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Autobiography & Memoir

Orestes Brownson: Sign of Contradiction
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American transcendentalism, the nineteenth-century philosophical and literary movement made famous by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and A. Bronson Alcott, had at its heart the idea of intuition. The accepted outlines of transcendentalism have become familiar to all students of American intellectual history: rejecting the dry bones of Unitarian religion and the feeble gentility of much antebellum writing, the transcendentalists—varied in temperament though they were—favored romanticism over rationalism, mystic insight over material fact and the spirituality of the divine Self over systematic theology of any kind. Given the modern tendency to enlist the transcendentalists as precursors of American liberal humanism, it is often forgotten that the primary motivation for New England intellectuals in producing such landmark mid-century texts as Woman in the Nineteenth Century (Fuller), Nature (Emerson), and Walden, or Life in the Woods (Thoreau) was deeply religious at its core. Even less well known is the complexity of the religious energy, much of it conservative, that circulated through the transcendentalist movement.

Herrera's Orestes Brownson returns to one of transcendentalism's most galvanizing early figures and serves as a useful reminder that the undeniably pervasive Protestant elements in transcendentalism and antebellum intellectual life generally need to be understood with relation to the increasing importance of Roman Catholicism in the United States. Now a marginal figure in histories of American literature, Brownson (1803-1876) was one of the most important public intellectuals of his day, a prodigious writer, editor and lecturer best known for his devastating proto-Marxian essay "The Laboring Classes" (1840). "The Laboring Classes," Brownson's most brilliantly written and visionary work—and one that refuses Emersonian intuition in favor of a deeply practical social analysis—took shape as a reaction to the devastating economic panic of 1837 and included his prescient remark that, "No one can observe the signs of the times with much care without perceiving that a crises as to the relation

of wealth and labor is approaching." A radical democrat during his early career, the young Brownson's polemic on labor insisted on reform of the Christian church and the civil government and, scandalously, the abolition of hereditary property. Brownson's infatuation with radical social change faded with the disastrous (for the Democratic Party) election of 1840, which resulted in a Whig victory that deeply disappointed Brownson and led him to re-think his liberal conviction that unaided human nature was capable of achieving necessary social reforms. And so, after an early career in which he served intermittently as a Universalist and then Unitarian minister, Brownson scandalized his transcendentalist friends, including Emerson and Thoreau, by suddenly and permanently converting to Roman Catholicism in 1844.

Born in Stockbridge, Vermont, Brownson was an entirely self-taught philosopher and theologian who came of age in Ballston Spa, New York, during the evangelical fervor endemic in the "burned-over districts" of New York, so named for the intensity of religious fever sweeping across that part of the country during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Honing his writer's craft through intense study and by contributing articles to the many evangelical periodicals flooding the New York region, Brownson later moved to Chelsea, Massachusetts, where at the age of thirty-three he had already emerged as a prime mover and leading essayist among the transcendentalists. Spelling out his radical conception of Christian ministry in his important early book, New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church (1836), Brownson—never entirely comfortable with the ardent humanism of Emerson and Thoreau—envisioned a "Church of the Future" that would blend and reconcile the spirituality and ritual of
Catholicism alongside the material and earthly emphasis of Protestantism. After his 1844 conversion, though, Brownson grew increasingly convinced that Catholicism alone could serve as the ideal American religion, and to that end he worked for several decades as editor and sole author of his important and scholarly Brownson's Quarterly Review, which grew to become the leading Catholic intellectual journal of the nineteenth century.

Orestes Brownson is admirably concise and clearly written; like Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s pioneering 1939 biography of Brownson, it succeeds in introducing Brownson's life and ideas to a new generation of general readers interested in the history of American Catholic thought. Herrera capably surveys the major aspects of Brownson's labyrinthine career, which included a vast output of essays on nearly every important political, religious and social topic of the nineteenth century. Although Herrera must be faulted for writing in a critical vacuum by scanting the enormous secondary literature on transcendentalism that has been produced in the last century, he performs the admirable service of positioning the irascible and mercurial Brownson accurately with relation to his more liberal peers. Even more crucially, Herrera's sensitivity to the puzzling shifts and intellectual contradictions within Brownson's critical

oeuvre highlights the paradox—registered by succeeding generations of American Catholics—of reconciling faith and culture.

James Emmett Ryan