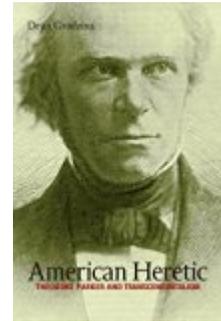


Dean Grodzins. *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiii + 631 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2710-9.

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With Heretics Like These, Who Needs Saints?

Dean Grodzins has written what is without doubt the definitive treatment of the early life of Theodore Parker. This is no mean feat as Parker was an exceptional individual, who contributed in vital ways to nineteenth-century New England and American culture. As the title of the book under review suggests, Parker joined with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and others to play a key role in the development of Transcendentalism. He also contributed to New England religious culture as well as participated in abolitionism, temperance, and other reform activities.

Born in Lexington, Massachusetts in 1810, Parker grew up in a family of farmers and mechanics whose chief claim to fame was John Parker, the captain of the local militia at the Battle of Lexington in 1775. Theodore, John's grandson, was something of a prodigy, beginning his formal schooling at the age of six. Parker later recalled that from an early age he had been stung by ambition—"smarter than those around him and he knew it," Grodzins observes (p. 21). At Harvard Parker crammed three years of study into a single year, although finances prevented him from earning his AB. Initially planning on a law career, he ultimately turned to ministry, attending Harvard Divinity School. Apparently destined for great things within the Unitarian faith of eastern Massachusetts, Parker began his career modestly, assuming the pastorate of the rather small parish of West Roxbury. A moderate in both social and theological views, Parker might well have bided his time until a better offer presented itself. But such was not to be, as

Parker entered the time of his life he called his "period of disappointment": a trying marriage, theological disputation, and ultimately virtual ostracism by his Unitarian brethren.

Born into a nondescript Lexington farming family, Parker was determined to move up in the world. His driving ambition included a determination to marry well—to fall for the right woman, one that provided security and instant status. And, of course, he did just that. Lydia Dodge Cabot may have been the love of Parker's life, but their marriage was hardly blissful. How could it be? They resided with Lydia's Aunt Lucy, in her house, in fact; they lived beyond Parker's modest income as pastor of Spring Street Church in West Roxbury; they spent precious little time alone; and, Grodzins suggests, engaged in marital relations only infrequently. They remained childless. Theodore routinely butted heads with Aunt Lucy, while Lydia constantly found herself betwixt and between two powerfully opposing forces. The tug-of-war between the Cabots on the one hand and the husband on the other was never a fair fight. Perhaps the Cabots spoke with more than just the Lowells, as the famous saying went, but they most certainly spoke not with the Parkers. Relations turned so sour in the marriage that Parker could write, in Greek script, as Grodzins has deftly deciphered, "Go where I may, this fact stares me in the face [My wife is a] DEVIL. I. HAVE. NO. HOPE. In. LIFE" (after p. 294).

In the late 1830s and into the 1840s, Parker under-

took many of the activities for which he is renowned. He established himself as one of the Transcendentalists, contributing to the *Dial*, and for a time editing the *Massachusetts Historical Review*. He attended the 1840 Chardon Street convention, after which he became deeply involved in numerous reform movements. The following year he delivered the first of what were to become smashingly successful lecture series. The Boston Association of Unitarian ministers graciously condemned these first lectures, entitled "Religion," even before he delivered a single one. In the same year Parker delivered and published his famous sermon "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity." By this time Parker, now thirty years old, had established himself as the most prominent Unitarian critic of Unitarianism. Many of his colleagues surely would have concurred with Grodzins's assessment that Parker was a heretic. Parker's famed activities in relation to fugitive slaves and antislavery are conspicuously absent; being the first of two volumes, the narrative breaks off in the middle of the 1840s before Parker's abolitionist career began to take off.

American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism is based on the author's 1993 dissertation, and includes a wealth of additional material from work done in the succeeding decade. It also reflects the mind of a mature scholar, who has presented, discussed, evaluated, and published on Parker over several years. For those of us who know the author, this volume turns out to have been worth the wait. Not only is *American Heretic* an important accomplishment on its own, it easily supercedes everything else written on Parker, period. The nineteenth-century works are far out of date; Henry Steele Commager's *Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader* (1936) is a weak book, and the more recent efforts just do not measure up. This is the definitive treatment.

That having been stated, not everyone will necessarily agree with Grodzins's interpretations, particularly about the place of religious disputation in Transcendentalism. Was Transcendentalism, in Perry Miller's phrase from a half century ago, "a religious demonstration?" Is the religious aspect what most interests scholars today? And just how heretical was Parker? With heretics like these, it is tempting to think, who needs conservatives! More on these questions shortly.

American Heretic breaks new ground in myriad ways. Anyone who thinks they understood Parker heretofore will profit immeasurably from reading and studying this book, as new material informs every page. Grodzins as the meticulous scholar is in evidence throughout.

Four examples will suffice. First, Grodzins deciphered Parker's script and managed to "translate" his subject's journals in their entirety. Next, the author identified and utilized "many anonymous published writings by Parker that have never before been attributed to him" (p. 499). The third and fourth, illustrations relate to Parker's manuscripts, and reveal investigative skills worthy of CSI. Hyperbole aside, Grodzins's keen eye picked up the fact that some of Parker's usage of Greek in his journals proved to be transliteration of English, undertaken apparently to mislead his wife. "On closer inspection," as the author notes, "the Greek passage turns out to be in English but written in Greek characters as a kind of code." Finally, with the help of modern technology and know-how, Grodzins managed to recover writing that Parker had, or thought he had, erased from his journals. So ingenious are these efforts, that the author has reproduced some of his investigative efforts in the book itself. On the basis of such tenacious researching, and the resulting mountain of information is *American Heretic* constructed.

As colleagues and comrades of the author might have surmised, *American Heretic* is a very sympathetic biography. Upon completion of his study of Charles Francis Adams, Martin Duberman noted that biographers ultimately must decide whether their subject tends toward the heroic or the craven, that being the nature of biographical study. After devoting his entire academic career to date to the examination of Theodore Parker, Dean Grodzins has chosen the former. Parker emerges less as a heretic than a hero, his heresies salutary and laudable, and the man himself courageous and well intentioned. Grodzins renders Parker's actions heroic and his religious ideas an important challenge to what Emerson called a "corpse-cold" Unitarian faith.

This is not to say that Grodzins is not critical of his subject. Good scholarship must be critical, and this is scholarship of the first order. Evident are Parker's many weaknesses, foibles, and blemishes. Most notable of these are Parker's prickly sensitivity and, at times, his overblown sense of self-importance. Selflessness is a rare commodity among major intellectual figures to be sure, but some disguise their driving ambition better than others. Emerson, for example, managed to make it appear that fame sought him out. Parker, to the contrary, did the seeking.

This is a biography that takes its subject on its own terms. A glance at the table of contents declares as much. There are ten chapters, the title of each is a direct Parker quotation—to wit: "I Preach Abundant Heresies," "Shut

in for My Own Good,” “The Ashes of My Success.” The words “I,” “Me” or “My” feature in seven of the ten chapter titles. Not that Grodzins is not critical, for he surely is. But this is a sympathetic project “of recovery.”

Grodzins reminds the reader that although Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and other leading Transcendentalists have been much studied, Parker’s life remains “a great hole in our knowledge of the past” (p. xi). The author goes on to suggest rather astutely why university researchers have ignored Parker. “Parker has been neglected lately, I suspect, because he held a view of the world that many today find alien.” “Passionately religious,” the brilliant Parker devoted his professional career and incomparable smarts to the study of God as well as to theological debates that are of little interest in current academic circles. Grodzins concludes, “this perspective had been almost completely lost among contemporary intellectuals.” While the author here emphasizes why there is such a gaping hole to be filled, he also signals the reader about a deeper ambition. To my mind—and this is personal conjecture here—Parker almost leaps from the pages of *American Heretic*, across a century and a half to offer early twenty-first century souls a theology for our times. Grodzins’s Parker seems to be a model of hope for humoculuses like us living in a secularized distopia. Parker’s theologically liberal brand of Christianity is not only worthy of close study, the author seems to suggest; it begs for retrieval. “It is something else I want to recover.”

On the basis of this passionate desire to recover the “Parker Way,” Grodzins seems to have made two decisive, overlapping choices. One is thematic and the other is editorial, and both go against current trends. The thematic choice relates to religion. For Grodzins, Parker’s primary importance rests in his religious beliefs and his actions based on those beliefs. Following Perry Miller, Grodzins sees Parker (with Emerson) as perhaps Transcendentalism’s key player precisely because religion was at the heart of the movement. The overwhelming emphasis, then, in the more than six hundred pages of his book, is on Parker’s religious and his ministerial career. If we are to understand Transcendentalism and Parker’s principal place within it, then it is necessary to grasp the religious issues at its heart. This includes close examination of Congregational Unitarian beliefs, the advent of German higher criticism of the Bible, German idealism after Kant (though remarkably, as Grodzins notes, Parker “had comparatively little direct contact with the writings of the major German philosophers” [p. 135]), as well as the doctrinal disputes among the Unitarian brethren. For

Grodzins, Parker’s religious commitments are the very marrow of his biography.

Placing religion at the heart of the study of Transcendentalism, at least to make the case for Parker’s recovery on theological grounds, runs counter to current historiographical trends. Take for example the two leading anthologies of Transcendentalism of their respective generations. Perry Miller’s *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (1950), the standard collection for decades, relegates literary and philosophical issues to the background, as ancillaries to religion. As for reform and antislavery, they are all but irrelevant. Contrast this with Joel Myerson’s outstanding new compendium, where religious issues represent just one part of a much larger whole.[1] Transcendentalism was less about “religious demonstration” than about reforming new social thought. To his credit Grodzins understands completely the current trends and consciously eschewed them.

Placing religious issues at the heart of Transcendentalism thereby makes Parker into a heretic. Grodzins finds in Parker’s intramural theological, intellectual, and personal disputes within Unitarianism a profound religious challenge to the status quo. Parker becomes, as the book title pronounces, an American heretic. How wrong, then, Emerson was when, in a letter to Carlyle in 1838, he described the furor over his Divinity School Address as nothing more than a storm in a teacup. To the contrary, Parker, who attended the Address and cherished Emerson’s declaration, believed the religious issues to be of the greatest moment. As Emerson retreated from the debate and essentially quit the ministry in favor of the secular lecture and lyceum, Parker stayed on. He could not turn away from the battle to rescue liberal theology from the clutches of orthodox stalwarts who would destroy it. Parker held fast to the ministry, preaching to the Unitarian faithful precisely because, to twist a phrase of Nietzsche, he held that to commit heresy was sacred.

Grodzins’s determination to recover the religious aspects of Parker’s life in all its forms necessitated splitting his study of Parker into two volumes. No doubt his publishers were against the move, and it is entirely possible that readers would have had to wait even more years for the larger, single volume. In these times of bottom lines and shrinking book budgets, the pressure on the author to put out a single volume biography must have been relentless. And Parker lived a fairly short life, dying in 1860 in his fiftieth year. With the publicity from several well-deserved prizes, a one-volume study would have sold briskly to boot.

From the critic's perspective, the question is not one of lucre or book sales, of course, but of interpretation. *American Heretic* ends in the mid-1840s, before Parker engaged in the antislavery activities that made him so attractive to historians. Grodzins's final paragraph, foreshadowing the next installment, quotes Parker declaring, "A Long long warfare opens before me" (p. 498). Scholars may well wonder if this "warfare" does not represent the heart of Parker's life; if it is not Parker's connection to the fight to abolish slavery, far more than the theological disputes, which validates Grodzins's determination to recover Parker from his comparative obscurity. Only in the next volume are we to witness the pocket revolution, as Theodore von Frank suggests, of the fugitive slave fight and the great abolitionist activities of the 1850s in which Parker played such an important part. We

also must await Parker's association with John Brown as a member of the Secret Six. Parker the religious heretic comes first, the Yankee crusader to abolish chattel slavery second.

Dean Grodzins's fifteen-year immersion into the life of Theodore Parker has paid dividends. *American Heretic* not only ranks as the best biography of Parker, but also is on par with other leading biographies of Transcendentalists published in recent years. For its sheer scale, depth of research, level of clarity, and more, it stands as quite an achievement.

Note

[1]. Joel Myerson, ed., *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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