

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Patrick W. Carey. *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005. 428 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-4300-5.

Reviewed by David Voelker (Departments of Humanistic Studies and History, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay)
Published on H-SHEAR (February, 2006)

The subtitle of Patrick Carey's much-needed modern biography of Orestes Brownson (1803-1876) refers to the fact that, prior to his 1844 conversion to Roman Catholicism, Brownson sequentially identified himself as a Presbyterian, Universalist, skeptic, Unitarian, and, at least unofficially, Transcendentalist. Brownson's frequent transformations made him an easy target for criticism, of which he reaped his fair share during his lifetime as he made the journey from religious liberal to Roman Catholic and from fervent democrat to constitutional conservative. Fortunately, Carey does not take the "weathervane" analogy too far. He charts Brownson's changing positions (religious, philosophical, and political), but he also manages to identify a unifying theme of Brownson's life: "his attempts to create an intellectual as well as a personal synthesis between the drive for freedom and the need for communion" (p. xvii) and his vision of the "dialectical harmony of all things" (p. xiii). Applying a dialectical model to Brownson's life and thought, Carey persuasively explains Brownson's many changes of mind. Indeed, dialectical harmony emerges here as the interpretive key to understanding Orestes Brownson.

Carey has produced what is by far the best available biography of a public intellectual whom Ralph Waldo Emerson once privately labeled as a "hero [who] wields a sturdy pen" (p. 93). Earlier biographical efforts were often marred by insufficiently critical approaches to both Brownson and the available historical sources. The main exception to this shortcoming was *A Pilgrim's Progress* (1939) by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who was interested primarily in Brownson's democratic politics. Schlesinger rightly claimed that Brownson "belongs to all Americans, not simply to Catholics," but he slighted the significance of Brownson's career as a Catholic. Theodore Maynard's *Orestes Brownson: Yankee, Radical, Catholic* (1943) provided a more comprehensive and contextualized account of Brownson's life; Maynard, however, leaned too heavily on Brownson's 1857 autobiography, *The Convert*, and he presented a "portrait" rather than an argument. Thomas Ryan's *Orestes A. Brownson: A Definitive Biogra-*

phy (1976) was highly detailed, but its strength derived more from its lengthy quotations from Brownson's published works and private letters than from its interpretative insights. In short, no biography prior to Carey's can be considered both critical and comprehensive.[1]

Unlike many Brownson biographers, Carey recognizes that the *Convert* was first and foremost a Catholic apologetic that cannot always be relied upon as a source of biographical detail. He uses the *Convert* sparingly and even points out its probable errors. Carey also avoids the problem of over-sympathizing with his subject. He attempts to understand Brownson's shifts and reversals without defending him, and he does not avoid unsavory aspects of Brownson's personality, including his anti-Protestant bigotry (p. 170) and his "virulent racism" (p. 350). Despite his willingness to criticize Brownson when appropriate, Carey goes a long way to uncover consistency in the shifts that Brownson's contemporaries saw as signs of mental instability.

Throughout the book, Carey develops the thesis that we can best understand Brownson's intellectual and religious trajectory if we recognize the dialectic process at the heart of his vision of the organic harmony of the universe. Brownson found various ways of making the argument for organic harmony at different points in his career, and ultimately his search for this harmony led him to Roman Catholicism. Brownson perhaps best explained this concept in his 1863 essay "Orthodoxy and Unitarianism": "By the divine creative act, all the parts of the universe are made one dialectic whole, in which all the parts are really connected with the whole, and with one another" (p. 239). As early as his 1836 *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church*, Brownson called for "a new synthesis of spirit and matter" (p. 64). Four years later, in his infamous essay on "The Laboring Classes," he called for a synthesis of religion and politics: "Our views, if carried out, would realize not a union, but the unity, the identity of Church and State. They would indeed destroy the Church as a *separate* body, as a distinct organization;

but they would do it by transferring to the State the moral ideas on which the Church was professedly founded, and which it has failed to realize.”[2] In 1842, he pushed his dialectical philosophy to a new level through his adaptation of Pierre Leroux’s “doctrine of communion.” In *The Mediatorial Life of Jesus*, he used Leroux’s doctrine to argue that Jesus, acting as “a mediator between God and Men.... saves the world by communicating to it his life.”[3] Eventually, for Brownson, the Roman Catholic Church became the crucial mediator and channel of God’s grace to humanity; he believed that the Catholic tradition allowed him to discover the dialectic harmony between freedom and authority, reason and faith, religion and politics, and natural and supernatural. Carey makes the insightful point that Brownson often seemed inconsistent in part because he drew on a “dialectical storehouse” that could provide him with conservative or liberal ideas as the situation required (p. 241). Brownson’s faith in “dialectic harmony,” Carey shows, also drove his post-1844 battles against the modern “movement to separate religion from revelation, philosophy from theology, science from its ultimate spiritual foundation, and politics from religious principle”—a movement that Brownson identified as atheistic (p. 288). Brownson thus rejected “the fundamental dualism of modern culture” (p. xvii).

The book briefly covers Brownson’s early years, from his birth through his excommunication by the Universalists in 1830. Born in Stockbridge, Vermont, in 1803, Brownson lost his father when he was about two years old; several years later, he was separated from his family when his mother sent him to live with an elderly couple in a neighboring town. The young Orestes was exposed to various Christian denominations as a boy, but he had no regular religious education. When he was about fourteen, he rejoined his family, which moved to Ballston Spa in upstate New York. By that time, he had attended revivals and experienced a conversion, but he had also dabbled in Universalism and adolescent skepticism. Only when he was nineteen was he baptized, as a Presbyterian, but he did not cleave to Calvinism for long. He soon returned to the Universalist beliefs that he had imbibed from his mother, aunt, and various books. In 1825, at the age of 22, Brownson undertook a relatively brief apprenticeship in Vermont to become a Universalist minister. Ordained in the summer of 1826, Brownson moved around frequently, following the preaching work; just as importantly, he served as an editor of the Universalist newspaper, *The Gospel Advocate*. In that capacity, Brownson wrote a variety of articles that attacked both Calvinist theology and the unruly emotionalism of evangelical revivals. Over the next few years, Brown-

son became an increasingly critical reader of the Bible, and he began associating with the radical free thinkers Robert Dale Owen and Fanny Wright. Neither of these trajectories endeared Brownson to his Universalist readers and followers. After being dismissed from his editorship, Brownson renounced Universalism and briefly struck up a closer relationship with the free thinkers. He would soon revive his preaching career, however, this time under the rubric of Unitarianism, and by 1836 he had gravitated to Boston, the de facto capital of Unitarianism.

It was as a Unitarian, under the influence of William Ellery Channing and a variety of French post-Kantian thinkers, that Brownson came into his own as a religious and political thinker. Carey very skillfully sorts out the most important influences on Brownson during the late 1830s. In short: “From Channing he learned the importance of the divinity of humanity and the human capacity to discover the depths of the divine within one’s soul. From [Henri Benjamin] Constant he learned that the religious sentiment was a natural and therefore universal and permanent element of humanity that manifested itself historically in a variety of variable and transitory human forms and institutions. From [Victor] Cousin he learned that philosophy itself was ultimately based on a spiritual reality that transcended but informed human reason in its quest for truth” (pp. 38-39). Drawing on these materials, but always reworking them for his own purposes, Brownson found himself aligning with Boston Transcendentalism, a movement that began as a romantic rebellion against Unitarian “supernatural rationalism.” But his interests as a writer went well beyond theology. In 1838 Brownson founded the *Boston Quarterly Review*, a journal of politics, religion, and literature that he wrote almost single-handedly (a subsequent version was more honestly titled *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*). The circulation of the *Review* easily surpassed that of the Transcendentalist *Dial*, and it became Brownson’s foremost means of self-expression.

When Brownson flirted with Transcendental idealism in the late 1830s, he did so in order to combat what he saw as the conservative Unitarian over-reliance on the allegedly objective evidences of Christianity—namely, the miracles of Jesus that proved the truth of his message. But unlike the more radical Transcendentalists (including Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Bronson Alcott), Brownson did not verge on reducing religion to a completely subjective phenomenon. In fact, Carey helpfully argues, Brownson’s brand of idealism tended toward the objective rather than the subjective: “Brownson had emphasized the divinity within humanity and asserted that one

could know that divinity intuitively or by an immediate grasp. But, following Cousin's philosophy, Brownson believed that the divine light within was impersonal and spontaneous, not personal (that is, under the control of the human will) and subjective. It came to all human beings, but as an objective revelation, not as an inherent part of the human condition" (p. 71). Brownson's objective idealism eventually caused him to separate himself from his Transcendentalist friends and colleagues; the process of doing so gradually led him to the Roman Catholic Church over the course of the early 1840s.

Carey provides an especially insightful analysis of Brownson's thought as he stood on the cusp of conversion to Catholicism. He identifies three experiences as being crucial to setting the stage for Brownson's final conversion: his realization of his own spiritual trajectory, which occurred as he listened to Theodore Parker's lectures on "absolute religion" during the winter of 1841-42; a conversion experience that convinced him of what he eventually labeled the "freedom of God"; and his study of Pierre Leroux's doctrine of "life by communion" (pp. 100-101). Listening to Parker awoke Brownson to what he later called the "invincible repugnance" of the "religion of humanity," of the naturalistic, humanistic philosophy that he had recently confused with true religion (p. 100). At about the same time as Parker's lectures, Brownson became impressed with God's absolute freedom and sovereignty. Carey, who draws more attention to this "conversion experience" than have other biographers, makes a convincing argument that this new conception of God provided a foundation for Brownson's renewed belief in divine providence—clearly a critical prerequisite for his forthcoming conversion to Rome. Carey also emphasizes that Brownson's new openness to providence developed independently of his reading of Leroux. In fact, Carey refers to the conversion as "an immediate insight or revelation" rather than as a scholarly discovery (p. 103).

Continuing his analysis of Brownson's transitional period of the early 1840s, Carey shows how Brownson "creatively appropriated" (p. 105) from the ideas of the French, ex-Saint-Simonian socialist Leroux. Leroux fashioned a "religious socialism" that was rooted in his "doctrine of communion" (p. 107). Carey summarizes the basic idea that Brownson borrowed from Leroux as follows: "Human beings could not grow or progress without receiving some higher life from outside the self and outside the human race.... Human beings had life because of their communion with God, with nature, and with other human beings" (pp. 114-115). According to Leroux, much of human progress could be explained through the in-

fluence of "providential men," who had special gifts that they shared with humanity (p. 115). Although Brownson rejected Leroux's post-church ethos, he seized upon the idea that human progress occurred through communion. Indeed, because of his newfound conviction of the reality of original sin, Brownson denied that humanity could lift itself up by its own bootstraps. The doctrine of communion, Carey elegantly shows, allowed Brownson to leave behind the "subjective idealism" of Emerson and Parker and to pursue instead "his own incarnational supernaturalism" (p. 116). Brownson's acceptance of communion, resting upon his new providentialism, paved the way for his insistence that humanity needed the church in order to be saved.

Carey's argument regarding the importance of Brownson's 1842 conversion experience is persuasive, but his analysis of Brownson's thought in the early 1840s neglects to provide a compelling answer to a crucial question: what happened to Brownson's earlier optimism about human nature and the potential for human progress? Carey is right to emphasize the positive shift in Brownson's conception of God, but something must have destroyed Brownson's optimism and thus paved the way for his shift toward reliance on providence. After all, as late as 1836 Brownson was a bright-eyed reformer with utopian ambitions. Brownson himself often cited his utter disillusionment with electoral democracy as the material factor in his declining confidence about human potential. Carey correctly argues that Brownson had long denied the notion that the voice of the people was the voice of God in favor of Bancroft's definition of democracy as "eternal justice ruling through the people" (p. 81). But this discussion of Brownson's views on popular sovereignty does not quite capture the apparently affective shift in his views on human nature. In his 1842 *Mediatorial Life of Jesus*, Brownson argued for the reality of "human depravity" and "original sin." This shift needs explaining. The best explanation is that Brownson's political experiences (especially the defeat of the Democrats in the presidential election of 1840) led him to change his assessment of human nature. Brownson struggled throughout his life to "unite religion and politics on the level of principles," although not institutionally (p. 123). Furthermore, he was more directly involved in politics than most public intellectuals of the time. (Prior to his Catholic conversion, Brownson took an active role in both workingmen and Democratic politics. In 1862, he campaigned actively in New Jersey in a failed bid for a seat as a Republican in the U.S. House of Representatives. And in 1865 he published the *American Republic*, which Carey aptly labels a "Catholic disserta-

tion on government,” p. 338.) Carey rightly argues that Brownson was “first of all a religious thinker.” In explaining Brownson’s shift regarding human nature, however, Carey might have had more interpretative success if he had briefly privileged politics over religion.

Carey might also have gone further to explain why Brownson’s post-1840 wandering led him to Catholicism rather than to yet another Protestant alternative. Brownson wrote his way through his conversion, and an 1843 series of articles in the Unitarian *Christian World* most clearly revealed his trajectory toward Rome. Carey very nicely details the responses of Brownson’s contemporaries to these articles, but he does not delve as deeply as he might have into the articles’ content. Carey shows how the concept of a universal church became increasingly central to Brownson’s thinking and points out that Brownson was becoming quite concerned about the matter of his own salvation by 1844, but he falls short of explaining why Brownson took the radical step of embracing Catholicism. This matter needs more attention—within the nuanced context laid out by Carey—especially because Brownson had virtually no contact with actual Roman Catholics prior to his conversion. Perhaps it makes the most sense to label Brownson’s 1842 perception of God’s freedom as his most significant conversion, with his joining the Catholic Church as a logical outcome. Even so, that logic could use a more sustained analysis.

Following his move to the Catholic Church, Brownson fell under the influence of Bishop John Fitzpatrick (who took responsibility for instructing the convert in Catholic doctrine), and he temporarily relinquished the doctrine of communion that had led him to the church. Carey shows how Brownson shifted to an apologetic that he called the “method of authority” and that Carey labels as a “post-Cartesian neo-scholastic apologetic,” targeted at demonstrating “the visible, authoritative, infallible and indefectible church as the condition of faith” (p. 165). To state the matter somewhat less abstractly, Brownson argued that neither reason nor the Bible alone could provide an adequate public support for Christian faith. Although he did not deny the personal relevance of “private illumination” (p. 166), he maintained that “the only infallible public witness and authentic interpreter of the revelation in Christ was the apostolic ministry” (p. 167). The legitimacy of the apostolic church, in turn, was supported historically by the Bible and Christ’s miracles. As Carey points out, this apologetic based on historical evidence and miracles marked a turning away from Brownson’s Transcendentalist approach of the late 1830s. Although Brownson returned to and refurbished his objective idealism during the 1850s under the influence of the writings

of Vincenzo Gioberti, for most of his career as a Catholic he took an uncompromising stand against Protestantism, rather than attempting to gain converts for Catholicism.

Despite his failing health, Brownson wrote through his final years, the decade after the Civil War. Carey makes it clear that Brownson continued to play an important journalistic role for American Catholics, publishing pieces in the *Catholic World*, the *Tablet*, *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. During this period, Brownson chafed under the supervision of his editors at the *Catholic World*, Augustine Hewit and Brownson’s old friend Isaac Hecker. He fundamentally disagreed with what he saw as their tendency to overemphasize the compatibility of Catholicism and modern American culture. Rejecting latitudinarianism, Brownson held to a hard line. He continued to assert an uncompromising version of the doctrine of “extra ecclesiam nulla salus”—no salvation outside of the church—an unpopular view among many American Catholics. Brownson also participated in the controversy over the First Vatican Council (1869-70). Carey’s extensive treatment of the reactions to the Council’s promulgation of papal infallibility shows how controversial the decision was among American Catholic leaders and that it played into the hands of American critics of the church. Not surprisingly, Brownson supported the doctrine of infallibility while painstakingly explaining just how it should be understood. Additionally, the central project that Brownson took up at the end of his life was that of combating naturalism and certain forms of liberalism. Carey deftly points out, however, that Brownson did not completely reject liberty; as Carey’s thesis suggests, Brownson sought a harmony between liberty and authority, supporting “liberty of conscience, religious liberty in the state, and the freedom of theology, philosophy, and science” while rejecting radical individualism and atheism in politics, education, and science (p. 334).

The book’s final full chapter concludes on a negative note, criticizing Brownson for his failure to see that he might have worked with American Protestants “in demonstrating a fundamental need for religion and Christianity.” Instead of seeing Protestants as fellow Christians and potential allies, Brownson targeted them with a “harsh and unjustifiable rhetoric” (p. 379). While Carey accurately depicts Brownson’s anti-Protestant tirades, he might have devoted more space to analyzing their content. It is true that all but the least ecumenical of today’s Christians would reject Brownson-styled bigotry, and it is also true that Brownson offended and alienated potential allies with his uncompromising

advocacy of Catholicism. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that Brownson's lack of ecumenical spirit did not flow from mere bullheadedness or from an impulse to be "more Catholic than the pope." Brownson's emphatic rejection of Protestantism derived from his understanding of the naturalist threat to religion in America. He had observed and experienced Protestant individualism in many of its forms, and he developed an extensive argument that explained how Protestantism was tantamount to infidelity.[4] His friend Isaac Hecker tried to lure Protestants into the Church by revealing the alleged weaknesses of Protestantism, but Brownson could hardly unite with what he perceived to be infidelity in order to combat it. This subject bears further excavation.

Patrick Carey has done more to advance the study of Orestes Brownson than anyone since Henry Brownson, a dutiful son who published a twenty-volume collection of his father's writings, along with a three-volume biography. Carey's biography provides us with an unparalleled consideration of Brownson's thought, carefully situated within the relevant American, French, and Catholic contexts. Americanists should be especially grateful for Carey's expert discussions of the writings of the French intellectuals who influenced Brownson. Furthermore, Carey's dialectical model gives us the best available explanation of Brownson's many intellectual shifts. Carey concludes by identifying what he sees as Brownson's main contribution to American thought: "He did not completely abandon the Transcendentalist tradition when he became a Catholic; in fact, he revived it and reshaped it in conjunction with Catholic ontology and traditionalism" (p. 388). But Brownson's historical significance goes beyond his distinctive theology. Carey's book, by so excellently evoking Brownson's intellectual context, will help other scholars address some outstanding issues: how was Brownson able to survive as one of the nation's early public intellectuals? How and why did this seemingly fickle man appeal to enough

of his contemporaries to support himself and his family off of voluntary contributions? How should Brownson's organic vision be understood within the larger context of American religion, politics, and culture? The fact that Carey himself has so assiduously worked to publish *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson* in six volumes to date (with one more volume forthcoming) suggests that he believes there are additional questions to be answered about Brownson and his significance.[5] Carey's publications will greatly advance this project.

Notes

The author would like to thank Ruth E. Homrighaus and Brian D. Steele for their assistance in preparing this review.

[1]. Other notable book-length treatments of Brownson include Doran Whalen [Sister Mary Rose Gertrude Whalen], *Granite for God's House: The Life of Orestes Augustus Brownson* (New York, 1941) and Per Sveino, *Orestes A. Brownson's Road to Catholicism* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970).

[2]. Brownson, *The Laboring Classes (1840) with Brownson's Defence of the Article on the Laboring Classes*, introduction by Martin K. Doudna (Delmar: Scholar's Facsimiles & Reprints, 1978), p. 19.

[3]. Brownson, "The Mediatorial Life of Jesus," in *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, vol. 4, ed. Henry F. Brownson (Detroit, 1882-1906), p. 161.

[4]. For examples of Brownson's anti-Protestant polemic, see "The Church Against No Church" (1845) in *Works*, vol. 5; and *The Spirit Rapper* (1854) in *Works* vol. 9. See also David J. Voelker, "Orestes Brownson and the Search for Authority in Democratic America" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of North Carolina, 2003), pp. 217 ff.

[5]. Patrick W. Carey, ed., *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, 6 vols. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000-2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: David Voelker. Review of Carey, Patrick W., *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11395>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.