The fresh, the bright, the ever free!”

Most fitting symbol of the Infinite, this trackless pathway of a world! heaving and stretching to meet the sky it never reaches – like the eager, unsatisfied aspirations of the human soul. The

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⁶ Lance Newman observes because Child usually makes her arguments by “indirect means,” she typically “does not record the thoughts that come to her when she looks below the surface; instead, she renders the surfaces and allows her readers to look into the Infinite for themselves” (Newman 2019, p. 184n. 77).

most beautiful landscape is imperfect without this feature. In the eloquent language of Lamartine, “The sea is to the scenes of nature what the eye is to a fine countenance; it illuminates them, it imparts to them that radiant physiognomy, which makes them live, speak, enchant, and fascinate the attention of those who contemplate them.”⁷

Child recognizes that her appreciation of the Battery area of New York City to the Boston Common may strike a New England audience as “heretical.” So be it. As Rodman Gilder once put it in the subtitle to his gripping historical account of the Battery: this was “the story of the adventurers, artists, statesmen, grafters, songsters, mariners, pirates, guzzlers, Indians, thieves, stuffed-shirts, turn-coats, millionaires, inventors, poets, heroes, soldiers, harlots, bootlicks, nobles, nonentities, burghers, martyrs, and murderers who played their parts ...” – in other words, the New York multitude in its kaleidoscopic “glory.”⁸

If you deem me heretical in preferring the Battery to the Common, consecrated by so many pleasant associations of my youth, I know you will forgive me, if you will go there in the silence of midnight, to meet the breeze on your cheek, like the kiss of a friend; to hear the continual plashing of the sea, like the cool sound of oriental fountains; to see the moon look lovingly on the sea-nymphs, and throw down wealth of jewels on their shining hair; to look on the ships in their dim and distant beauty, each containing within itself a little world of human thought, and human passion. Or go, when “night, with her thousand eyes, looks down into the heart, making it also great” – when she floats above us, dark and solemn, and scarcely sees her image in the black mirror of the ocean. ...

But if you would see the Battery in *all* its glory, look at it when, through the misty mantle of retreating dawn, is seen the golden light of the rising sun! Look at the horizon, where earth, sea, and sky, kiss each other, in robes of reflected glory! The ships stretch their sails to the coming breeze, and glide majestically along – fit and graceful emblems of the Past; steered by Necessity; the Will constrained by outward Force.⁹

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7 Child 1998, p. 10. Lydia Moland (2021) traces Child’s use of the term “Infinite” back to German idealism, which I don’t dispute, but I suggest below that there are more proximate sources in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

8 Gilder 1936.

9 Child 1998, pp. 10-11.

Humanity has undergone a transition from its youth into maturity, from poetry and song to the duties of social transformation. But, Child insists, the “poetry and song” of troubadours continues to inspire.

During your ramble, you may meet wandering musicians. Perhaps a poor Tyrolese with his street-organ, or a Scotch lad, with shrill bag-pipe, decorated with tartan ribbons. Let them who will, despise their humble calling. Small skill, indeed, is needed to grind forth that machinery of sounds; but my heart salutes them with its benison, in common with all things that cheer this weary world. I have little sympathy with the severe morality that drove these tuneful idlers from the streets of Boston. They are to the drudging city, what Spring birds are to the country. The world has passed from its youthful, Troubadour Age, into the thinking, toiling Age of Reform. This we may not regret, because it needs must be. But welcome, most welcome, all that brings back reminiscences of its childhood, in the cheering voice of poetry and song!¹⁰

Child concludes her letter with a stirring appeal to what is immortal: the ideal of beauty.

Therefore blame me not, if I turn wearily aside from the dusty road of reforming duty, to gather flowers in sheltered nooks, or play with gems in hidden grottoes. The Practical has striven hard to suffocate the Ideal within me; but it is immortal, and cannot die. It needs but a glance of Beauty from earth or sky, and it starts into blooming life, like the aloe touched by fairy wand.¹¹

Let us turn now to consider how Child may have hoped that her readership would respond to her lyrical invocation of urban life.

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10 Child 1998, p. 11.

11 Child 1998, p. 12. When the leading Transcendentalist journal *The Dial* was under the editorship of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Child published a short essay (“What is Beauty?”) in which she defended a kind of dialectical aesthetics (reprinted in Appendix 2 below). As opposed to the concrete *feeling* of what is beautiful, she contended, the properly abstract *Idea* of Beauty turns out to be the “union” and “perfect proportion” of “two Great Creative Principles”: Love and Wisdom (Child 1843, p. 490) – the “undulating line” of Beauty that dialectically resolves the elements of the “circle” and the “straight line” (491). It would be worth appreciating *Letters from New-York* as an application of Child’s aesthetic theory, through which she discerns the persistence of beauty in the midst of squalor and envisions radical social transformation. More generally, as Clemens Spahr (2011) has argued, Transcendentalists defended a theory of “radical beauty” that conveyed their utopian desire to transform both individuals and social conditions.

Sympathy and Affect

Jonathan Steele has stressed Child's intended "sentimental" effect.¹² Although her friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson "had taught a powerful discourse of personal transformation and human dignity, ... what his writing lacked was a coherent analysis of the structures shaping public behavior and values." As a result, Child "combined the transcendentalist commitment to the self-reliant self with a more general awareness of how public feelings shape political action." In other words, she came to realize that "social change has an affective, as well as an intellectual, component. People's hearts, as well as their minds, needed to be changed; for, otherwise, they would remain frozen in habituated patterns of perception and behavior. This made it necessary to generate patterns of self-awareness that would enable the public to see and feel themselves in a different light." In short, "existing discourses of sentimentalist reform, focused on political sympathy, provided a powerful tool for measuring collective emotional responses. But often, such discourses tended to mystify the precise dynamics of social change."¹³

In order to emphasize Child's distinctive method in *Letters from New-York*, Steele contrasts

the concept of "affect" to personalized conceptions of "sympathy" or "sentiment." This critical move is necessary because many readers continue to characterize sentiment and sympathy as individualized responses, a projection of feeling onto a suffering other, without attending to the linkage between such personal response and more general climates of thought and feeling.¹⁴

Moreover, he continues,

the concept of "affect" is the key to understanding the way that both Child and Fuller link transcendentalist insight to such sentimentalist response. "Affect" is a useful category, because it generalizes and desubjectifies the personalized concept of "sentiment."¹⁵

Steele specifically contends that Child reworked Emerson's concept of the "Over-soul," understood as a "fount of divine energy." She did so

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12 Steele 2014.

13 Steele 2014, pp. 207-208.

14 Steele 2014, p. 209.

15 Steele 2014, p. 209.

by using concepts of affect and shared feeling to amplify individual moments of sentiment, making them more audible. In the process, she established a collective emotional field that was analogous to the collective spiritual field ... that Emerson used to gather together individual moments of illumination. This rhetorical move created the ideal literary medium for measuring the distance between images of perfected being and the unjust social and political conditions that limited the self's development. The move toward social justice, whether the abolition of slavery or the amelioration of urban poverty, depended on the dual capacity to imagine more equitable conditions and to mobilize a collective will (energized through affect) that might change the world.¹⁶

Steele concludes his discussion of Child by arguing that for the latter “the emotional rhythm of everyday life”

is crucial, for the public mood touches every part of our being. It can shape structures of care or lead us into moments of carelessness and apathy that grow out of the belief that one's private feelings do not relate to the larger world. ... Child, like other antislavery advocates, was engaged in a ... battle [whose] “front-line” was the city – the place where public moods shape people's willingness to resist social injustice or reinforce their sense that feelings are a private resource that can be hoarded just like money. From this perspective, the target of *Letters from New-York* is the possessive individualism that believes it can own the self or slaves – pieces of disposable property enclosed within impermeable boundaries. But when we view Child's text through the lens of affect, we understand that such enclosure mystifies the relational and emotional ties that make a person part of a community. They generate a fixation on visible surfaces and a blindness to the invisible relays of affect and ideology that shape human culture and everyday experience.¹⁷

Lastly, Steele offers an intriguing comparison between Child and the Marxist forms of ideology critique developed by Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, both of whom sought to open “a cut or rift in the present” and thereby to produce an “alienation effect” that “destabilizes the ‘dream-state’ of the contemporary world.”¹⁸

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¹⁶ Steele 2014, pp. 210-11.

¹⁷ Steele 2014, p. 217.

¹⁸ Steele 2014, p. 215. Interestingly, although he does not mention Child, Clemens Spahr (2011) draws a comparison between the Transcendentalists and Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. In particular,

Yet Steele's compelling analysis contains a theoretical blind spot: it fails to acknowledge that Child was trying to explain how the urban proletariat can become aware of its class interests and act from below through self-emancipation without waiting for what Richard Rorty famously called a "progress of the sentiments" from above by well-meaning liberals.¹⁹ As a result, Steele fails to notice Child's emphatic use of the term "the Infinite," which plunges us below the surface of political affects to the ontological depth of class consciousness and the prospect for radical social transformation. Or to the level of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*, his literary autobiography, had called a power that is "indestructible" and therefore inexhaustibly re-ebullient."²⁰

Indeed, Coleridge accentuates this foundational sense of infinity that is not what lies beyond the constituted limit of finitude but instead wells up as its constitutive force. Toward the end of the thirteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* we encounter a twofold distinction:

The IMAGINATION ... I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or, where his process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify, It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.²¹

Spahr devotes a marvelous chapter to Orestes Brownson and the latter's commitment to "transcendentalist class struggle" (pp. 133-54) – a concept that I readily borrow.

19 For a defense of self-emancipation against Rorty's paternalism, see Stolze 2020, pp. 263-92. Another possible line of criticism concerns Child's presumed implication within an ideological practice through which racialized images of the "grotesque" were constructed as the basis for arousing readers' moral sympathy (Foster 2010). No doubt this is an important challenge to Child that emphasizes the limits of "white abolitionism." Yet, I would add, political affects are no less contradictory than are political concepts, positions, or projects – these always and only exist as the provisional outcomes of ongoing ideological struggle. Indeed, a similar illustration may be found in chapter four of *Condition of the Working Class in England* in which Engels discusses "Irish Immigration" but occasionally lapses into crude stereotypes. Engels rightly condemns Robert Carlyle for an "exaggerated and one-sided condemnation of the Irish national character" (Engels 1987, p. 102), but how else could one fairly characterize his own demeaning caricature: "The Irishman loves his pig as the Arab his horse, with the difference that he sells it when it is fat enough to kill. Otherwise, he eats and sleeps with it, his children play with it, ride upon it, roll in the dirt with it, as anyone may see a thousand times repeated in all the great towns of England" (p. 103).

20 Coleridge 1834, p. 169.

21 Coleridge 1834, p. 172. Emerson had a copy of this U.S. edition in his personal library; see Harding 1967, p. 64.

As Coleridge's biographer Richard Holmes has put it, Coleridge's conception of the imagination named "an active process, like an electrical current pulsing between objective and subjective polarities. The mind does not stand passively outside its experience registering and recording, but enters dynamically into what it sees, read or hears." Indeed, the imagination "proclaims the childlike part of the creative sensibility, ever fresh and spontaneous, which both the scientist and the poet must retain. It enacts the emotional energy – the passion of Hope – which accompanies the imaginative impulse."²² If, as Holmes writes elsewhere, all this all draws on the common intellectual currency of European discussion at the turn of the century, and the notion of some form of active-passive dialectic or polarity in the human mind, it also does something that no previous writer had achieved."²³

Interestingly, Emerson annotated his personal copy of *Biographia Literaria* with a list of page references to key terms. In particular, he indicated p. 172,²⁴ which is the page in which Coleridge begins to distinguish between "imagination" proper and mere "fancy," which, by contrast, he proposes

has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definitives. The Fancy is, indeed, no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space, and blended with, and modified by, that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word CHOICE. But, equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.²⁵

In other words, Coleridge offers a brief transcendentalist critique of David Hume's reduction of infinite imagination to finite fancy, which as a "mode of memory" has no self-generating power but merely relies on the passive association of ideas that have arisen from sense impressions but come to fade in their vivacity.²⁶ For Coleridge, Holmes observes, "the passive mind-set of Associationism ... is connected with submission, addiction and death, while 'Imagination,' the active and unifying power, is connected with joy and freedom."²⁷

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22 Holmes 2017, pp. 298-99.

23 Holmes 1999, p. 411.

24 A photograph of Emerson's list appears in Harvey 2013, p. x.

25 Coleridge 1834, pp. 172-73.

26 See especially Hume 2000 on impressions, ideas, and fancy (which Hume treats as synonymous with imagination). For commentary, see Costelloe 2019.

27 Holmes 1999, p. 412.

In *Nature*,²⁸ Emerson's first book, published in 1836, we find ample evidence of Coleridge's influence.²⁹ For example, in the section concerning "Spirit," Emerson notes that

all the uses of nature admit of being summed in one, which yields the activity of man an infinite scope. Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us.³⁰

Five years later, in his essay "The Over-Soul,"³¹ Emerson reiterates this theme of ultimate reality and argues that

we live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.³²

Emerson further distinguishes between appearance and reality, ontological surface and depth, unity underlying diversity:

From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A man is the façade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins, when the individual would be something of himself. All

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28 Emerson 1983, pp. 5-49.

29 For Coleridge's considerable influence on Emerson, see Harvey 2013.

30 Emerson 1983, p. 40.

31 Emerson 1983, pp. 383-400.

32 Emerson 1983, p. 386.

reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey.³³

In order to appreciate Child’s debt to Emerson, it is finally worth noting the latter’s insistence on temporality that underlies human experience:

We are often made to feel that there is another youth and age than that which is measured from the year of our natural birth. Some thoughts always find us young, and keep us so. Such a thought is the love of the universal and eternal beauty. Every man parts from that contemplation with the feeling that it rather belongs to ages than to mortal life. The least activity of the intellectual powers redeems us in a degree from the conditions of time.³⁴

Child’s appeal to the power of the Infinite – which identifies what Coleridge calls the “indestructible” power of the imagination and Emerson the “perpetual effect” of nature – does not reduce the individual to the collective but envisions a common source for both.³⁵ Moreover, Child redirects Emerson’s dialectical method away from a phenomenology of natural landscapes.³⁶ By contrast, in her “vivid book of popular transcendentalism,”³⁷ she deploys a phenomenology of urban landscapes and the interplay of the alienated built environment with more-than-human forces that persist and periodically reassert themselves: not only, most dramatically, the sea, but even “flowers in sheltered nooks and gems in hidden grottoes.”³⁸ Child’s rambles through

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33 Emerson 1983, p. 387.

34 Emerson 1983, p. 388.

35 It is worth dwelling on this matter. In Letter 3, dated September 3, 1841, Child writes: “What a strange thing is the mind! How marvellously is the infinite embodied in the smallest fragment of the finite!” (Child 1998, p. 16). Yet in Letter 10, dated October 21, 1841, she cautions against the view that each of us is but a portion “of a Great Mundane Soul, to which we ultimately return, to be swallowed up in its infinity.” Indeed, she rejects this idea as having a “bewildering and oppressive power” precisely over a mind like hers, which is already prone to “eager questioning of the infinite” (Child 1998, p. 44). Indeed, in Letter 38, dated March 17, 1843, Child insists that “Nature made us *individuals*, as she did the flowers and the pebbles; but we are afraid to be peculiar, and so our society resembles a bag of marbles, or a string of mould candles. Why should we all dress after the same fashion? The frost never paints my windows twice alike” (Child 1998, p. 172).

36 The term “landscape” recurs throughout *Nature* (see Emerson 1983, pp. 9-11, 14-15, 18, 34, 42-43). For her part, Child notes that “I always see much within a landscape – ‘a light and a revealing,’ every where” (Child 1998, p. 16). Moreover, the term “landscape” plays a normative role for Child: as she observes, those who rely on “public opinion for their moral fixed point of view” easily fall into confusion, for public opinion “moves according to the provender before it, and they who trust to it have but a whirling and distorted landscape” (Child 1998, p. 192).

37 Richardson 1995, p. 393. Richardson also notes that Emerson read and admired Child’s book.

38 Child 1998, p. 12. On Emerson’s dialectical method, which was indebted to Coleridge, see Paul 1952, pp. 112-19 and Harvey 2013, pp. 40-53. In reference specifically to the “mounting dialectic” from

the broad streets and back alleys of New York City renew the dialectic of reversal that Emerson had advocated regarding his own walks through the woods and fields of Concord, Massachusetts: “Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it any time these twenty years!”³⁹

Engels in England

In June 1845 a young Engels published *Die Lage der arbeiten Klasse in England* – initially for a German audience – his strategic “mapping”⁴⁰ of the English working class that was the fruit of his two years spent at his father’s textile factory in Manchester and getting to know at first hand not just the plight of industrial workers but also their struggles.⁴¹ As Terrell Carver reminds us, this was a work “written before he began to work intensively with Marx, and indeed the young author may have delayed moving abroad to join his communist contacts until the book was completed.”⁴² Indeed, Engels’s book should be studied for its own distinctive contribution to what was ultimately to become “Marxism.”⁴³

From the start, in this exemplary case of applied philosophy and engaged journalism, Engels declares: “To you I dedicate a work in which I have tried to lay before my German countrymen a faithful picture of your condition, of your sufferings and struggles, of your hopes and prospects.”⁴⁴ It is worth noting that the first mention of Engels’s book in an American periodical was likely an article published in the August 5, 1845 issue of the *New-York Daily Tribune* – a translation by Child’s friend Margaret Fuller of an essay written by Heinrich Börnstein, who was “a former comrade” of Marx and Engels, and provided a “cogent summary of the positions of Europe’s various factions of ‘humanists,’ ‘socialists,’ and ‘communists.’”⁴⁵

the concrete to the abstract that provides the “architectonics” for *Nature*, see Francis 1967; and Gilmore 1985, pp. 18-34.

39 Emerson 1983, p. 34.

40 See Blackledge 2019, pp. 39-48.

41 Engels 1987. On the historical and biographical context for Engels’s relocation to England, see Marcus 2017.

42 Carver 2021, p. 147.

43 Whether Engels contributed as a co-equal to Marx or – especially after Marx’s death – turned an open project into a more or less closed “worldview” is not my concern here. But see Carver 2020 for a good sense of why especially the early Engels deserves to be studied apart not only from the early Marx but also from later developments in both individuals’ theoretical and political evolution.

44 Engels 1987, p. 27.

45 Capper 2007, p. 262. Fuller translated the title of Engels’s book as *On the Situation of the Laboring Class in England* (Börnstein 1845).

After considering the history of the English proletariat and its contemporary working conditions, Engels offers a vivid account of daily life in such major cities as Manchester and London. As he insists from the start,

the condition of the working-class is the real basis and point of departure of all social movements of the present because it is the highest and most unconcealed pinnacle of the social misery existing in our day. ... A knowledge of proletarian conditions is absolutely necessary to be able to provide solid ground for socialist theories, on the one hand, and for judgments about their right to exist, on the other; and to put an end to all sentimental dreams and fancies pro and con. But proletarian conditions exist in their classical form, in their perfection, only in the British Empire, particularly in England proper. Besides, only in England has the necessary material been so completely collected and put on record by official enquiries as is essential for any in the least exhaustive presentation of the subject.⁴⁶

Engels soon poses a decisive political question that animates the rest of the book:

The condition of the working-class is the condition of the vast majority of the English people. The question: What is to become of those destitute millions, who consume today what they earned yesterday; who have created the greatness of England by their inventions and their toil; who become with every passing day more conscious of their might, and demand, with daily increasing urgency, their share of the advantages of society?⁴⁷

An especially compelling part of the book – and at times reminiscent of Child’s letters – is Engels’s “roaming” account of daily life in such “Great Towns” as Manchester and London.

A town, such as London, where a man may wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing. ... After roaming the streets of the capital a day or two, making headway with difficulty through the human turmoil and the endless lines of vehicles, after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realises for

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46 Engels 1987, p. 12.

47 Engels 1987, p. 30.

the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilisation which crowd their city; that a hundred powers which slumbered within them have remained inactive, have been suppressed in order that a few might be developed more fully and multiply through union with those of others. The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And have they not, in the end, to seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme.⁴⁸

Engels, of course, considers the English working class not just in its objective formation but also in the growing subjective desire by a growing number of workers for radical social transformation. Indeed, he discerns

the deep wrath of the whole working-class, from Glasgow to London, against the rich, by whom they are systematically plundered and mercilessly left to their fate, a wrath which before too long a time goes by, a time almost within the power of man to predict, must break out into a revolution in comparison with which the French Revolution, and the year 1794, will prove to have been child's play.⁴⁹

.....
48 Engels 1987, p. 69.

49 Engels 1987, p. 31.

Engels examines thoroughly in his book what he calls the “demoralization” [*Demoralisation*]⁵⁰ of the working class.⁵¹ The poor, he argues, are caught up in a form of “social warfare” [*der soziale Krieg*] waged against them:

Since capital, the direct or indirect control of the means of subsistence and production, is the weapon with which this social warfare is carried on, it is clear that all the disadvantages of such a state must fall upon the poor. For him no man has the slightest concern. Cast into the whirlpool, he must struggle through as well as he can.⁵²

As a result,

the workers [are] cast out and ignored by the class in power, morally as well as physically and mentally. The only provision made for them is the law, which fastens upon them when they become obnoxious to the bourgeoisie. Like the dullest of the brutes, they are treated to but one form of education, the whip, in the shape of force, not convincing but intimidating. There is, therefore, no cause for surprise if the workers, treated as brutes, actually become such; or if they can maintain their consciousness of manhood only by cherishing the most glowing hatred, the most unbroken inward rebellion against the bourgeoisie in power. They are men so long only as they burn with wrath against the reigning class. They become brutes the moment they bend in patience under the yoke, and merely strive to make life endurable while abandoning the effort to break the yoke.⁵³

Not surprisingly, such proletarian misery occurs in such a way that the ruling class can choose to ignore, since

the members of this money aristocracy can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of

.....
50 Engels 1987, pp. 20, 40-41, 71, 127, 129-30, 138, 140, 142, 149, 153, 161, 186, 208, 219, 244, 292. Indeed, Engels characterizes even the English bourgeoisie: “I have never seen a class so deeply demoralized, so incurably debased by selfishness, so corroded within, so incapable of progress, as the English bourgeoisie” (p. 281).

51 I disagree with Blackledge (2019, pp. 40, 43, 45, 48) that Engels regularly falls into mere “moralizing” or “moralism.” On the contrary, moralism proper would replace the need for social analysis and political strategy by substituting more or less empty platitudes about how awful the world is. This is hardly Engels’s *critical normative* approach in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

52 Engels 1987, pp. 37-38.

53 Engels 1987, p. 125.

business without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left. For the thoroughfares leading from the Exchange in all directions out of the city are lined, on both sides, with an almost unbroken series of shops, and are so kept in the hands of the middle and lower bourgeoisie, which, out of self-interest, cares for a decent and cleanly external appearance and can care for it. True, these shops bear some relation to the districts which lie behind them, and are more elegant in the commercial and residential quarters than when they hide grimy working-men's dwellings; but they suffice to conceal from the eyes of the wealthy men and women of strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth.⁵⁴

Under such dire circumstances, lofty moral concepts like freedom are nearly inoperative:

Fine freedom, where the proletarian has no other choice than that of either accepting the conditions which the bourgeoisie offers him, or of starving, of freezing to death, of sleeping naked among the beasts of the forests! A fine "equivalent" valued at pleasure by the bourgeoisie! And if one proletarian is such a fool as to starve rather than agree to the "equitable" propositions of the bourgeoisie, his "natural superiors", another is easily found in his place; there are proletarians enough in the world, and not all so insane as to prefer dying to living.⁵⁵

Indeed one can no longer easily isolate cases of individual murder from the institutional reality of *social* murder:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims

.....
54 Engels 1987, p. 58.

55 Engels 1987, p. 88.

must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.⁵⁶

Engels even describes in harrowing detail environmental aspects of the moral abasement to which the working class has been subjected:

The centralization of population in great cities exercises of itself an unfavourable influence; the atmosphere of London can never be so pure, so rich in oxygen, as the air of the country; two and a half million pairs of lungs, two hundred and fifty thousand fires, crowded upon an area three to four miles square, consume an enormous amount of oxygen, which is replaced with difficulty, because the method of building cities in itself impedes ventilation. ... The manner in which the great multitude of the poor is treated by society today is revolting. They are drawn into the large cities where they breathe a poorer atmosphere than in the country; they are relegated to districts which, by reason of the method of construction, are worse ventilated than any others; they are deprived of all means of cleanliness, of water itself, since pipes are laid only when paid for, and the rivers so polluted that they are useless for such purposes; they are obliged to throw all offal and garbage, all dirty water, often all disgusting drainage and excrement into the streets, being without other means of disposing of them; they are thus compelled to infect the region of their own dwellings. Nor is this enough. All conceivable evils are heaped upon the heads of the poor.⁵⁷

Yet such deplorable conditions *must not* be allowed to continue. As Engels proclaims,

Let the ruling class see to it that these frightful conditions are ameliorated, or let it surrender the administration of the common interests to the labouring-class.⁵⁸

.....
56 Engels 1987, pp. 106-107.

57 Engels 1987, pp. 47-48.

58 Engels 1987, p. 120.

Importantly, the first stage of achieving these “common interests” lies in the emergence of a distinctive movement of the working class through the creation of labor unions. As Hal Draper has stressed, Engels’s *Condition of the Working Class in England* was “the first important attempt” to grasp the significance of trade-unionization

within the framework of a revolutionary socialist standpoint. It was the first influential product of socialist thought that rejected the two prevalent attitudes: the opinion that trade-unionism was useless or harmful to socialism, and the belief that it was all-sufficient for workers’ interests, in short, sectarianism and reformism – in order to assume the *integration* of trade-unionism into the socialist perspective of revolution.⁵⁹

There are, according to Draper,⁶⁰ several reasons for such “integration”: first of all, trade unions have arisen from workers’ desire to assert their basic humanity; secondly, unionization aims at reducing competition among workers and, ultimately, at abolishing competition itself; finally, the labor movement helps to train workers for leadership in the broader class struggle, for which strikes especially serve as “skirmishes” for what Engels calls “the great struggle which cannot be avoided.”⁶¹ In a particularly sharp passage, he targets the incomprehension of those who fail to grasp the primacy of proletarian practice over socialist theory:

It will be asked, “Why, then, do the workers strike ... when the uselessness of such measures is so evident?” Simply because they *must* protest against every reduction, even if dictated by necessity; because they feel bound to proclaim that they, as human beings, shall not be made to bow to social circumstances, but social conditions ought to yield to them as human beings; because silence on their part would be a recognition of these social conditions, an admission of the right of the bourgeoisie to exploit the workers in good times and let them starve in bad ones. Against this the working men must rebel so long as they have not lost all human feeling, and that they protest in this way and no

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59 Draper 1978, pp. 84-85. For an interesting transatlantic comparative study of the engagement of utopian socialist communities like Brook Farm – supported by Child – with the nascent U.S. labor movement, see Guarneri 1994, pp. 292-320, who stresses that “just as labor organizations and Fourierist circles had overlapping memberships, they both opposed the Europeanization of American working conditions. While they sometimes argued over strategy, they shared enough ideas, interests and goals to cooperate in campaigns to consolidate worker resistance” (p. 295).

60 Draper 1978, pp. 90-92.

61 Engels 1987, p. 232.

other, comes of their being practical English people, who express themselves in *action*, and do not, like German theorists, go to sleep as soon as their protest is properly registered and placed *ad acta*, there to sleep as quietly as the protesters themselves.⁶²

But what does the future hold in store? Engels proposes that

the enemies are dividing gradually into two great camps – the bourgeoisie on the one hand, the workers on the other. This war of each against all, of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat, need cause us no surprise, for it is only the logical sequel of the principle involved in free competition. But it may very well surprise us that the bourgeoisie remains so quiet and composed in the face of the rapidly gathering storm-clouds, that it can read all these things daily in the papers without, we will not say indignation at such a social condition, but fear of its consequences, of a universal outburst of that which manifests itself symptomatically from day to day in the form of crime. But then it is the bourgeoisie, and from its standpoint cannot even see the facts, much less perceive their consequences. One thing only is astounding, that class prejudice and preconceived opinions can hold a whole class of human beings in such perfect, I might almost say, such mad blindness. Mean-while, the development of the nation goes its way whether the bourgeoisie has eyes for it or not, and will surprise the property-holding class one day with things not dreamed of in its philosophy.⁶³

In the terms of a prophecy that should be understood not so much as a prediction of the future but as a warning to the present, Engels concludes:

Prophecy is nowhere so easy as in England, where all the component elements of society are clearly defined and sharply separated. The revolution must come; it is already too late to bring about a peaceful solution; but it can be made more gently than that prophesied in the foregoing pages. This depends, however, more upon the development of the proletariat than upon that of the bourgeoisie. In proportion, as the proletariat absorbs socialistic and communistic elements, will the revolution diminish in bloodshed, revenge, and savagery. Communism stands, in principle, above the breach between bourgeoisie and proletariat, recognises only its historic significance for the present, but not its justification for the future: wishes, indeed, to bridge over this chasm, to do away with all class antagonisms.

.....
62 Engels 1987, p. 226. By way of contrast, it is worthwhile to appreciate U.S. utopian socialist ambivalence about the efficacy of strikes. See Guarneri 1994, pp. 294-95.

63 Engels 1987, p. 143.

Hence it recognises as justified, so long as the struggle exists, the exasperation of the proletariat towards its oppressors as a necessity, as the most important lever for a labour movement just beginning; but it goes beyond this exasperation, because Communism is a question of humanity and not of the workers alone. (p. 582)

How are we to read Engels's book from the standpoint of Child's own – and vice versa? Arguably, what is at stake is the possibility – indeed, the *desirability* – of a philosophical-political encounter between Transcendentalism and Marxism. How can and should one approach such an encounter in terms of what Child called “means and ends”?⁶⁴

For a Transcendentalist Marxism

There are at least three sectarian and unfruitful ways for Marxists to engage with the New England Transcendentalist movement:⁶⁵

- Regard the movement as homogeneous;
- Classify it as a largely idealist intellectual movement;
- Dismiss the Transcendentalist conception of the individual as “possessive” or “bourgeois.”

A case in point: the U.S. Marxist cultural critic V.F. Calverton once crudely asserted that Emerson

extended the petty bourgeois philosophy of the frontier to its farthest anarchical extreme, extolling at times attitudes that were as definitely antisocial in their implications of the frontiersmen who early defied every semblance of state, authority, and tradition.⁶⁶

.....
64 “Means and Ends” (reprinted as Appendix 1 below) is the title of an editorial Child published in the December 1, 1842 issue of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Child elaborated on the distinction: “proneness to have faith in man, rather than God, is exemplified in the universal tendency to convert means into an end. Means belong to the finite, and are therefore temporary; the end exists in the infinite, and is eternal” (Child 1842). Child's distinction between means and ends anticipates, in certain respects, Marx's distinction between exchange value and use value. Moreover, her criticism of the religious and political sectarianism that results from a disastrous conversion of means into ends provides the basis for a critical discussion with Marxism, e.g., regarding the tendency that Hal Draper famously called “sectism” (Draper 2019). In the February 16, 1843 issue of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Child turned to the problem of “sects and sectarianism” arising with the abolitionist movement itself, and she proposed that “the only way to cast out the demon of sectarianism, is by the calm promulgation of Truth, not for the purpose of building up any party, or attacking any party” (Child 1843, p.146).

65 On New England Transcendentalism as a distinctive social movement, see Rose 1981; Newman pp. 35-43.

66 Calverton 1932, p. 249.

Indeed, Calverton maintained that even the supposedly “heroic elements” in Emerson’s philosophy “sprang out of his belief in the individual’s power to achieve, to work out his own destiny, notwithstanding the nature of society or environment.”⁶⁷ With a preposterous analogy, Calverton claimed, Emerson reminded him

very much of many of the revolutionaries in czarist Russia, who, when they saw a revolution in reality, became horrified, and who, because they were not prepared for the ruthless tasks of carrying out a revolution to its inevitable conclusion, became the most bitter opponents of the Bolsheviki who put the revolution into actual practice and made it work. It was much easier for Emerson, or let us say, for the Mensheviki, to defend democracy or revolution while they remained concepts, than it was to accept them when they saw them in operation, in the flesh, as it were.⁶⁸

It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry at Calverton’s agitprop dismissal of Emerson and the movement that the latter helped to initiate and to steer – not away from politics but courageously head on into abolitionism, women’s rights, opposition to the 1846-1848 U.S. war on Mexico, advocating for greater socio-economic inequality, and pushing the 1861-1865 Civil War in as egalitarian direction as possible. Such an assessment is equally true of Child, who political militancy is our concern here.⁶⁹ Let us simply note that the best of contemporary scholarship has meticulously sought to reclaim the actual political commitments of New England Transcendentalists. Perhaps they were not “Bolsheviki”; but they were scarcely “Mensheviki,” either!⁷⁰

Indeed, let us isolate a decisive passage in “The Over-Soul,” which by its title alone may appear to be a suitable source for Calverton’s complaint about Emerson as a bourgeois thinker. Yet in this essay Emerson is assuredly *not* advocating bourgeois, possessive, or any other kind of individualism. For example, he insists that

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67 Calverton 1932, p. 247.

68 Calverton 1932, p. 247.

69 See Moland 2022. Calverton ignored – or, more likely, was unaware of – the vital contributions not only of Child but of other figures like Margaret Fuller and the Peabody sisters (Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia). For a “female genealogy” of Transcendentalism, see Argersinger and Cole 2014.

70 On Emerson’s politics, see especially Gougeon 1990. Robert Milder has urged caution regarding the ambiguities of Emerson’s “radicalism,” depending on the phases of his career. Yet Milder emphasizes Emerson’s common ground with Hegel (and Marx) in a defense of “transcendence” as a “leap beyond the actualities of the social moment to a qualitatively different future,” and he adds that “the test of a radical vision is not whether it is historically fulfilled or seems to posterity ever to have been realizable, but whether it had a credible basis in contemporary apprehensions of reality” (Milder 199, p. 55). Arguably, Milder’s analysis of Emerson applies as well to Child. More broadly, on the Transcendentalist movement’s abolitionist impulse and its ethical-political outlook, see Wirzbicki 2021.

I live in society; with persons who answer to thoughts in my own mind, or express a certain obedience to the great instincts to which I live. I see its presence to them. I am certified of a common nature; and these other souls, these separated selves, draw me as nothing else can. They stir in me the new emotions we call passion; of love, hatred, fear, admiration, pity; thence comes conversation, competition, persuasion, cities, and war. Persons are supplementary to the primary teaching of the soul. In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all. Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal. In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God. And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company become aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought, in which every heart beats with nobler sense of power and duty, and thinks and acts with unusual solemnity. All are conscious of attaining to a higher self-possession. It shines for all.⁷¹

Indeed, that light shines as brightly for the least among us:

This energy does not descend into individual life on any other condition than entire possession. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whomsoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur.⁷²

To reiterate Jonathan Steele's words, Child's very target in *Letters from New-York* "is the possessive individualism that believes it can own the self or slaves – pieces of disposable property enclosed within impermeable boundaries."⁷³

Accordingly, a more prudent, and potentially more fruitful, path for Marxists to take in their philosophical-political encounter with Transcendentalism would be the one sketched by David Herreshoff in his underappreciated book, *American Disciples of Marx*, in particular, in his identification of the common philosophical-political ground shared by Emerson and Marx.⁷⁴

.....
71 Emerson 1983, p. 390.

72 Emerson 1983, pp. 396-97.

73 Steele 2014, p. 2017.

74 Herreshoff 1967.

After disposing of an entrenched “frontier thesis” for why significant historical advance in the United States would not be possible until the nation had matured,⁷⁵ Herreshoff reminds us that

there is a strong and broad American radical tradition older than Marxism; subjugated men and women have often raised the cry for justice in the United States. Wishing to break the yoke of a ruling class, the white race, or the male sex, Americans have joined movements aimed at completing the unfinished business of 1776.⁷⁶

In addition, “the socialist and individualist movements of the nineteenth century had common intellectual origins and grew with more or less vigor in Europe and America under the pressure of different national environments.”⁷⁷

According to Herreshoff, both Marx and Emerson “linked technology and human misery,”⁷⁸ decried alienation, and embraced revolutionary change.⁷⁹ There was, he contends, “an optimism in [their] social criticism ... deriving from their shared sense of the transitoriness of the evils they censured.”⁸⁰ Moreover, “although Emerson expected capitalism to last longer than Marx did, there was no basic difference between them about what would replace it”⁸¹ – a type of socialism, notwithstanding the shortcomings of contemporary utopian experiments. Finally,

.....
75 Herreshoff notes that Hegel initially set the terms of this thesis in his conception of America as “the country of the future,” with “its world-historical importance ... yet to be revealed in the ages which lie ahead” (Hegel 1975, p. 170), a position later famously canonized by the U.S. historian Frederic Jackson Turner in his 1893 article “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (reprinted in Faragher 1999, pp. 31-60). According to Hegel, “North America is still at the stage of cultivating new territories. Only when, as in Europe, it has ceased merely to augment its farming population will the inhabitants press in upon each other to create town-based industries and communities instead of moving outwards in search of new land; only then will they set up a compact system of civil society and feel the need for an organic state. A comparison between the free states of North America and the countries of Europe is therefore impossible; for Europe, despite all its emigrations, has no natural outlet for its population such as America possesses: if the ancient forests of Germany still existed, the French Revolution would never have occurred. North America will be comparable to Europe only after the measureless space which this country affords is filled and in civil society begins to press in upon itself.” (p. 170). On Hegel as a source for Turner, see Holt 1948. See West 2023 for a robust alternative to Turner’s formulation that avoids Hegel’s unconvincing distinction between the “conquest” of South America and “colonialization” of North America (Hegel 1975, p. 167).

76 Herreshoff 1967, p. 14.

77 Herreshoff 1967, p.18.

78 Herreshoff 1967, p. 20.

79 Herreshoff 1967, pp. 18-19.

80 Herreshoff 1967, p. 21.

81 Herreshoff 1967, p. 22.

both Emerson and Marx looked forward to a new harmony between man and nature in which the split between city and country would be overcome. This goal, thought Marx, would be approached through a struggle between the classes produced by the industrial revolution, a struggle which would be fought principally in the cities. But Emerson's way to utopia lay in an immediate exodus from the city and transformation of the countryside into a garden.⁸²

Although Herreshoff himself did not do so, one could readily include both Child and Engels in this encounter of nascent Marxist socialism with Transcendentalism.⁸³

* * * *

Just as Steele rightly recovered the affective dimension of Child's book, one should equally emphasize such an approach to Engels's book. Indeed, cultivating moral sentiment is an indispensable part of building an affective – and effective! – movement aimed at radical social transformation. Both Child and Engels beckoned their readers to empathize with the plight of the victims of capitalist urbanization. Both insisted on the possibility of social progress through collective action.⁸⁴ Both condemned the environmental degradation to which workers and the poor were subjected, but Child pointed the way forward to what

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82 Herreshoff 1967, p. 23.

83 It is worth noting that Transcendentalists were already in critical dialogue with – sometimes even living as active participants within – utopian socialist experiments like Brook Farm and Fruitlands. See Guarneri 1994; Francis 1997; and Jackson 2019, pp. 87-122. In particular, "at the transcendentalist community of Brook Farm, Child's friends John Sullivan Dwight and Francis Shaw were exploring utopian socialism as a solution to poverty – an experiment Child followed with keen interest" (Karcher 1994, p. 304). Child visited the community on at least one occasion, as John Thomas Codman later recalled in his memoirs (Codman 1994, p. 80). Child wrote in a letter to Francis Shaw, dated October 12, 1841, that she supposed that Brook Farm would fail as an experiment; "because the *beginnings* of such things always do." But, she continued, "whether it succeeds or not, I think it will do much good, for these plans are unquestionably the nucleus of a great idea, destined to work important social reforms" (Child 1982, p. 150). In reality, then, the question is not whether there can and should be an encounter between Transcendentalism and socialism – there already was in the 1840s! The question is whether or not there can and should be an encounter between Transcendentalism and *Marxist* socialism.

84 See especially the article "Progress and Hope," in which Child argues that those who believe in perpetual progress found their faith mainly on the inward growth and unwritten history of the soul. They see within all events spiritual essence, subtle, expansive, and noiseless as light; and from all roseate gleam resting on the horizon's edge, they predict that the sun will rise to its zenith, and veil the whole earth to transfigured glory" (Child 1844, p. 230). In her conclusion, Child invokes the utopian experiment at Brook Farm, after it had made a turn to Fourierism: "Not in vain did Fourier patiently investigate, for thirty years, the causes of social evils and their remedy. Not in vain are communities starting up all around us, varied in plan, but all born of one idea. Do you say they will never be able to realize their aspirations? Away with your skepticism! I tell you that, if they all die, they will not perish without leaving the seeds of great social truths scattered on the hill sides and in the valleys; and the seed will spring up and wave in a golden harvest" (p. 234).

Lance Newman has called “the Green City.”⁸⁵ Perhaps Engels was more insistent than Child that middle-class interests were “diametrically opposed” to those of the working class – “though they will try to maintain the contrary and to make you believe in their most hearty sympathy with your fates.”⁸⁶ Yet Child grounded finite forms of struggle in an immeasurable ontological dimension that is implicit in Engels’s book but requires proper (re)formulation: “Most fitting symbol of the Infinite, this trackless pathway of a world! heaving and stretching to meet the sky it never reaches – like the eager, unsatisfied aspirations of the human soul.”⁸⁷

That is to say, the Over-soul of class consciousness.

* * * *

Appendix 1: Lydia Maria Child, “Means and Ends” [1842]⁸⁸

Our proneness to have faith in man, rather than God, is exemplified in the universal tendency to convert means into an end. Means belong to the finite, and are therefore temporary; the end exists in the infinite, and is eternal. The mistakes to which I have alluded is remarkably illustrated in the pursuit of riches. Of what avail are riches, except as a means of happiness? Yet, men never stop to enjoy themselves, they are so busy trying to grow rich. A quaint old lady in Massachusetts uttered sound philosophy on this point. Being advised not to stop to gather certain berries, because there was a greater abundance farther in the woods, and moreover, they would certainly come back that way, she replied, “I always make it a rule to take my comfort as I go along in the world;

.....
85 See Newman 2019, pp. 153-87 (including a detailed reading of *Letters from New-York* on pp. 166-79). As Newman puts it, Child proposed that “urban misery is directly caused by the eradication of green space” (p. 173) and “intellectual and emotional health requires denizens of the city to reorient themselves from time to time by making contact with nature where they can” (p. 172). Newman equally stresses the impact of Child’s “Transcendentalist critique of capitalist modernity” on such figures as the poet William Cullen Bryant, who campaigned in New York City for urban green space, and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, who produced the designs for New York City’s Central Park and Boston’s Emerald Necklace. Moreover, “in the following decades, Olmstead and his sons would design hundreds of city parks and college campuses across the United States” (p. 179).

86 Engels 1987, p. 27.

87 Child 1998, p. 10. The leading Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing put it well in a letter to Child that is dated December 21, 1841: “I have been delighted to see in your ‘Letters from New York’ such sure marks of a fresh, living, hopeful spirit; to see that the flow of genial noble feeling has been in no degree checked by the outward discouragements of life. The world’s frowns can do us little harm if they do not blight our spirits, and we are under obligations to all who teach us, not in words, but in life, that there is an inward power which can withstand all the adverse forces of the world” (Child 1883, p. 45).

88 Child 1842. To my knowledge, this is the first time that Child’s editorial has been reprinted.

for maybe it won't be here when I come back." The *use* of money is the only way to enjoy it; and a reproduction of itself is *not* use. The moment this valuable means is made an end, the curse of God rests upon it. The man who lives to accumulate, may talk of large dividends, but the real products of his capital are dyspepsia, ennui, suspicion, anxiety; and in some cases voluntary death from fear of being robbed. Well might angels laugh, if they were not angelic, to see men toiling thus laboriously to raise apples of Sodom.

Use is the order of our being. To live for *others* is the only way to live for *ourselves*. There is no escape from this divine law. All outward things are only means to this end. Nature teaches it in her perpetual tendency to equilibrium. Whatsoever object has light, imparts to the next object, and that to the next. The merest taper cannot burn for one, but sends its tiny rays far into the surrounding gloom. Warmth continually gives itself out, and rises upward, as human love should do.

The same laws that apply to money, apply to intellectual and spiritual wealth. Whosoever would hoard the manna that has fallen from heaven for *daily use*, shall find it to become a mass of corruption. We see the history of this written on sects. Calvinists, Baptists, Quakers, Universalists, etc., handed together to make what seemed to them truths bear on the general cause of Christian principles; but in the process of time, the sect became an *end* instead of a *means*, and the plainest principles of Christian morality were sacrificed, if they came in the way of the growth of the sect. Hence we see men, called "ambassadors of Christ," officiating at the gallows, praying on a drum-head, as chaplains of the army, and defending slavery by the example of Abraham. Why are not the priesthood in advance of public opinion, as a genuine priesthood must ever be? Because it is their appointed business to sustain a *sect*. One is afraid that he shall render the Baptists unpopular; another that he shall diminish public favor toward the Calvinists, and thus not get so much money to build meetinghouses and pay preachers; another is afraid of the same effect on Unitarians. The means have become an end; the finite and temporary is substituted for the infinite and the eternal.

The Friends had a most admirable reason for saying thee and thou. The custom formerly prevailed in the English language as it still does in many European dialects, to use the plural form to a superior, and the singular to an equal. The Friends, with that refined conscientiousness which marked their early history, objected to this practice, as a violation of human equality. W[illiam] Penn said thou to the Duke of York, on pain of being imprisoned in the tower; but it was in defense of a *universal principle*, not a sectarian custom. It was, with him, simply a means to an end. Many of his successors retain the form, without even a knowledge of the principle from which it took its rise; with them the means have become an end. Such would fain hoard up William Penn's manna for their own use; but it will not keep. If they would grow spiritually, they

must derive their growth from food daily received, and daily *used*. The same thing is true of the fashion of their garments. In the beginning they dressed plainly, because they deemed it wrong for one to assume superiority over another in outward things, and that money ought not to be spent on gay attire, in a world of raggedness and starvation. They objected to bright tints, because the coloring of such was injurious to human health. There is a beautiful tenderness in all this; and the form might well become honorable for the spirit of which it was the manifestation. But with many, these means of advancing great principles, have become the end, to which these principles themselves are sacrificed. They will expend more thought, time, and money to procure a particular color, or cut of the garment, than it would cost to forbear the observance.

Political parties are only temporary means to advance the general good; yet how perpetually we see them destroying the very principles for which they were formed, for the sake of sustaining the *party*. Our general government itself, was merely a means to advance human freedom by exemplifying the doctrine of equal rights; but the formation of the government came to be regarded as an end, and human freedom was sacrificed thereto.

Eating and drinking are but means to sustain life, which is to be employed in perpetual use; but they are made the end of existence, to which all power of usefulness and enjoyment are often sacrificed. Another sense, given only as a means to promote domestic happiness through the activity of the affections, is made an end, for which all the affections are blighted, and all domestic happiness sacrificed.

This life itself is but a means to prepare for the life which is eternal. Yet how universally, how lamentably, men regard it as an end. They spend the whole of life in “getting ready to live” — not hereafter, but here. Thus does the finite perpetually shut out the infinite. Would that man could look outward to his heavenly destiny, and not downward to his earthly wants.

Appendix 2: Lydia Maria Child, “What is Beauty?” [1843]⁸⁹

“Then had I all sorts of strange thoughts, which would hardly have agreed with sense. *It was as if the secret of Creation lay on my tongue*; how God, by the power of his voice, had called every thing forth, and how music repeats in each breast this eternal will of LOVE and WISDOM.”

This – *Bettine*

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89 Child 1843. To my knowledge, this is the first time that Child’s essay has been reprinted.

The two creative principles of the universe are LOVE and WISDOM. Their union, and perfect proportion, constitutes BEAUTY.

In common modes of speech, this word is obviously enough, applied to mere *forms* of Love and Truth, in which the perfect proportion is at once felt, rather than seen, and we instinctively name it harmony. But I am now striving to define the abstract and universal *Idea*; and this I believe to be a harmonious proportion of the two great Creative Principles.

From a healthy union of Affection and Thought flows Energy. When we love to do that which we perceive it right to do, we cannot otherwise than embody it in earnest action. This is *moral* beauty.

When truth is perceived through the transparent medium of affection for it, it embodies itself in *intellectual* beauty; and the productions of such states are spontaneously and universally acknowledged as beautiful. Hence, genius ever works with unconsciousness, and is a mystery to itself. The harmony is so complete, that thought does not attempt to analyze affection, or affection to question thought. Being *one*, they are unconscious of each other's presence. The spiritual life then flows in freely, and men call it divine mania, inspiration, intuition, genius.

Beauty of *recitation* is the adaptation of the tone to the word spoken. The word is obviously an embodiment of *thought*, and tone, of *affection*. There is the same subtle union, and mysterious significance, in the *expression* and the *proportions* of a statue.

Musicians say there are three primal notes, without which music cannot be; and there are three primal colors, without a due proportion of which painting wants harmony. Pictures by the old masters show a knowledge of this; or rather an intuition, that transcends knowledge.

An artist once suggested to me that the triple elements of *form* were the Circle, Straight-line and the Undulating. I at once saw that it must be so; because they represent the spiritual tri-une, of Love, and Wisdom, and Beauty. Space evidently relates to Love, and time to Truth; for love is *infinite*, and truth is *eternal*. The circle represents infinity, and the straight line eternity; the combination of both is a succession of curves – the line of *beauty*. This undulating line is, as it were, a map of the spiral; the spiral represented on a horizontal plane. None but the Omniscient can comprehend the full significance of the spiral; for it contains the universe – from the smallest pebble, to the throne of Jehovah. The ancients had glimpses of this, and therefore that line is so often found among the most sacred temples in their temples. Forever revolving and ascending, it combines the circle, the straight line, and the curve. Are not these like the three primal notes and colors, forms of Love, Wisdom, and Beauty, or Affection, Thought, and Energy? This eternal trinity creates and re-produces all things in its own image.

The perfect and constant harmony of Love and Truth constitutes the Divine Mind. The *separation* between them, with the power of occasional union, and glancing revelations, from within and without, of a final, perfect, and eternal marriage, constitutes human nature, with all its marvelous spiritual phenomena. Its hope and its aspirations are but a recognition of the Divine Union by which it was created, and a prophecy of the Divine Harmony toward which it tends.

Wherever the soul catches a glimpse, in *any* form, of a perfect union of Love and Truth, it rejoices in the radiant marriage-vesture, and names it Beauty. In all these forms, the soul sees the face of its Parent. It is reminded of its *home*, and drawn thither. Hence, next to the word "harmony," "a joyous perception of the infinite" is the most common definition of Beauty.

Beauty is *felt*, not seen by the understanding. Mere analysis never attains so high. It can dissect, but it cannot create beauty, or perceive it; because it is thought standing *alone*, and therefore in self-consciousness. A primal note is wanting, and its tune is ever defective. A primal color is gone, and its painting is deficient.

All evil is perverted good, and all falsehood is reversed truth. Therefore, the tri-une mystery, that pervades the universe, is embodied in shapes of evil, as well as of good. Hatred, Falsehood, and Force take an infinite variety of forms, as do Love, Truth, and Energy. If the proportion between falsified truth and perverted affection be harmonious, the product has power to charm. It has been truly said, "There is a sort of beauty in a wicked action, provided it be well done." Much of Byron's intellectual power has this origin. Milton's Devil wears it like a robe of fascination. The same law shows itself in ultimates, in the material world; hence the beauty of the tiger, the leopard, and other destructive animals.

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