



Reason for a Renaissance:  
The Rhetoric of Reformation and Rebirth  
in the Age of Transcendentalism

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It was the day of the “Renaissance” of New England.  
—“The American Unitarian Pulpit,”  
*Christian Examiner*, July 1865

ONE of American literary history’s fundamental truisms is that the body of written work produced in New England between the 1830s and the 1860s constituted a renaissance. The authors who created that literature used the term and its cognates to refer to their cultural milieu, and since that time scholars have followed their lead. In no decade since the Transcendental Club first met in 1836 has the concept been absent from informed discussions of the period. The term’s long bloodline notwithstanding, however, many, perhaps most, critics today believe that F. O. Matthiessen coined the idiom *American renaissance* in his highly influential volume *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). Sacvan Bercovitch, for example, claims that scholars “owe the idea of an American Renaissance to F. O. Matthiessen.” Matthiessen’s book, Bercovitch continues, “reset the terms for the study of American literary history.”<sup>1</sup>

The latter half of Bercovitch’s statement is quite accurate. Matthiessen did “reset” the term *renaissance*, a vital designation for a crucial period in our national literature. Perhaps without

<sup>1</sup>Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 631.

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knowing that he was doing so, Matthiessen adopted the transcendentalists' term, but in the process he redefined it, distorting its original meaning. In 1958 Harry Levin revealed that it was he who had proposed the title, suggesting it to Matthiessen after his publisher demanded something "more descriptively categorical" than *Man in the Open Air*, the working title Matthiessen had gleaned from Whitman.<sup>2</sup> Matthiessen's new title met some resistance as well, but he defended it in a letter to his publisher, promising to add "a few additional sentences in the preface" to clarify his intentions.<sup>3</sup> He made good on his promise. "The starting point for this book," he wrote,

was my realization of how great a number of our past masterpieces were produced in one extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression. It may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a *re-birth*; but that was how the writers themselves judged it. Not as a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America's way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture.<sup>4</sup>

In failing to explore the ways in which the writers of 1830–60 considered their era a renaissance, however, Matthiessen not only fostered the impression that he had coined the term, but he propagated his particular version of it as well. To return the idiom to its original, self-referential historical moment, one must engage in what historian Reinhart Koselleck calls *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history, which he defines as "a specialized method for source criticism . . . directing itself in particular to the analysis of central expressions having social or political content."<sup>5</sup> That engagement is no trivial academic exercise; rather, it is akin to the restorer's art of stripping away

<sup>2</sup>Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in George Abbott White, "Ideology and Literature: American Renaissance and F. O. Matthiessen," *TriQuarterly* 22–24 (1972): 497.

<sup>4</sup>F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. vii.

<sup>5</sup>Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 81.

accumulated layers of varnish to reveal the brilliance and uniqueness of an old master's painting. To retrieve the cultural significance of the American literary renaissance in its own time, we must likewise penetrate the clouds of meaning that have gathered between that period and our own.

*They "Reset the Terms": Misconceiving the American Renaissance in the Twentieth Century*

It is, one hopes, safe to assume that the transcendentalists' reasons for adopting the term *renaissance* are more important, more intellectually compelling, than the critical agendas of those who have promulgated the term since Matthiessen's redefinition of it. Still, there is some merit in appreciating that Matthiessen does not bear full responsibility for our current distortion of the concept.<sup>6</sup> Those before him, although more nearly matching the transcendentalists' sense of the term, had already begun to warp it by adding or subtracting meanings that reflected the concerns of their own generation. Charlene Avallone, for example, suggests ways in which, years before Matthiessen, Samuel Osgood, Charles Richardson, and Barrett Wendell encouraged the academy to adopt the term *renaissance*.<sup>7</sup> Kermit Vanderbilt, too, has credited Barrett Wendell and the generation of scholars preceding Matthiessen with describing the contours of the American renaissance.<sup>8</sup>

Wendell set the stage for his *A Literary History of America* (1901) in the following way:

<sup>6</sup>Over the years, critics have lambasted Matthiessen for everything from the title of his work to its scope. William Cain rightly labels the book "an enormously inviting target" (*F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988], p. 168). Matthiessen has been attacked for everything from focusing primarily on Emerson and Thoreau, to failing to discuss such central figures as Frederick Douglass and Margaret Fuller, to limiting the geographical range of his study to New England. Much of the criticism, however, is concentrated on the very idea of a renaissance in nineteenth-century New England.

<sup>7</sup>Charlene Avallone, "What American Renaissance? The Gendered Genealogy of a Critical Discourse," *PMLA* 112 (1997): 1102–20.

<sup>8</sup>Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy: The Roots, Growth, and Maturity of a Profession* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 143.

What does concern us is the intellectual outburst; and this, as we shall see, took, on the whole, a form which may best be described as renascent. In all sorts of intellectual life a new spirit declared itself; but this new spirit was more like that which aroused old Italy to a fresh sense of civilized antiquity than like a spontaneous manifestation of native thought or feeling. In a few years New England developed a considerable political literature, of which the height was reached in formal oratory; it developed a new kind of scholarship, of which the height was reached in admirable works of history; in religion it developed Unitarianism; in philosophy, Transcendentalism; in general conduct, a tendency toward reform which deeply affected our national history; and meantime it developed the most mature school of pure letters which has yet appeared in this country. To these various phases of the New England Renaissance we may now devote ourselves in turn.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his many chapters on the era, Wendell mustered evidence to support his use of the term and, in offering his assessments, drew comparisons with the nation's other great age, that of the Puritans. Although Wendell takes his era's all but obligatory potshots at the Puritans, he also asserts more positively that the transcendentalists, "these impulsive and untrained philosophical thinkers of renascent New England, . . . were descended from two centuries of Puritanism." He also assembled relevant views from contemporaries about their period, noting, for example, Emerson's affection for the Elizabethans. More to the point, in commenting on an essay by George Ripley in the second issue of the *Dial*, Wendell emphasized that "in the course of his article Ripley uses concerning his awakened New England the words 'new life,' in just the sense in which we have found the word 'Renaissance' so truly to express the spirit of the moment."<sup>10</sup> Even so, Wendell merely invokes the term's reformatory pedigree without elaborating upon it.

The next year, in 1902, Helen Winslow described the age of Emerson as "a literary epoch the like of which has scarcely been known since the Elizabethan age" in her *Literary Boston*

<sup>9</sup>Barrett Wendell, *A Literary History of America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 245.

<sup>10</sup>Wendell, *A Literary History of America*, pp. 293-94, 303-4.

of *To-Day*.<sup>11</sup> Walter Fuller Taylor's *History of American Letters* (1936) featured a lengthy discussion of what, to him, seemed a settled definition of the term. "New England Renaissance," he claimed, denotes an "extraordinary revival" that followed a period in which "the literary genius of New England long lay dormant." Although he does not discuss it at length, Taylor conflates this "literary genius" with New England's "stress on spiritual values," something lost in most treatments after Matthiessen's.<sup>12</sup> That same year, Van Wyck Brooks wrote in *The Flowering of New England*,

In later years, when people spoke of the "renaissance" in New England, they spoke with a measure of reason; for in Boston, as in Florence, four hundred years before, there was a morning freshness and a thrill of conscious activity. The New England imagination had been roused by the tales of travelers and the gains of commerce, the revival of ancient learning, the introduction of modern learning, the excitements of religious controversy. After the long winter of Puritanism, spring had come at last, and the earth reappeared in its beauty.<sup>13</sup>

One can acknowledge the utility of the descriptor *American renaissance* even while lamenting that literary critics have, in failing to trace the conceptual history of the term they appropriated, deformed it. Brooks, while he does associate the twin discourses of renaissance and reformation, defines the former by contrasting it to the latter. Such misconceptions were not without influence. Following the lead of his predecessors, Matthiessen used the term *renaissance* to refer to what other writers had deemed a "flowering" of literature in the decades of 1830–60 and to suggest that, in many ways, that intellectual milieu resembled the English Renaissance, with American writers drawing on seventeenth-century works by such figures as Milton, Shakespeare, and Sir Thomas Browne. But

<sup>11</sup>Helen M. Winslow, *Literary Boston of To-day* (Boston: L. C. Page, 1902), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>Walter Fuller Taylor, *A History of American Letters* (New York: American Book Company, 1936), p. 141.

<sup>13</sup>Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1815–1865* (New York: Dutton, 1936), p. 111.

even though Matthiessen acknowledged that “the seventeenth-century frame is of the greatest relevance for the practice of their [American writers of 1830–60] art,” he and other twentieth-century critics neglected to elaborate on the relationship between the American renaissance and the English Renaissance and Reformation. If one accepts Matthiessen’s statement that “the transcendental theory of art is a theory of knowledge and religion as well,” this oversight is significant and regrettable.<sup>14</sup>

*Renaissance and Reformation: Establishing a  
“Due Sense of Historical Continuity”*

If we move back into the century in which the transcendentalists were active, we can observe that commentators were more carefully establishing connections among discourses of art and religion, aesthetic and theological rebirth, as well as invoking Puritanism’s determinative influence. In a seminal essay published in the *Unitarian Review* of February 1889, Francis Tiffany, just as Matthiessen would do half a century later, sought to justify the terms he used to describe the cultural period of the 1830s–1860s. “I propose to enlarge the title into ‘Transcendentalism; or, The New England Renaissance,’” he noted. “The especial designation, Renaissance, or Re-birth, I would emphasize from the outset, as starting in the mind a distinct class of conceptions, without the aid of which the New England movement cannot be treated with due sense of historical continuity.” That continuity, Tiffany argued, located both the early Puritans and their descendants the transcendentalists together amidst the “grand uprising of the Renaissance.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Avallone, in her compelling but flawed article “What American Renaissance? The Gendered Genealogy of a Critical Discourse,” quotes Samuel Osgood’s 1876 discussion of “the Renaissance in literature among the New England

<sup>14</sup>Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup>Francis Tiffany, “Transcendentalism: The New England Renaissance” (1889), reprinted in *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, ed. Philip Gura and Joel Myerson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), pp. 211, 214.

Puritans in the nineteenth century.”<sup>16</sup> Despite her resourcefulness in tracing the term back to Osgood, Avallone ignores the intriguing religious implications of his statement, for Osgood stresses, it should be noted, that the nineteenth century’s flowering of literature occurs *among*, not necessarily in opposition to, the Puritans. Surely, such an odd expression begs analysis! Moreover, although Avallone correctly attributes Osgood’s comment to his review of Octavius Brooks Frothingham’s *Transcendentalism in New England* (1876), she does not connect Osgood’s use of the term *renaissance* to Frothingham’s, a significant lapse given that Frothingham was himself a transcendentalist and employed the rhetoric of reformation and renaissance throughout his work.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Osgood, too, was a transcendentalist—even if a “tentative” one, as Judith Green describes him<sup>18</sup>—who published a number of articles in the *Western Messenger*, the primary means by which transcendentalism spread beyond New England in the 1830s and 1840s. When Osgood invoked the “New England Renaissance” in his review of Frothingham’s book—a book Tiffany called “the only full and adequate account of this important movement”<sup>19</sup>—he recalled the movement in which both men had participated by using the language they had shared four decades earlier.

In asserting that it “bordered closely on Transcendentalism,” Frothingham had perhaps given Osgood the inspiration for his bizarre prepositional dislocation of American Puritanism. In connecting the two cultural phenomena, Frothingham argued that “transcendentalism simply claimed for all men what Protestant Christianity claimed for its own elect.”<sup>20</sup> Certainly

<sup>16</sup>Avallone, “What American Renaissance?” p. 1105. Samuel Osgood, “Transcendentalism in New England,” *International Review* 3 (1876): 745.

<sup>17</sup>Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1876), pp. 52–53, 87, 89, 103, 187–88, 273–74, 364.

<sup>18</sup>Judith Kent Green, “A Tentative Transcendentalist in the Ohio Valley: Samuel Osgood and *The Western Messenger*,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984), p. 79.

<sup>19</sup>Tiffany, “Transcendentalism: The New England Renaissance,” p. 216.

<sup>20</sup>Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England*, pp. 107–8.

Frothingham understood that neither movement could be so easily reduced, but his statement indicates that transcendentalists did not consider Puritans their enemies, as early-twentieth-century representations might suggest. Puritans were, Samuel Eliot Morison quipped, “the Englishmen who had accepted the Reformation without the Renaissance.”<sup>21</sup> In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence similarly averred that the Pilgrims wanted “no more of this new ‘humanity’ which followed the Renaissance.”<sup>22</sup> Francis Tiffany, Samuel Osgood, and Octavius Brooks Frothingham, the last two being members of the “new school,” as it was sometimes called, depicted transcendentalism, on the other hand, as sparking a rebirth of the Reformation and the Renaissance as those historical developments had been experienced in Europe *and* in colonial New England.

Again, one might ask, what is the point of this rather pedantic genealogy of a cultural term? At stake is something more than mere pedantry, the shibboleth of proper attribution. At stake is the precise identification of the underlying rationale that motivated the thinkers and writers of the American renaissance as they sought to position themselves along a historical continuum. At stake, in short, is the very reason for an American renaissance.

As the intelligentsia of the nineteenth century used the term, it connected the New England renaissance to the reformational impulses of the early colonists, even as it opposed contemporary manifestations of Calvinism and conservative Unitarianism. In *The Practice of Conceptual History*, Koselleck notes that “the two terms ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Reformation’ . . . aimed at a restoration of a past state of affairs in the domains of art and literature, humanistic studies, and religious doctrine and ecclesiastical institutions. The standard of reference for renewal did not lie in the future but rather in the past, in the Bible

<sup>21</sup>Samuel Eliot Morison, *Those Misunderstood Puritans* (North Brookfield, Mass.: Sun Hill Press, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923), p. 8.



and in the works and texts of classical antiquity.”<sup>23</sup> American transcendentalists hearkened back to a time in which the conceptual pair Reformation–Renaissance imagined a “new age” in the past. In this sense, then, the American renaissance might more accurately be termed the American re-Renaissance or the American re-Reformation. Matthiessen argued that his title did not imply “a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, that is precisely how the transcendentalists depicted their era, as a rebirth of the Reformation and Renaissance that the Puritans and Pilgrims had transported to the colonies.

*“We Want a Reformation”: Finding Historical Models for the 1830s–1860s*

Early figures in the transcendentalist movement understood the connection between theological reformation and aesthetic renaissance. As Sydney Ahlstrom and Jonathan Carey have commented,

The history of post-Reformation theology reveals either a gradual reassertion of medieval modes of thought or the gradual victory of Renaissance ideas. Lutheranism lapsed into a new scholastic orthodoxy, and important branches of the Calvinistic movement were compromised similarly. It is in this context that the appearance of the post-Reformation heroes of the Unitarian Reformation should be considered, for they are best understood as a subsidiary fruitage of the Renaissance.<sup>25</sup>

Such “subsidiary fruitage” included the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, whom Frothingham deemed “a Transcendentalist without knowing it,”<sup>26</sup> and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who resigned his Unitarian pulpit in 1832. The harvest also

<sup>23</sup>Reinhard Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 163.

<sup>24</sup>Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, p. vii.

<sup>25</sup>Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Jonathan S. Carey, eds., *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup>Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England*, p. 303.

gathered in Margaret Fuller and other members of the Transcendental Club, a discussion group formed in 1836 that consistently referred to its day as one marked by reformation and renaissance. In fact, the Transcendental Club was sometimes called "Hedge's Club" after Frederic Hedge, and it was he who looked back on the movement in 1867, referring to it as a "a new era in philosophy and religion," one in a string of revolutions. Describing transcendentalism in America explicitly as a type of the Renaissance, Hedge asserted that "The revival of letters in Europe was followed by a similar divorce of the intellectual and spiritual life of the age from the ecclesiastical."<sup>27</sup>

Hedge, like other transcendentalists, invoked the terms *renaissance* and *reformation* simultaneously, suggesting that a rebirth of aesthetics *and* spirituality had occurred in 1830–60. The conjunction is important, for it calls into question the contention, frequently made, that the rise of transcendentalism represented a secularization of American religion. Too often the era is viewed, as Jerome Loving phrases it, as a "rebirth on American soil of a number of European values and artistic concerns that had been obliterated by Puritanism."<sup>28</sup> The transcendentalists saw it differently. Osgood, for example, declared that transcendentalism sparked a "Renaissance," a "new Puritan life," and "a revival of culture in New England" that "stirred the old theocracy into new life."<sup>29</sup> Samuel Johnson agreed, maintaining that "[t]he real Transcendentalists of the seventeenth century were the Mayflower pilgrims."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Frederic H. Hedge, "The Destinies of Ecclesiastical Religion," *Christian Examiner*, January 1867, pp. 12, 11.

<sup>28</sup>Jerome Loving, *Lost in the Customhouse: Authorship in the American Renaissance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. ix. Kevin Van Anglen's "Reading Transcendentalist Texts Religiously: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Myth of Secularization" is an exemplary discussion of the folly of dismissing transcendentalism as a "secular" movement. Van Anglen's call for "a more open approach to the question of secularization" is certainly warranted. His essay can be found in *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, ed. John L. Mahoney (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), p. 166.

<sup>29</sup>Osgood, "Transcendentalism in New England," pp. 745–46.

<sup>30</sup>Samuel Johnson, "Transcendentalism," *Radical Review*, November 1877, pp. 447–78, reprinted in *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, p. 158.

In his 1830 essay "Remarks on National Literature," William Ellery Channing strikingly asserted America's need for both a reformation and a renaissance in letters.

It seems to us that in literature an immense work is yet to be done. The most interesting questions to mankind are yet in debate. Great principles are yet to be settled in criticism, in morals, in politics; and, above all, the true character of religion is to be rescued from the disguises and corruptions of ages. We want a reformation. We want a literature, in which genius will pay supreme, if not undivided homage, to truth and virtue; in which the childish admiration of what has been called greatness, will give place to a wise moral judgment; which will breathe reverence for the mind, and elevating thoughts of God.<sup>31</sup>

"We want a reformation," Channing asserted, and then, with his next breath, declared, "We want a literature." For Channing, as for most of those associated with transcendentalism, a newly resplendent American culture had delivered twins: religious reformation and literary renaissance.

Conservative Unitarianism and any other belief that privileged creed over direct revelation was, for Channing, akin to the "old theology" of Calvinism or the even older theology of Catholicism. Spreading "religious freedom," he insisted, would finally "redeem the Christian world from the usurpations of Catholic and Protestant infallibility."<sup>32</sup> In works like "Unitarian Christianity," he allied the old Reformation with a new American "glorious reformation" as he asserted the need for rooting out the "Papal dominion [that] is perpetuated in the Protestant church."<sup>33</sup> Fuller recapitulated this conceptual model when she declared that even among Protestant churches in America, "Each little coterie has its private pope."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup>William Ellery Channing, "Remarks on National Literature," *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.*, 3rd ed., 6 vols. (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1843), 1:270.

<sup>32</sup>William Ellery Channing, "Christian Worship," *Works*, 4:343-44.

<sup>33</sup>William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," *Works*, 3:102-3.

<sup>34</sup>Margaret Fuller, "Review of Theodore Parker, *The Excellence of Goodness*," in *Margaret Fuller, Critic: Writings from the "New-York Tribune," 1844-46*, ed. Judith Mattson Bean and Joel Myerson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 93.

Jenny Franchot's view that anti-Catholicism was "part of liberal Protestantism's struggle to divest itself of absolutist Calvinist orthodoxy while attempting to control its own debilitation by rallying forces against a malevolent Rome" is apt, but liberal Unitarians and transcendentalists certainly aimed at targets beyond the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>35</sup> The rhetoric they employed presupposed what Koselleck terms the "repeatability of events" or a "figurative or typological ordering of events."<sup>36</sup> Calling for that "glorious reformation" in his own day, Channing invoked a Reformation whose work, he argued, remained unfinished; "Much stubble," as he phrased it, "is yet to be burned."<sup>37</sup> Criticizing both Catholicism and Protestantism, he assumed the reformational mantle, considering contemporary reforms advocated by liberal Unitarians and transcendentalists to be contemporary manifestations of the old Puritan spirit.

Exerting an early influence on transcendentalism, Channing sought to spark a reformation that would unleash the individual's capacity for spiritual growth. It is often suggested that literature, for the transcendentalists, substituted for theology. For Channing, however, literature was only one aspect of a program of self-culture that would result in a cultural resurgence and religious reformation.

Like Channing, Emerson consistently viewed the contemporary reaction against Calvinists, conservative Unitarians, and all formal elements of what he dismissively lumped together as "that old religion" through the lens of the historical Reformation.<sup>38</sup> In his 1838 essay "Demonology," he argued that the belief in providence, a "faith in a dotting power," is "as frequent in America to-day as the faith in incantations and philters was in old Rome, or the wholesome potency of the sign of the cross in modern Rome."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. xxvii.

<sup>36</sup>Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 95.

<sup>37</sup>Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 3:102.

<sup>38</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Method of Nature," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. (Boston: Riverside Press, 1904), 1:220.

<sup>39</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Demonology," *Complete Works*, 10:16.

Roger Lundin dismisses Emerson's rhetoric as evidence of the writer's "disdain for Catholicism" and a manifestation of "his peculiar post-Christian Protestant pride,"<sup>40</sup> but Lundin misses the point entirely. Emerson directs antagonistic statements just as frequently against Calvinists and Unitarians as against Catholics, and in this regard he exhibits the widespread transcendentalist proclivity to promote reformation by targeting *any* orthodoxy.

In a multiplicity of works spanning his lifetime, Emerson limned a progression of theology, setting forth a timeline of sorts. In his essay "Character," for example, he declared that "Calvinism rushes to be Unitarianism, as Unitarianism rushes to be pure theism," a development he likened to the Reformation.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the Reformation is a trope that appears in a number of Emerson's writings. Thus, in his eulogy of Theodore Parker, that dogged Unitarian/transcendentalist leader becomes "Luther, Knox and Latimer, and John Baptist."<sup>42</sup> Emerson goes beyond mere suggestion to make the point explicitly in his essay "The Preacher," where he observes that the "venerable and beautiful traditions in which we were educated are losing their hold on human belief, day by day; a restlessness and dissatisfaction in the religious world marks that we are in a moment of transition; as when the Roman Church broke into Protestant and Catholic, or, earlier, when Paganism broke into Christians and Pagans."<sup>43</sup> The American reformation, as Emerson depicts it, is part of a natural, ongoing process punctuated by moments of noticeable transition.

Christopher Cranch, the gifted caricaturist who famously depicted Emerson as an eyeball with surprisingly long legs,

<sup>40</sup>Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 48.

<sup>41</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Character," *Complete Works*, 10:117.

<sup>42</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Theodore Parker," *Complete Works*, 11:289. Such comparisons to Reformation leaders were common, particularly with reference to Theodore Parker. Frothingham refers to him as "the Luther of the time" in "Some Phases of Idealism in New England," in *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, p. 205. No less a figure than Cyrus Bartol labels Theodore Parker "a second Luther" in *Radical Problems* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1872), p. 75.

<sup>43</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Preacher," *Complete Works*, 10:217.

leaped to defend transcendentalism against Andrews Norton (and many others) with similar logic:

Much is said of late by persons not knowing whereof they speak, of what has been termed "Transcendentalism." Now, though not one in a hundred of these talkers can tell what this hard word means, or even explain their own vague idea of its meaning, it is a very convenient word. . . . Thus it was with the first appearance of Christianity, in a degree never seen before or since. Thus it was with the Reformation—thus it was with the Puritan movement—thus it was with the Unitarian movement. From time to time some grand Truth dawns like the light upon nations who sat in darkness.<sup>44</sup>

Notably, in this spirited defense of transcendentalism, Cranch connected it by name with the Puritans and the Reformation. For Cranch and for many others, the "new school" was the "grand Truth" that was developing from such historical points of origin. Transcendentalism marked a rebirth of the Puritan reformational spirit, directed in this instance primarily against the Protestant "popes" of America.

### *"There Was a New Consciousness": Redefining Orthodoxy*

Because the transcendentalists viewed themselves as furthering the historical Reformation or inaugurating a re-Reformation, they summarily dismissed any appeals to orthodoxy. In *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins takes Matthiessen to task. "None of the works that Matthiessen names is by an orthodox Christian," she notes, "although that is what most Americans in the 1850s were, and although religious issues pervaded the cultural discourse of the period."<sup>45</sup> Certainly, Tompkins is correct in stating that Matthiessen fundamentally ignores the centrality of theological debate in the 1830s–1860s, but her call that literary historians treat works representing the period's *orthodoxy* is far more complicated than might at first appear.

<sup>44</sup>Christopher P. Cranch, "Transcendentalism," *Western Messenger*, January 1841, pp. 405–6.

<sup>45</sup>Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 200.

Orthodoxy in New England looks like heterodoxy elsewhere. One recalls Edmund Burke's apt description of the colonies at the time of the Revolution: "[T]he religion most prevalent in our northern colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance: it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion."<sup>46</sup> Puritan, Pilgrim, Quaker, or Catholic were all, from a Church of England perspective, unorthodox.

By the 1830s, America's ongoing religious dialogue had reached such a pitch in New England that even "orthodox" denominations were battling over doctrinal issues. Theological diversity had spawned a "silent revolution," as Emerson called it in the "Worship" chapter of *The Conduct of Life*, and he characterized the chaotic diversity that had ensued: "the heathenisms in Christianity, the periodic 'revivals,' the Millennium mathematics, the peacock ritualism, the retrogression to Popery, the maundering of Mormons, the squalor of Mesmerism, the deliration of rappings, the rat and mouse revelation, thumps in table-drawers, and black art."<sup>47</sup> In the essay "Christian Denominations," which appeared in a May 1839 issue of the *Western Messenger*, William Henry Channing (brother of William Ellery Channing) expressed dismay at the rhetoric used to discuss belief systems, taking particular exception to one term:

A far more objectionable name of this class, however, is that of *Orthodox*. Orthodox indeed! We should deem him, who gave us such a name, as insulting us with irony. All right, infallible, free from all error, possessed of all truth,—these are the ideas which the name suggests; and what can be so preposterous as for a human being, with only two half blind eyes, to think or say that he sees the whole universe of truth? . . . Orthodox! It would be a presumptuous title for a seraph; and for a mortal!<sup>48</sup>

In short, what, in an era of tremendous religious ferment, does "orthodox Christian" even mean? Clearly, the answer

<sup>46</sup>Edmund Burke, *Speech on Conciliation with America*, 1775 (reprinted, Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1902), p. 22.

<sup>47</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Conduct of Life, Complete Works*, 6:208–9.

<sup>48</sup>William Henry Channing, "Christian Denominations," *Western Messenger*, May 1839, p. 5.

depends on one's perspective. Unitarians, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, for example, viewed each other as unorthodox. They were united in viewing the Roman Catholic Church as unorthodox and, moreover, dangerous. Catholics, for their part, viewed Protestantism as deviant. Connecting 1840s America to the Reformation, Margaret Fuller describes the situation brilliantly.

From Luther downward, each sect claiming to be Protestant, has claimed no less to utter its anathema against those who differed from it, with the authority of a Golden Bull, nor were Lutherans distinguished for tolerating any new evidences of the spirit of Luther. In our own country this has been manifested in the most marked manner.<sup>49</sup>

Were we capable of polling Americans of the 1830s–1860s, most would likely identify themselves as orthodox; whether they would identify their *neighbors* as orthodox, however, is another question. Any definition of orthodoxy, in other words, requires a statement of perspective. It is this awareness that lurks behind Emerson's various analyses of the New England renaissance.

In his engaging retrospective "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," Emerson discusses the period 1820–40, summing it up as follows:

It seemed a war between intellect and affection; a crack in Nature, which split every church in Christendom into Papal and Protestant; a Calvinism into Old and New schools; Quakerism into Old and New; brought new divisions in politics; as the new conscience touching temperance and slavery. The key to the period appeared to be that the mind had become aware of itself. Men grew reflective and intellectual. There was a new consciousness.<sup>50</sup>

As they came to reflect upon and to define their historical moment, settling on the trope of the American renaissance, the transcendentalists understood that from the beginning their

<sup>49</sup>Fuller, "Review of Parker," p. 93.

<sup>50</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," *Complete Works*, 10:325–26.



movement was marked by a healthy disrespect for what others called orthodoxy. And yet, in their program to undermine Calvinism and conservative Unitarianism, they also sought to appropriate the legitimacy of the Reformation. They inherited the independent spirit of the Pilgrims and Puritans, then, even while setting out to reform much of their theology.

*“Books Have Become Our Pulpits”: Conflating Reformation and Renaissance Rhetoric*

In 1836, Orestes Brownson’s *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* identified the Renaissance as “[o]ne of the most immediate and efficient causes of Protestantism”; at the same time, he commented that the “reformation connects us with classical antiquity, with the beautiful and graceful forms of Grecian art and literature.”<sup>51</sup> Rebirth of a new spirit in religion and rebirth of a new spirit in literature were, Brownson posited, as fundamentally allied in his own era as they had been in the age of Luther and Calvin. Perry Miller’s assertion that transcendentalism “was not primarily a literary phenomenon” but instead “a religious demonstration” thus misses the mark, for it divorces two elements that were inextricably intertwined.<sup>52</sup> Transcendentalism was at its core both literary and spiritual, just as the Sistine Chapel spans religious and aesthetic realms of human endeavor.

Those who first used the concept of a renaissance to define a particular era in American culture certainly embraced this connection between an ongoing reformation in religion and a renaissance in letters, as is evident in their writings. One sees it in Frothingham’s book in 1876, in Osgood’s review of the book that same year, and in many earlier essays by Channing, Emerson, Fuller, and other writers. In 1836, when George Ripley wrote his famous reply to Andrews Norton, the

<sup>51</sup>Orestes Brownson, *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church*, vol. 4 of *The Works of Orestes Brownson*, ed. Henry F. Brownson, 20 vols. (1883–90; reprinted, New York: AMS Press, 1966), p. 17.

<sup>52</sup>Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 8–9.

“Unitarian Pope,” he chided his former teacher for forgetting “the principles of our Protestant fathers” in his desire to quash transcendentalist articles. Ripley further lamented the effect that lack of historical perspective had on “Theology, Literature, Art, and Society.” Tellingly, he ended his discussion by stating, “I wish to go back to the philosophy of the most enlightened Fathers, to that of the giants of English theology in the days of their unshorn strength.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in 1840, James H. Perkins, one of the editors of the *Western Messenger*, argued that “the fullest reception of the doctrine of the Reformation” would be effected by means of literature, whose role must be redefined. “The writers of our country must feel themselves called on to work for their country and mankind,” Perkins asserted.

Literature must cease to be an amusement, a mere pass-time, an ornamental thing, a luxury; it must lose its lightness, and become serious, for by it are to be worked out serious results. Books have become our pulpits, and newspapers our shrines for daily resort; if at those shrines we worship Mammon or Lucifer, and not the true God, woe, woe to us and to our country.<sup>54</sup>

Writing in 1839, Reverend Orville Dewey, in his “Discourse on Psalm 43:5,” maintained that truth could be most nearly approached by means of the free and open exchange of ideas. “God hath appointed no man, neither priest nor pope, to be the unquestioned expositor of his truth,” Dewey insisted; in “the great heart of the world lie the causes of progress; in spreading freedom, in the spirit of literature, in the growth of knowledge, in the divine elements of truth itself.”<sup>55</sup>

In 1842, Charles Mayo Ellis anonymously issued the pamphlet *An Essay on Transcendentalism*. Ellis believed that transcendentalism had suffered under the accusation that it was nebulous, and after humorously trotting out those criticisms, he went on to define the movement in terms of religious reform

<sup>53</sup>George Ripley, “Letter to the Editor,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 9 November 1836, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup>James H. Perkins, “Associations, A Vital Form of Social Action,” *Western Messenger*, October 1840, pp. 275–76.

<sup>55</sup>Orville Dewey, “Discourse on Psalm 43:5,” *Western Messenger*, July 1839, p. 183.

and artistic renaissance: "Our religion we have received at the hands of men who worshipped the relics of the saints," he argued, but the "religious condition of the race" has improved along with the "tone of society and literature."<sup>56</sup> Even those outside of the movement felt the truth of such statements. Rufus Griswold's *The Prose Writers of America* appeared in its fourth edition in 1859. In his prefatory essay, "The Intellectual History, Condition, and Prospects of the Country," Griswold discussed reformational influences in American culture, suggesting that the literature of the day was the product of "spiritual liberation."<sup>57</sup> Griswold, like his contemporaries, saw no division between the reformational spirit and the renaissance that writers believed was underway in America.

In 1878, Emerson reflected that the "religion of seventy years ago was an iron belt to the mind." "Luther would cut his hand off sooner than write theses against the pope," Emerson declared, "if he suspected that he was bringing on with all his might the pale negations of Boston Unitarianism." Just as the Reformation sought to re-form the church along the lines of a utopian "primitive Christianity," Emerson looked back to the age that looked back, hoping for a similar rebirth. And if it were achieved, he anticipated that the American reformation's "natural religion" would spawn "a new crop of geniuses like those of the Elizabethan age . . . with a happy heart and a bias for theism."<sup>58</sup> *The Elizabethan Age*. Mathiessen noted the frequency with which writers of the 1830s–1860s conceived of themselves as Elizabethans, but he misunderstood the twinned concepts of reformation and renaissance such a parallel implied.

The conceptual pairing of reformation and renaissance helps explain the attention mid-nineteenth-century America lavished on seventeenth-century English poet John Milton. The anonymous author of "Loungings in the Footprints of the Pioneers,"

<sup>56</sup>Charles Mayo Ellis, *An Essay on Transcendentalism*, ed. Walter Harding (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1954), pp. 35–37.

<sup>57</sup>Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *The Prose Writers of America: With a Survey of the Intellectual History, Condition, and Prospects of the Country*, 4th ed. rev. (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1859), pp. 49–50.

<sup>58</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sovereignty of Ethics," *Complete Works*, 10:204, 208.

an 1859 *Harper's* article, invoked the English Renaissance by name and proposed that Milton and Shakespeare "belong to ours more than to the epoch which produced them" because, as the author reasoned, in the 1850s, the authors' writings "have more admirers and more students now than they ever had before."<sup>59</sup> Margaret Fuller, in her October 1845 review of Rufus Griswold's edition of Milton's essays, commented on Milton's Americanness, suggesting that "in him is expressed so much of the primitive vitality of that thought from which America is born, though at present disposed to forswear her lineage in so many ways. He is the purity of Puritanism."<sup>60</sup> Both Channing and Emerson produced influential essays on Milton. "I attribute much importance to two papers of Dr. Channing, one on Milton and one on Napoleon," Emerson wrote of the Unitarian clergyman in the context of the inauguration of the Transcendental Club. Highlighting the group's conjoined interests in aesthetics and the sacred, Emerson noted that Channing was both "the star of the American Church" and author of two important literary and historical essays, which "were widely read."<sup>61</sup>

One of these essays was Channing's 1826 "Remarks on the Character and Writings of John Milton," which Emerson credited in "Life and Letters in New England" as a preeminent force in inaugurating transcendentalism: Channing's essay was "immediately fruitful in provoking emulation."<sup>62</sup> Reading Channing's essay, one cannot fail to be moved by the revolutionary ardor that animated his subject, even as the reactionary elements of the poet's character are acknowledged as well. It is not just that Milton, as Matthiessen observed, "remained the archetype of the poet for New England."<sup>63</sup> Rather, Milton emerged as a crucial figure for the transcendentalists and

<sup>59</sup>Anon., "Loungings in the Footprints of the Pioneers," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, May 1859, p. 758.

<sup>60</sup>Margaret Fuller, "Review of *The Prose Works of John Milton*," *Writings from the New-York Tribune*, p. 248.

<sup>61</sup>Emerson, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," p. 339.

<sup>62</sup>Emerson, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," p. 339.

<sup>63</sup>Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, p. 103.

liberal Unitarians because, more than any other, he embodied both the Reformation and the Renaissance, the twin objects of transcendentalist yearning. Fuller stated that Milton “draws us to a central point whither converge the rays of sacred and profane, ancient and modern Literature.”<sup>64</sup> Paraphrasing St. John to laud Milton, Channing made a similar point: “It is the glorious prerogative of this art, that it ‘makes all things new’ for the gratification of a divine instinct.”<sup>65</sup> Milton personified the new spirit of his own age, both in its devotion to religious reform and artistic renewal, and so centuries later he was elevated to herald an analogous movement in America.

Many readers today will find Milton’s usefulness to the transcendentalists puzzling, for they class Milton with the party of Puritans, the dour Englishmen who, Morison and Lawrence claimed, had turned their backs on the Renaissance. Like Fuller, who sums up Milton as the “purity of Puritanism,” Channing distanced the poet from Calvinism: “Swayed as Milton was by the age in which he lived, his spirit could not be subdued to the heart-withering faith of the Genevan school.”<sup>66</sup> As surprising as it may seem to those who have become accustomed to a secularized American renaissance, Channing, and contemporaries who read his influential essay, could think of no better leader for their army of transcendentalists than Milton—poet and Puritan, representative of both Renaissance and Reformation—as they set out to wage war against Calvinism and conservative Unitarianism.

In 1838, Emerson wrote his own appreciation of Milton, praising him as “an apostle of freedom” who urged “the doctrine of unlimited toleration” on his Puritan brethren.<sup>67</sup> Considering the battles Emerson was conducting against religious formalism, the spirit of Milton must have offered powerful inspiration. Like the writer of the *Harper’s* article, Emerson

<sup>64</sup> Fuller, “Review of *The Prose Works of John Milton*,” p. 247.

<sup>65</sup> William Ellery Channing, “Remarks on the Character and Writings of John Milton,” *Works*, 1:8.

<sup>66</sup> Channing, “Remarks on the Character and Writings of John Milton,” 1:57.

<sup>67</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Milton,” *Complete Works*, 12:271.

claimed Milton for his own age, prophesying that he “will be part of the history of the nineteenth century.”<sup>68</sup>

Liberal Protestants’ affinity for the Reformation in general and for Milton in particular is, in many ways, understandable. It is more curious, however, to discover that Catholic writers of the day were also inclined to link transcendentalism with renaissance and reformational discourse. Orestes Brownson is a case in point. Brownson was a charter member of “The Transcendental Club” who, as Caroline Dall phrased it, “met with us once or twice, but became unbearable, and was not afterward invited.”<sup>69</sup> In 1844, Brownson converted to Catholicism, and he went on to disavow the transcendentalists who had disapproved of him. Both before and after his conversion, Brownson, like the transcendentalists, saw in the American present a continuation of the Reformation and the Renaissance; after his conversion, however, his attitude about what he observed shifted dramatically. His publication *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* (1844–75) gave him a literary pulpit from which to deliver homilies on contemporary culture and literature. In “Socialism and the Church,” for example, he identified the Protestant Reformation as the root cause for numerous revolutions in nineteenth-century America. The “children of the Reformation,” he bemoaned, “have at length carried [the work of reform] to the borders, if not into the regions, of nihilism.”<sup>70</sup>

More intriguing is Brownson’s interpretation of the radical conflation of renaissance and reformational rhetoric. In his 1846 essay “Protestantism ends in Transcendentalism,” he asserted that “Transcendentalism . . . is nothing but the fundamental principle of the Protestant Reformation itself.” In other words, Brownson saw New England’s new theological and literary movement as the logical outcome of Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg

<sup>68</sup>Emerson, “Milton,” p. 248.

<sup>69</sup>Caroline H. Dall, *Transcendentalism in New England: A Lecture Delivered before the Society for Philosophical Enquiry, Washington, D.C., May 7, 1895* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1897), p. 16.

<sup>70</sup>Orestes Brownson, “Socialism and the Church,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* 3 (January 1849): 95.

and Calvin penning his *Institutes* while exiled in Switzerland.<sup>71</sup> One suspects that converted Catholic Brownson really meant that Protestantism dead-ends in transcendentalism, which represents a culmination of the Reformation's errors. In "American Literature" (1847), Brownson explicitly linked the Reformation with "the Revival of Letters." The "depreciation of the Middle Ages" and the "ecstasies over the Renaissance," he grumbled, were mental constructs nineteenth-century Protestants had received "by right of inheritance."<sup>72</sup>

In short, Brownson accepted the transcendentalist conflation of reformational and renaissance rhetoric only to condemn the consequence as "pure heathenism." In "Christianity and Heathenism" (1852), he was blunt:

Protestants are fond of claiming the revival of classical studies in the fifteenth century as one of the most active and influential causes of what they call the Reformation. They are no doubt right in this; not indeed, as they pretend, because these studies marked or effected an intellectual progress, not indeed because the people were or became more generally educated or more truly enlightened than they had previously been; but because these studies tended to draw off the mind and heart from sacred literature, and to turn them from the spiritual to the secular, from the Christian to the heathen. . . . It is easy to understand, on principles quite creditable to the Church, why the revival of letters, the *renaissance*, as the French call it, was influential in preparing Protestantism. It was an effect and a cause of the revival of the secular order. It threw men back on the order outside the Church, back on nature as unelevated by grace, and made them prefer the city of the world to the city of God. It was a revival of heathenism.

Both the Reformation and the Renaissance ought to be condemned, Brownson insisted, for "the revival of classical studies, which was the revival of profane or secular literature, must have favored heresy, and helped to prepare the

<sup>71</sup>Orestes Brownson, "Protestantism Ends in Transcendentalism," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1846): 370.

<sup>72</sup>Orestes Brownson, "American Literature," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* 1 (July 1847): 388.

Protestant apostasy.” And so, although Brownson’s intellectual understanding of the historical movement that was emerging in the 1830s–1860s was much like that of the transcendentalists, he exhibited none of their triumphalism; instead, he derided the literary and religious confusion of the time, seeing in the nebulous theological and literary productions of the transcendentalists a reflection of what had been produced hundreds of years earlier during “what they call the Reformation.”<sup>73</sup>

Catholic and Protestant alike, the writers of the transcendentalist era conjoined the rhetoric of reformation and renaissance in an attempt to show that their enterprise was grounded in the past and yet forward looking as well. As Reinhart Koselleck observes, “Historical semantology shows that every concept entering into a narrative or representation . . . renders relations discernible by a refusal to take on their uniqueness.”<sup>74</sup> That is, a conceptual history of the tropes of *renaissance* and *reformation* reveals much about the motivations and attitudes of the transcendentalists but also suggests that their use of these concepts inevitably obscures the uniqueness of their mid-nineteenth-century American context. While many transcendentalists were anti-Catholic, for example, their chief adversary was not the Pope in Rome but the “Unitarian Pope,” Andrews Norton. Thus, the transcendentalists may have lost something of their cherished individuality by exploiting the historical analogy even as it helped establish their place in the continuity of history. Exploring the conceptual history of *renaissance* and *reformation* as used by the transcendentalists clarifies both the movement’s historical analogs and its historical uniqueness.

Many critics have suggested that New England’s literary revival was imaginary, a concocted conceit. Even Lawrence Buell, one of the most eminent commentators on the era, refers to the 1830s–1860s as “the so-called Renaissance period,” and he offers in place of the commonly used term the new designation

<sup>73</sup>Orestes Brownson, “Christianity and Heathenism,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* 6 (January 1852): 7–8, 10, 7.

<sup>74</sup>Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 112.



“American Literary Emergence.”<sup>75</sup> But such a proposition is tenable only if one has accepted Matthiessen’s misappropriation of the term *renaissance*. Likewise, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury adopt the phrase “American Naissance,” even though they concede that “Renaissance” has more currency because “that is what Matthiessen called his study, and that is what we call the era still.”<sup>76</sup>

For the transcendentalists, however, their age was not a birth, not a naissance, but a rebirth—a renaissance. Those writers who are the subjects of the term themselves originated it. Looking toward that previous age, they took inspiration from it, set their mission by it, and used its rhetoric to publish their beliefs to the wider world. Transcendentalists—writers like Channing, Emerson, and Fuller—disagreed on many subjects, but they believed that the age in which they lived and worked was a moment of religious reformation and literary rebirth: it was, as many of them characterized it so memorably, an American renaissance.

<sup>75</sup>Lawrence Buell, “American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon,” *American Literary History* 4 (1992): 411, 415.

<sup>76</sup>Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 104.

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