

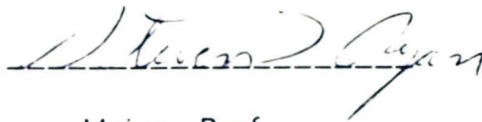
**THE HUMAN SEARCH FOR DIVINITY:  
THE PHILOSOPHIES OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND  
MARTIN BUBER AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON  
WALT WHITMAN AND BERNARD MALAMUD**

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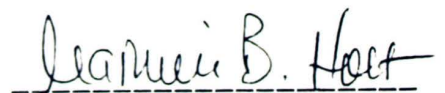


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The Human Search for Divinity:  
The Philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Martin Buber  
and Their Influence on Walt Whitman and Bernard Malamud

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
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Michael Richard Meise  
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## ABSTRACT

Though separated by nearly a century of history and an ocean of geographical space, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Martin Buber shared very similar views on how the human finds divinity. Through an investigation of each man's personal history and a close reading of several of their central works, one finds much affinity between the two. Both men, at an early age, experienced the loss of one of their parents. Both men were educated in a rather orthodox manner with much emphasis placed upon their respective religions, Emerson in the Unitarian tradition and Buber in Judaism. Yet what truly connects each of these men to the other is their search for new ways, within their religion, to express the human relationship with God. Both men conclude that this relationship with divinity can best be found through one's relationship to nature and to one's fellow human. This experience is not found in heightened moments of extraordinary events, but rather in one's hallowing of the every day, moment upon moment existence.

Furthermore, the power found in Emerson's and Buber's thought had a profound influence on literary figures of their day, particularly the poetry of Walt Whitman and the fiction of Bernard Malamud. Many lines found in Whitman's "Song of Myself" reveal his affinity to Emerson's view of divinity. Likewise, the philosophy of Buber can be found throughout Malamud's *The Assistant*. Malamud believes as much in the power of

Buber's "holy insecurity" and ability to find hope in the every day as a path to divinity, as Whitman believes in Emerson's message of finding the miracles in the ordinary and renewed strength within one's own uniqueness. Both writers embrace the transcendental and the existential, and, though on the surface it seems the body of work they produced is very different, it is in the end, similar.



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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

In March of 1985, I took a day off from my teaching duties as Band Director at Dickson County Senior High School to stay home and listen to a radio broadcast by Robert Shaw. At that time Mr. Shaw was Director and Conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the famed Robert Shaw Chorale. This lecture, entitled "Worship and the Arts," was given in commemoration of the three-hundredth birthday of Johann Sebastian Bach. Five years prior to that day, I was privileged to spend a week, as a member of the Austin Peay State University Chorus, in Knoxville, Tennessee, rehearsing Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* under the direction of Mr. Shaw. Britten's *War Requiem* sets itself apart from any requiem ever composed, for it is the first ever to include, in addition to the traditional liturgical sections, text that is not Biblical (poems by Wilfred Owen). As a part of that week of rehearsals, I attended several lectures given by Shaw on Britten's incorporation of Wilfred Owen poems in his requiem. That week's experiences had such a profound effect on me that I was anxious to hear this 1985 broadcast. From Shaw's remarkable words I received numerous revelations and was taken down several new paths. In his lecture, Shaw suggested that one definition of art might be, "the flesh become word." The word became flesh, as understood from the

opening of St. John's Gospel, is familiar doctrine. But what about that reciprocal idea of flesh becoming word, the daily possibility of matter becoming spirit, the notion of man as creator becoming god-like in the process? Shaw states in a recent interview published in the April 1996 issue of the *Choral Journal*, "in so far as there is a Creative Principle (which some people may identify as God), and if man is created in that particular image, then man has the responsibility of being the Creative Principle" (Baxter 13). The notion of man as divine was a new idea to me.

The second idea from Shaw's speech that struck a chord deep within was somewhat of a reversal of the first: the idea of studying the humanity of Christ and not being preoccupied with his divinity. Having been raised in a community consisting mostly of very fundamental Christians who saw Christ as purely divine and *the* only son of God, this view of Jesus as human was foreign to me. It was an idea that brought a fresh breeze across my brow and stirred within my heart a new enthusiasm for religion.

My third revelation was Shaw's reference to Martin Buber, a twentieth-century German-Jewish philosopher and theologian. After hearing Shaw quote Buber, I immediately purchased a translation of Buber's *I and Thou*. Though I must admit that after my first reading of this intricate work I was filled with more confusion than



understanding, through patient rereadings and numerous hours of studying many of his other works, I came to see his ideas with clarity and understanding. I began to read every Buber book I could find and found myself overwhelmingly attracted to his writings. It may seem strange that a musician would be so interested in the thoughts of Martin Buber, yet it was through his words that I began to discover how to define art and the aesthetic experience. Why did I get chill bumps up and down my spine and arms when singing Handel's *Messiah* or the Mozart *Requiem*? Why was I so strangely and powerfully moved by Brahms, Bruckner, Ives, Shostikovich, or Samuel Barber, to name a few? I came to align the I-THOU experience with the communal relationship of creating music. It was my I going forth to join the other THOU which brought me to the ETERNAL THOU. Through Buber's explanation of the two-fold world of I-IT/I-THOU, Buber also helped me to understand why this moving experience did not happen every time and why it could not be forced.

In the fall of 1995 I enrolled in a seminar entitled, "The American Renaissance," in which Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address" was part of the required reading. While reading the words of Emerson's address, I was stunned by his similarity to Buber. His idea of finding divinity in the every day miracles of

existence and his notion that Christ should be viewed as an example of man's possibilities to be divine fell hand in hand with Buber's *I and Thou*. I began to entertain the belief that one can come to a clearer understanding of what Emerson is saying by using Buber's I - THOU philosophy as a guiding light.

But let us move back for a moment to Shaw's idea of a "Creative Principle." Though Emerson and Buber preceded Shaw, few have expressed this principle better. As poets, philosophers and religious leaders, these two men devoted their lives to cultivating this idea. That their achievements affected the artists of their day can be seen nowhere more acutely than in the poetry of Walt Whitman and the fiction of Bernard Malamud. Throughout "Song of Myself" one sees this "Creative Principle" as shaped by the impact that Emerson had on Whitman. Likewise, throughout *The Assistant*, one can see the influence that Martin Buber had on Malamud.

Both Emerson and Buber were driven by a quest to explain the divine potential of humans and the unique relationship that humans have with each other, with nature, and particularly with God. The idea that humans find their relationship with God through their experience with others and nature is significant to understanding Whitman and Malamud. It is the many philosophical writings of Emerson and Buber that won them such an important influence on

their readers. Many see Buber's *I and Thou* as being as much a prose-poem as it is a philosophical and theological work. However, it is the religious thought that presses on the reader and has sustained it as a monumental piece still read today. And though Emerson's "Divinity School Address" is not a work of poetry, its syntactical construction and literary qualities continue to lift its readers to lofty heights. Its obvious intent is to motivate its audience (future ministers) to reexamine the dogmas and traditions of their church and find more intimate and compelling ways to communicate with their future parishioners.

The intention of this thesis is to examine the philosophical and theological thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Martin Buber and to reveal the profound effect they had on the writings of Walt Whitman and Bernard Malamud. This thesis will address the following questions: How is it that a nineteenth-century American Christian sounds so much like a twentieth-century German Jew? What is it about Buber's philosophy that can help one better understand Emerson's thoughts? If art is to be seen as the divine creative process of man, then how were the poems of Whitman influenced by Emerson and what did Malamud gain by his understanding of Buber? Though the reader of this thesis may find it peculiar that I have historically inverted my approach by placing Buber as the eyeglass



to Emerson, I can only say that this is the way that it came to me. Actually, I can thank Robert Shaw for the beginning of my journey. I came to Buber through Shaw, and I came to understand Emerson through Buber. That is how I present it to you. Who knows? Maybe there is something Kantian in this approach. Since time and space are mere perceptions of our reality and do not have absolute knowable qualities of their own, it makes little difference if, when trying to understand thoughts, one starts at the beginning or the end. At present, one is more likely to find discussions on Emerson and Buber within literature classes than courses focused on philosophy or theology. The reason for this is that both men had profound influences on other writers. Although it would be equally justifiable to investigate Emerson's influence on the writings of Henry David Thoreau or Buber's influence on the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer, I have chosen to approach a more in-depth analysis of Emerson's influence on Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Buber's influence on Malamud's *The Assistant*. My argument is that, within their times, these men were considered the writer's philosophers because of their humanistic approach to theology and their unique ability to ennoble the human spirit. This idea is clearly seen in the works of Whitman and Malamud. Why did Emerson and Buber have such an influence on writers? What is it about their particular

beliefs that cause them to seem so similar? Though speaking to two different generations, it seems to me that each was saying something that attracted the writers of their day. Emerson and Buber were both concerned with a search for divinity. In their searching they reached similar conclusions: one can only find the divine spirit through one's engagement with others and nature; divinity is found in the everyday experiences of life; there is that constant existence of a condition in which the human can become divine; it is not in the extraordinary events but the ordinary events of life that one finds a connection with God.

There are three primary sections to this thesis. The first will investigate the similarities between the ideas of Emerson and Buber, using Buber as a way to better understand Emerson. The second will explore several historical influences that helped to shape each man's thoughts. This chapter will focus on how these men were affected by family, education, and religious environment; it makes no claim to revealing every important influence but seeks the common ground found in each man's history that may have led them to similar conclusions as to humans and their relationship to divinity. The final chapter will unveil specific evidence as to Buber's influence on Malamud and Emerson's influence on Whitman. By using Malamud's novel *The Assistant*, I hope to show many

examples of how Buber's *I and Thou* had a strong effect upon Malamud's creative thought. Likewise, by pointing to several sections of Whitman's "Song of Myself," I hope to show how one can come to a clearer understanding of Whitman's poetics if one realizes the importance of Emerson's influence. My desire is to prove that the connection between these four men is found in their understandings of the principles I stated above.



## CHAPTER II

### Using Martin Buber's I-Thou to Understand the Voice of Emerson

Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. (Emerson, "The Over-Soul" 190)

In the relation with God unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness are one. He who enters on the absolute relation is concerned with nothing isolated any more, neither things nor beings, neither earth nor heaven; but everything is gathered up in the relation. ( Buber, *I And Thou* 78-79 )

To form a deeper, richer and more vivid understanding of Ralph Waldo Emerson's religious utterances listen to the dialogical voice of Martin Buber. If one comes to terms with the I-THOU philosophy of Martin Buber, the world of dialogue, one will find that its use as a poetic guiding light will beam a clear vision on the words of Emerson. Two utterances come before humanity to speak of the uniqueness of one's ability to enter into divine relation. These voices sing with a freshness and release that rejects the character and behavior of authoritative religious attitudes and indeed sings of the individual's

ability to experience divine relationship in the ordinary events of life's passage. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an early nineteenth-century American poet, philosopher, and essayist sings in harmony with Martin Buber, an early twentieth-century German Jewish philosopher. Emerson is a man who speaks from a strong Protestant background to an early nineteenth century audience steeped in the traditions of the American Christian struggling for a unifying definition of Christianity. Buber speaks from a strong Zionist up-bringing to an early twentieth-century audience of European Jews struggling for a unification of Hasidism and Haskalah, "of Jewish mystical piety and Jewish Enlightenment"(Wood 4). Though Emerson's "The Divinity School Address" and Buber's *I and Thou* come to the reader from two very different cultures and nearly a century apart, after careful examination of both utterances, one finds that they are speaking of a very similar relationship between God and man and urging their audiences to begin rethinking past practices of religious institutions and look to a unique individualism that not only realizes the important role of the human in his or her universe, but celebrates one's relationship to God, a relationship that can only be found through intercourse with the world that is met each moment upon each moment. Throughout these two monumental works ("The Divinity School Address" and *I and Thou* ) one finds a profound similarity in both content and style. Both men ask their audiences to draw closer to the natural world. Emerson, for example, in the very opening of his

address, after a beautiful description of the Sunday evening setting, immediately impresses upon his audience his total affinity for his world when he says,

One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world, in which our senses converse. How wide; how rich; what invitation from every property it gives to every faculty of man! (Baym 944)

The key here is the "invitation from every property." All of nature's properties offer opportunities for what Buber refers to as the **I-Thou** relationship:

In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal *Thou*; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou*; in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*.

(Buber 6)

Two strong ideas seem to be shared by both of these men: first, that man's unique relationship with the divine is found through his hallowing of the nature which meets him every hour; second, that man has not seriously studied the pure humanity of Christ, having been too preoccupied with his divinity.

The struggle for the early nineteenth-century American was to find a balance between a new-found freedom of thought and expression and the strong traditional domination of established Christian churches that had been, and still were, accustomed to using tactics of



manipulation and fear to maintain possession of the parishioners allegiance. The importance of the individual and his role in his world is a theme that is not unique to this era; and one may find it fruitful, sitting this side of both centuries, to listen, not only to the dominant voices of Antebellum America, but the echoes thereafter, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how one searches for God. Emerson and Buber uttered from two different caves, two different tribes, during two different times; yet their utterance erupted from similar desires and exposed remarkably similar themes.

Martin Buber was born in Vienna in 1878 and grew to be a well known and highly respected philosopher and scholar. His devotion to Zionism, Hasidism, and the understanding of both Christianity and Judaism endeared him to a large audience of both Christians and Jews. His most profound and penetrating work is *I And Thou*, an intense utterance describing man's dialogical relationship with each other, with things, and with God. Published in 1923, it is clear that *I And Thou* was central to Buber's life and the strongest documentation of his dialogical philosophy. As he was reaching the final version of the piece he stated:

If I myself should designate something as the "central portion of my life work," then it could not be anything individual, but only the one basic insight that has led me not only to the study of the Bible, as to the study of Hasidism, but also to an independent philosophical presentation: that the I-THOU

relation to God and the **I-THOU** relation to one's fellow man are at bottom related to each other. (Buber, Friedman *Encounter On the Narrow Ridge* 128)

The final phrase of Buber's words enriches one's grasp of the key to Emerson's "Divinity School Address." Buber states "at bottom" the relationship one has to his fellow man is "related to" the relationship he has with God. Emerson commands, in his address to his young, hopeful, soon-to-be ministers: "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost,\_\_\_\_\_cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity. Be to them a man" (954).

Though it is no easy task to explain Buber's philosophy in a few lines, it is important to reveal to the reader a brief introductory view of the **I-IT/I-THOU** world. One of the clearest definitions can be found in the "Translator's Preface to the Second Edition" of *I And Thou* written by Ronald Gregor Smith, a Buber scholar who worked closely with Buber while writing a translation of his book:

There is *one* world, which is twofold; but this twofoldness cannot be allocated to (let us say) on the one hand the scientist with a world of **I t** and (let us say) on the other hand the poet with a world of **Thou**. Rather this twofoldness runs through the whole world, through each person, each human activity. To recognize this is to recognize the need for reserve, for concreteness, for what Buber elsewhere calls "the hallowing of the everyday." Any situation may become the vehicle of the

## "Eternal Thou."(Smith ix-x)

Immediately one is drawn to the similarity of a general attitude that is found in both Emerson and Buber: the crucial role of the individual and the individual's activities toward recognizing the divinity in each form of life at every hour. Emerson complains in his address that so many ministers sermonize in such a fashion that it is difficult to believe they live the same daily experiences as the audience whom they address:

He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. (951)

Buber would continue to clarify the need to communicate by explaining that for one to come to a relationship with God, one needs to come to a relationship with humanity. To relate *with* humans one must relate *to* humans. Emerson reveals to his audience that the ineffective minister has no sincere relationship with humanity, since he rarely identifies with them; therefore, there is little hope of both preacher and audience finding divine kinship. Buber would see the ineffective preacher's relationship to his parishioners as an **I-IT** association in which the preacher perceives his audience as an object to be used or manipulated rather than as an **I-THOU** relationship in which he sees an opportunity to find **THE ETERNAL THOU** through equal and shared discourse.



Throughout Emerson's "Divinity School Address" the reader senses that the core of his journey to God is his own powerful **I** which must seek his own uniqueness in order to embrace the uniqueness of each individual and, therefore, become the vehicle to embracing the **Eternal Thou**. In a journal entry written three months prior to his address, Emerson writes of a talk he had with "The Divinity School youths" concerning "Theism." He states "that the preacher should be a poet smitten with love of the harmonies of moral nature" (Emerson, Bliss & Perry 126). Nothing is more important than to realize one's own potential ability to embrace the divinity found in nature. Buber refers to this act as that of pure relationship which strips away the fragmentary view of a moment and creates that whole experience that is unity. It is one's choice to accept or deny the world, to bring fulfillment or bring void:

The primary word **I-THOU** can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the **THOU**; as I become **I**, I say **THOU**.

All real living is meeting. (Buber, *I And Thou* 11)

Emerson and Buber both believe that it is only through this harmonious act of engagement and intercourse with the world that one comes to a divine relationship.

Evelyn Barish in her book *Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy* argues



that Emerson's primary motive behind his address to the Divinity School at Harvard was to eliminate the soul's death which was occurring as a result of his audience carrying on the established institutional traditions and beliefs. Emerson felt that many of these traditions and rituals no longer brought humanity into a relationship with God. Emerson's proclamation was for his listeners to use their own minds, not that of the historical church, to communicate with each other. Barish describes Emerson's motive as fighting a type of death:

The enemy was death. Emerson's object was to save not their immortal but their mortal souls from the death-in-life for which he felt their pallid creed was preparing them. "Deal out to the people your life," he urged them, "life passed through the fire of thought."  
(Barish 146)

Though Barish is wise to use death of the soul as descriptive of Emerson's fight, her distinction between an immortal and a mortal soul would not have found favor with Emerson or Buber, for both would have argued that they are one and that it is found only in relationship with a living God. This, in fact, was one of the primary objectives for Emerson's address: to use one's own life experiences, one's own revelations, to find a God that is alive. "Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead"(949). Buber says that it is the individual's daily revelations in

life that bring one to the living God:

If you explore the life of things and of conditioned being  
you come to the unfathomable; if you deny the life of things and  
of conditioned being you stand before nothingness, if  
you hallow this life you meet the living God. (79)

Buber is saying that one meets the divine presence through his daily experiences with the world that is his. As he explains in his book *The Way of Man*, this religious attitude is not pantheism:

Thus, a divine spark lives in every thing and being, but  
each such spark is enclosed by an isolating shell.

Only man can liberate it and rejoin it with the origin:  
by holding holy manner, that is, so that his intention in doing  
so remains directed towards God's transcendence. Thus the  
divine immanence emerges from the exile of the 'shells.'

(5-6)

This is precisely Emerson's complaint with the ministers of his own time and the established traditions of the institutional churches. They have become so enclosed in their shells that they no longer express any sincere communication with their parishioners. They have lost their ability to come into close and personal relationship with the very people they are trying to reach. By continuing to practice worn-out rituals, beliefs, and traditions without sober reappraisals they have lost sight of humanity.

Nowhere can this misguided set of beliefs and practices be seen

more vividly than in Emerson's argument that many of the clergy and established churches had lost sight of the true humanity of Jesus. Emerson is troubled by the continued emphasis placed upon the pure godliness of Christ and the literal translations of past miracles to the exclusion of seeing the divine manhood of Jesus and the miracles of the every day. To see Jesus as strictly and exclusively God is to destroy his strength in giving all humanity a possibility of coming into a divine relationship with God. This idea may be understood clearly by viewing the words of Theodore Parker, a contemporary transcendentalist colleague of Emerson's, who, in his "Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," when talking about the misguided view of theology that focuses firmly on Jesus as God, states:

But if, as some early Christians began to do, you take a heathen view, and make him (Jesus) a God, the Son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense, much of the significance of his character is gone. His virtue has no merit, his love no feeling, his cross no burthen, his agony no pain. His death is an illusion, his resurrection but a show. (Parker, Miller *The American Transcendentalist* 126)

This is the point which Emerson makes as the "first defect of historical Christianity"(948). The transcendence of God occurs through the existence of man. God needs man to exist. Thus, the transcendentalist and the existentialist meet on the same path.



To better understand Emerson's view of Jesus, listen to Buber's explanation of the powerful I seen in the life of Christ. Buber views Jesus as the perfect illustration of an I that unconditionally meets his THOU:

How powerful, even to being overpowering, and how legitimate, even to being self-evident, is the saying of I by Jesus! For it is the I of unconditional relation in which the man calls his THOU Father in such a way that he himself is simply Son, and nothing else but Son. Whenever he says I he can only mean the I of the holy primary word that has been raised for him into unconditional being. If separation ever touches him, his solidarity of relation is the greater; he speaks to others only out of this solidarity. It is useless to seek to limit this I to a power in itself or this THOU to something dwelling in ourselves, and once again to empty the real, the present relation, of reality. I and THOU abide; every man can say THOU and is then I, every man can say Father and is then Son: reality abides. (66-67)

The key to Emerson's voice is found throughout this passage by Buber and is firmly grasped in the final phrase, "every man can say Father and is then Son: reality abides," for Emerson wants his audience to understand that within each one of them is the possibility of becoming that son.

Donald L. Berry in his article "Buber's View of Jesus as Brother"



offers the reader a further understanding of Buber's Jesus that exemplifies Emerson's position with clarity. Berry states that "Buber finds Jesus to be the paradigm, the prototypical representation of the fulfilled person in relation to God, but one who himself is not the end, the fulfillment, the accomplished work, the completion. Jesus appears in *I And Thou* as this unified, or 'fulfilled man'"(Berry 208). Berry reinforces his argument by focusing on Buber's act of pointing out "Jesus' deflection of faith in himself: 'There is none good, but God alone'( Mark 10:17)"(Berry 210). By understanding this principle vision of Christ, one reaches a distinct understanding of Emerson's frustration with the preacher and the church whose proselytizing focus is Jesus as God. Emerson is afraid that his audience will become blind to the possibility of finding the divine within themselves if they lose touch with this Christ paradigm and see it as one which can nevermore be obtained. Rather, Emerson says:

That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen. There is no longer a necessary reason for my being. Already the long shadows of untimely oblivion creep over me, and I shall de cease forever. (948-949)

As to the definition of miracles, once again one finds in the voice of Buber a guiding light to bring Emerson's view into sharper focus. Emerson showers his audience at the start of his "Divinity School Address" with luscious descriptions of the nature which surrounds

them. He asks his audience to "subdue and enjoy it"(944). Thus begins Emerson's definition of the miraculous, yet nowhere is his definition more clear than when he confides to them where he believes Jesus stood in relationship to miracles. Emerson says,

He spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the man is diviner. But the very word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain. (948)

If one can accept the belief that a miracle is a treasure in its truest form, then one may turn to the sixth section of Buber's *The Way of Man* to find a regeneration of Emerson's definition of the miraculous. In this section entitled "Here Where One Stands," Buber begins by sharing with his readers a story which "Rabbi Bunham used to tell young men who came to him for the first time" (36). The story is about a Rabbi from Cracow who had a particular dream which recurred three times in which "someone bade him look for a treasure in Prague, under a bridge which leads to the king's palace"(36). To satisfy his dream he traveled many miles to this place only to be told by the captain of the bridge that there was no treasure there. The captain further states, "As for having faith in dreams, if I had it, I should have had to get going when a dream once told me to go to Cracow and dig for treasure under the stove in the room of a Rabbi"(36). In the conclusion of the story the

Rabbi "traveled home, dug up the treasure from under the stove, and built the House of Prayer which is called 'Reb Eizik Reb Yekel's Shul'"(36-37). Buber goes on to explain that "There is something that can only be found in one place. It is a great treasure which may be called the fulfillment of existence. The place this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands" (37).

Emerson asks his audience to find the miracle in their every day lives and their every day world. In speaking of this daily miracle that shines he refers to what Buber calls "the hidden divine life"(38). As Buber further explains the meaning of the story about the Rabbi's search for treasure he shares with his reader a central belief of the Hasidic Jew:

It is said of a certain Talmudic master that the paths of heaven were as bright to him as the streets of his native town. Hasidism inverts the order: It is a greater thing if the streets of a man's native town are as bright to him as the paths of heaven. For it is here, where we stand, that we should try to make shine the light of the hidden divine life. (38)

This is the miracle which Emerson wants his audience to understand. It is not the unbelievable, extraordinary event that men should search for to come into a relationship with Christ, but rather a fresh and deeper vision of man's daily encounters: "To aim to convert a man by miracles, is a profanation of the soul. A true conversion, a true Christ, is now, as always, to be made, by the reception of beautiful



sentiments"(949).

One final point which Emerson wishes to drive home to his Harvard audience of soon-to-be-preachers is to be individual, is for each to listen to his own voice; be creative and invent anew. He asks them not to be imitators of the past and only repeat the utterances of past voices with no thought to their own uniqueness. He says,

Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say, 'I also am a man.' Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity . . . In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's. (953-954)

Emerson yearns for individuals to discover their own individualities and in so doing find unique passages to God and to humanity.

Once again, Emerson's definition of one's personal passage that is aware of one's own uniqueness and shuns imitation is echoed in the second section of Buber's *The Way of Man*, "The Particular Way." In this section Buber describes how each person may find his or her own way to serve God. He stresses the importance of not trying to imitate the greatnesses of the past:

Every man's foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never-recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, and be it even the



greatest, has already achieved. (16)

The most powerful line in the chapter, a line that virtually sums up the whole idea, is when Buber shares with his reader the words of a past Rabbi. Buber says, "The same idea was expressed with even greater pregnancy by Rabbi Zusya when he said, a short while before his death: 'In the world to come I shall not be asked: 'Why were you not Moses?' I shall be asked: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"(17). This is Emerson's point. He urged his audience to be more like themselves, not the systems, synods, established institutions, past preachers and teachers, but rather forge their own unique paths toward finding the divine relationship and new ways to reveal these paths to humanity. In "The Divinity School Address" he says: "I look for the new Teacher"(955), "That is always best which gives me to myself" (948), and "The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself" (948).

Buber calls this individual cry the I. This I which belongs to each man is essential to his relationship with others and with God. The strength of the I determines the strength of the relationship:

The stronger the I of the primary word I-THOU is in the twofold I, the more personal is the man.

According to his saying of I \_\_\_ it can be decided where a man belongs and where his way leads. The word I is the true shibboleth of mankind.

So listen to this word! (65)

Emerson's request to his audience is to search for intuition and have the courage to follow it once found. He asks his audience to act according to their own soul, their own natural feelings, and to rethink the established historical traditions and beliefs of the church: "Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms" (955). He feels so strongly towards this individual search that he is willing to risk his credibility with the very officials and teachers that fostered his level of intellect. His "Divinity School Address" created such a storm of controversy that Emerson was not invited back to speak at the Harvard Divinity School for thirty years thereafter. Robert E. Burkholder in his article, "Emerson, Kneeland, and the Divinity School Address," describes Emerson's dilemma at the time after his address as follows:

Immediately following the Divinity School Address and for several months thereafter, Emerson found himself in an untenable situation. Even though he had resigned his pastorate in 1832, he still identified with Unitarianism---the religion of his father, and, more important, his class--and there is no reason to suspect that he went to the Divinity School on that July evening with any less formidable a task in mind than the reform of Unitarianism away from narrow formalism toward a broader sort of religion based upon his recognition of the divinity in nature and in man. (9)

Buber would say that Emerson's contention is to come to God in one's

own existence, through the course of one's own being, in the paths of one's life, in the relationships of each meeting, and through the possibilities of searching for the **Eternal Thou** in the world, not away from the world, or as Emerson would say, not in search for fascinating miracles. Buber states in *I And Thou* ,

To look away from the world, or to stare at it, does not help a man to reach God; but he who sees the world in Him stands in His presence. "Here world, there God" is the language of **IT**; "God in the world" is another language of **IT**; but to eliminate or leave behind nothing at all, to include the whole world in the **THOU**, to give the world its due and its truth, to include nothing beside God but everything in him--this is full and complete relation. (79)

Emerson wants just this. He sees a church that has lost its ability to come into a complete relation with man and, therefore, lost its ability to find God. He wants his audience, those who will be officials in the churches of the future, to find within themselves the possibilities of seeing the **Eternal Thou** in their congregations and thus bring all to a more complete relationship with God.

Though there seems to be no historical evidence that Buber was affected by the utterances of Emerson, there is some evidence that he heard a voice from the Transcendentalists through Henry David Thoreau. A biography on Buber entitled *Encounter On the Narrow Ridge*, written by Maurice Friedman, makes mention of an occasion in which



Buber wrote some thoughts on Thoreau. Writing on the centennial of Thoreau's death, Buber testified in 1962 that reading Thoreau's classic tract, 'Civil Disobedience,' had had a strong impact on him in his youth, but that it was only much later that he understood why:

It was the concrete, the personal, the "here and now" in the writing that won my heart for it. Thoreau did not formulate a general principle as such; he set forth and grounded his attitude in a particular historical-biographical situation. He spoke to his reader in the realm of this situation common to them so that the reader not only learned why Thoreau at that time acted as he acted, but also--provided that this reader was only honest and unbiased--that he himself, the reader, must act, should the occasion present itself, in exactly that way if he were seriously concerned about making his human existence real. (417)

Here is where the transcendentalist of the nineteenth century and the existentialist of the twentieth century meet. It is through the thoughts of Buber that one finds the connection between the belief that one must transcend towards the divine and pull the divine into the existence of the everyday, grasping that moment upon moment as a way to God. Had Emerson's contemporaries understood this philosophy, later articulated as the **I-THOU** philosophy by Buber, the controversy over the "Divinity School Address" may not have been so strong. One sees clearly all of Emerson's arguments when viewing them through

the dialogical eyeglass. That Buber ever read Emerson has not been documented, though it seems likely given the fact that Buber was a voracious reader and, having been impressed by Thoreau, may have wanted to investigate more of the transcendentalist movement. There are, however, several very important sources that can be found to have been crucial to the development of the ideas of both Emerson and Buber. Plato, Immanuel Kant, Goethe, Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and certain aspects of the Hindu religion all seemed to play critical roles in the formulation of philosophies of Emerson and Buber. Both men had very good educations and read extensively most of what they could on various religions and philosophies. Both men immersed themselves in their respective religious branches and, interestingly, both were responsible for playing leadership roles in trying to reform many central aspects of their religions. The following chapter will investigate how each man came to his beliefs, and how, after having been raised and educated within his particular religion, each attempted to make fundamental reforms and cause his contemporaries to reinvestigate traditional rituals, practices, and beliefs.

## CHAPTER III

### **Emerson And Buber: Shaped by Family, Philosophy and Religion**

That a nineteenth-century Christian American and a twentieth-century German Jew would come to many of the same conclusions as to their philosophical and religious views is an intriguing mystery which may seem difficult to explain. How did these two men, who lived in different centuries, were raised in very different cultures, and influenced by different religious dogmas, reach such a comparable view of humanity's relationship to divinity and the human role as being? Under close investigation, many parallels can be found and brought to light to offer clues that link Emerson and Buber. Family influences, social circumstances, educational experiences, and religious movements of their day all had a profound effect on each man and were important influences toward moving them into prominence. Each man has his own unique history, yet it is startling to realize how many parallels can be found between the two. It is impossible to know a man's history in its totality, or to find every influence that helped to build his thoughts, yet when one is engaged in the business of investigating the importance of these major figures and their persuasive utterances, one must begin at the roots. Since the focus of this investigation is primarily philosophical and religious, likewise, the focus on the genesis will be the same. Some attention will be given to family and social



history, but primarily as it relates to each man's religious development.

Before following the streams that carried each man to his beliefs, it is important to note that neither Emerson nor Buber believed himself to possess a particular system of philosophy, but rather each saw himself constantly moving towards belief without bondage to systems or dogmas. In fact, it is that attitude of constant freshness and regeneration that both held to be vitally important in their lives; it may very well be one of the most important harmonies that these men possessed. In chapter twenty, "The Poet-Philosopher," of John Macleer's *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter*, Macleer speaks to this notion of Emerson not being associated with any one system:

He did not aspire to be the heir of any one philosophical tradition and, even had he wanted to be so regarded, he realized that he had studied none with sufficient thoroughness to merit that status. He never pretended to be a systematic philosopher. "I need hardly say," he owned in 1839, "to anyone acquainted with my thoughts, that I have no System."  
(159)

Likewise, Grete Schraeder in the introduction of his *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber* states that "Even in the last years of his

[Buber's] life he declared, 'I have no doctrine,' and described himself as 'atypical' and not confined to any particular intellectual system" (11). Though neither man wanted to be associated with a particular system of belief, that fact in itself may be seen as a way of believing and an important quality which both possessed.

Both Emerson and Buber suffered lost parents very early in their lives. Emerson's father died before Ralph Waldo reached eight years of age, and when Martin Buber was three years old his "mother literally disappeared without leaving a trace, and the home of his childhood was broken up" (Friedman 3). This loss for each man took its toll and acted as a significant event towards shaping his future. Though creating much emotional pain, these losses also served to link each man with other relatives who were to have much influence on their future. Emerson became strongly attached to his mother, Ruth, and his Aunt Mary, both of whom were to play major roles in his upbringing and education. Buber was sent to live with his paternal grandparents, Solomon and Adele Buber. Solomon was a rather wealthy business man "with a large estate near Lvov, then the capital city of the Austrian 'crown land,' Galicia" (Friedman 4).

Ruth, Emerson's mother, obviously played a major part in Emerson's life. Early in Ralph Waldo's life, Ruth provided the family with the "income she needed to maintain basic living standards

while keeping her sons in college by running a succession of boardinghouses" (Macleer 42). Yet what is most important to note is the order in which she prioritized the needs of her children: "She once specified these priorities for her children: 'Their souls, their minds next, their bodies last'" (42). From this statement one becomes acutely aware of the type of support Ralph Waldo was to receive in his future studies. One of the most telling descriptions of Ruth and her relationship with her sons is found in Macleer's book. Macleer relates a story that is common to many families, yet one that gives his reader a glimpse of Ruth's love for her children and a taste of the family atmosphere that surrounded Ralph Waldo in his youth:

On some holiday, perhaps a day of parades and other festivities, he went off with his brother William and was gone till bedtime. He never imagined that his mother---that serene and earnest woman who each morning retired to her bed chamber for an hour of silent meditation and prayer--seemingly untouched by anxiety, would be anxious for his welfare. He was amazed, therefore, when, on their return, she cried out, with genuine feeling and thanksgiving, "My sons, I have been in an agony for you!" . . . "I went to bed," he related years later, "in bliss at the interest she showed." In



such a household, obviously, intense affection was not usually shown or even meant to be inferred. (16)

Almost as important as Emerson's mother's influence on the boy was that of his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. Aunt Mary was a central figure throughout Emerson's life. Aunt Mary was a strong and caring person who showed as much concern for Ralph Waldo's instruction and future as his own mother. Emerson loved his aunt and, as shown by the many times he consulted her during crucial moments in his life, had a deep respect for her character. What makes Aunt Mary an even more important personality is that she stood, theologically, on the very ground that Emerson later was to reject. Mary was deeply attached to the Calvinist way of thinking:

She took it wholeheartedly. God was omnipotent and man existed only to glorify Him. Human nature was totally depraved. This world, as decreed by the divine vengeance, was a vale of tears. Happiness was not to be found in this life but the next. Our duty here was to recognize our own worthlessness and that of all earthly things and to live a strict conformance with the dictates of the Bible. (Macleer 30)

Needless to say, Aunt Mary became very concerned with the direction that her nephew began to take, in his youth and later, yet she never

withheld her complete love for him throughout his life. What is even more ironic is that from her vigorous habit of reading every book she could find, Emerson was inspired by her example and was to formulate many of his ideas from that which he read. His respect for Aunt Mary was so strong that at one of the most critical moments in his life, the time at which he delivered one of his most important and controversial sermons, "The Lord's Supper," the one that cost him his position as pastor at The Second Church in Boston, he first went to Aunt Mary to argue his points with her and discuss what he knew was going to be a possible end to his ministry.

As Emerson received support from his mother and aunt, Martin Buber was fortunate to have been raised by his grandparents. Solomon Buber "was a highly respected scholar and had introduced his grandson to the language and tradition of his forefathers" (Schaeder 24). Solomon Buber was a self-taught man who devoted much of his life to reading, the relationships of languages, and religion. He is still considered today to be the architect of "*the* authoritative, critical editions of the Midrash - - a special class of Talmudic literature made up of interpretations of the Bible, wise sayings, and rich saga" (Friedman 8). Solomon was also responsible for having provided Martin with a variety of educational experiences at various schools and by private tutors.

Also important to Martin's beginnings as an enthusiastic reader was his grandmother, Adele, who, aside from devoting most of her time to handling the business affairs of her husband, also took time each day to read as much of the German classic literature as she could. Adele grew up in a small orthodox community where women were not permitted to read, or if they did read, they were to read only religious books, yet Adele secured a secret place in her house where she would hide each day and read everything she could lay her hands on, particularly the German classics. It was from her great love for the German language and the German classics that Martin became such an enthusiastic reader. Both Solomon and Adele provided Martin with all that he needed to launch him into a life devoted to religion, community affairs, and professional scholarship. His future love for theology, philosophy, and literature was very much the fruit of Solomon and Adele's work.

As important as these early family influences were on both Emerson and Buber, they cannot, in themselves, account for the tremendous impact these men were to have on their era. Education and a huge appetite for learning played a critical role in their philosophical development. Both were strongly influenced by past and current philosophers and religious leaders.

Emerson, deeply immersed in Greek and Latin studies, was



particularly impressed by Platonic and Neoplatonic writings. As Macleer states, "The notions of overarching Unity, of a God-like One, of mysticism, which engrossed him, do not exist in Plato but only in Neoplatonic interpretations of his work. Their influence on Emerson's essay on Plato is marked" (160). Emerson was introduced to Neoplatonic thought through Ralph Cudworth's book, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), which he read while at Harvard. Cudworth gathered insights that led Emerson to speak of "an energetic principle which imposes God's command upon matter. Cudworth insisted, also, that Spirit controlled Nature. These ideas, of course, had a major impact on Emerson's thinking" (Macleer 160). Many scholars believe that this is the principle seed from which grew Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul. Though some argue that the *Bhagavad Gita* was the primary influence that led Emerson to this idea, Macleer argues that "since Emerson first read the Gita only after he had written 'The Over-Soul,' it could not have been his source" (161). Whatever the case may be, one cannot dismiss Platonic influence on Emerson given the numerous entries in his journals that deal with his thoughts on Plato.

Like Emerson, Buber was also greatly impacted by the writings of Plato. That Plato's dialogues had their influence on Buber can be seen in Buber's "first large work, *Daniel*, whose subtitle *Dialogues*

on *Realization* indicates its resemblance to the style form of a Platonic dialogue" (Schaeder 105). Interestingly enough, *Daniel* also smacks of Eastern philosophies like "The Over-Soul"; yet, unlike Emerson, Buber had spent a considerable time studying Eastern religious thought before composing *Daniel*. Similar to "The Over-Soul," the idea put forth in *Daniel* is the unification of the individual with God, a realization of God and existence:

*Realization* here means God wants to be realized -- not through "religion" but through every individual who in his own sphere does what is right, unifying, and formative, and who "loves the world to the end of unconditionality." *Daniel* is a life teaching without fixed religious obligation, an existentialism which at the same time signifies a West-East synthesis. To be, as Poet-Philosopher, an apostle of Eastern teaching to the West is the task Buber had set before himself in writing *Daniel*. The spirit that this work breathes can be summed up in the concluding words of the dialogue with the monist: "Let us believe in man!" (Schaeder 105-106)

Though the influence that the writings of and about Platonic thought can be seen throughout many of Emerson's and Buber's writings, "The Over-Soul" and *Daniel* are the strongest evidence that Plato played a major role in each man's thoughts.

Also pivotal to shaping the minds of these two men were the philosophical thoughts of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Both men point to Kant as helping them break through early difficult periods of confusion to a new clarity of ideas and philosophical expressions. It was Kant's explanation of the distinction between Reason and Understanding that helped both men advance towards their ideas of realizing divinity.

Kant, who coined the word "transcendental," supplied Emerson with a way to explain the power of intuition. Through Kant, Emerson began to see reason as "the Divine Essence" and as he wrote

in his journal in June 1835, "Reason is the superior principle. Its attributes are Eternity & Intuition. We belong to it, not it to us." He [Emerson] saw the function of Reason as integrative. Observing the many, it composes them into one. It prophesies as well: "The Understanding listening to Reason, on one side, which saith *It is* , & to the senses on the other side, which say *It is not* , takes middle ground & declares *It will be* . Heaven is the projection of the Ideas of Reason on the plane of the Understanding." (Macleer 164)

Emerson saw each mind as part of that Reason; yet unlike Kant, who believed there would always exist within understanding a realm of the unknowable, Emerson, aligning man's mind with the universal



mind, believed that, through deep searching, the world could be knowable:

Emerson's championship of self-reliant individualism was an inevitable consequence of his espousal of German Idealism. If our deepest thoughts share the same Reason with the world, if each mind is part of that Reason, and if ideas alone are real, then we have every reason to trust our own thoughts: To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, - that is genius.

(Macleer 165-166)

For Buber, the authority of Immanuel Kant is even more pronounced. Buber credits Kant for helping save him from suicide. At the age of fourteen, Buber began to struggle with the entire concept of space and time. The idea of eternity was so difficult for him to deal with that he became overwhelmed with suicidal notions. Though this event is very difficult to explain, one might come to a clearer understanding by reading Maurice Friedman's offering of a quote by Buber from his "Autobiographical Fragments,"

A necessity I could not understand swept over me: I had to try again and again to imagine the edge of space, or its edgelessness, time with a beginning and an end or time without beginning or end, and both were equally impossible,

equally hopeless -- yet there seemed to be only the choice between the one or the other absurdity. Under an irresistible compulsion I reeled from one to the other, at times so closely threatened with the danger of madness that I seriously thought of avoiding it by suicide. (16)

Friedman goes on to explain that it was only after Buber read Kant's *Prolegomena to All Future Metaphysics* that he found solace in his struggle with space and time. Kant's ideas that space and time were mere forms of our sensory perception helped the young Buber move towards a philosophical peace; these were now concepts that fell into the region of the unknowable and did not have to be dealt with as an absolute answer.

Friedman explains that Kant's concepts were not only responsible for giving Buber some respite from his frustration, but also helped to lead him on the road to the dialogical relationship of I-THOU:

The question was explained as unanswerable by nature, but, at the same time, he was liberated from having to ask it.

. . . At this moment, there appeared to Buber the intuition of eternity, an intuition that even at the end of his life he held to be the most remarkable intellectual achievement of man. Eternity is not endless time. It is rather Being as such, Being that is beyond the reach alike of the

finitude and infinity of space and time since it appears only in space and time but does not enter into this appearance. Buber not only gained an inkling of the reality of eternity as quite different from either the infinite or the finite, he also glimpsed the possibility of a connection between himself---a man---and the eternal. Thus, in his uncharacteristic response to Kant, Buber got an inkling not only of the "I-It," or subject-object relation, but also of the "I-Thou." (17)

Immanuel Kant was instrumental in helping both Emerson and Buber along their road to a relationship with the divine.

Though one cannot repudiate the importance that philosophy and literature had on Emerson and Buber, it was the interpretation of the Bible and its impact on their religious climate that became central and the predominant arena in which both men would concentrate the bulk of their energies. Religion and religious movements were their primary concern, and it was here that both men were to have their most important experiences. Emerson was born into a family historically devoted to the Unitarian Church; his father and grandfather were Unitarian ministers. His brother, William, studied to be a Unitarian minister and that was the course determined for Ralph Waldo. Likewise, Buber, through the influence of his grandparents, devoted a major portion of his life's direction to



Judaism. "Buber's grandfather, Solomon, was, as Buber himself described him, the last great scholar of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment" (Friedman). To come to an understanding of the hub of Emerson's and Buber's belief, it is vital that one have some idea of the religious movements to which they belonged, for it was within these religious movements that they concentrated the majority of their efforts and worked steadfastly for reform. It is also through their tireless efforts towards religious reform that they arrive at a mutual focus: the humanity of Jesus Christ.

In early nineteenth-century America, the Unitarian Church became an important movement that began to "discard the earlier faith in the existence of a Trinity and retain belief in the unity of god, accepting Christ as divine in the same sense that a human being is but not as a member of a divine Trinity" (Holman and Harmon 488). The Unitarian Church became the domain on which most of the important speakers of the transcendental movement initiated their doctrines. Unitarianism has been credited, or blamed, depending on where one stands, for having revised much of Calvinism and chiseled away many of the fundamental dogmas of the early Protestant church. Perry Miller, in the introduction to his book, *The Transcendentalists*, describes the Unitarianist movement as follows:

Unitarianism was the culmination of a century-long campaign for freedom, elegance, and liberality. Men like Andrews Norton and Francis Bowen quite properly regarded themselves as the guardians of a great tradition, as being progressive and forward-looking men. Furthermore, it was Unitarianism that overcame the provincial hostility of Puritan New England to belles-lettres and to the fine arts, that pried open the doors of those enchanting vistas that were spread before the generation of the 1830's. Buckminster, Everett, and Channing set the model for a minister who could be literate rather than pedantic, who could quote poetry rather than eschatology, who could be a stylist and could scorn controversy. (10)

In this vein, one can see, from Emerson's first sermon "Pray Without Ceasing," given in 1826, to his controversial sermon "The Lord's Supper," given in 1832, and finally his 1838 "Divinity School Address," the Unitarianist idea rise to its absolute peak. Because of his noticeable lack of focus on Christ as pure divinity, his belief that the great miracles of Christ were not central to Christianity, and his outspoken desire to question many of the ritualistic practices within the church, Emerson became known by many as "the devil's henchman," and transcendentalism became characterized by Andrews Norton, as "absolutely and not remotely of infidel tendency

and import" (Macleer 251). Emerson's Aunt Mary was deeply disturbed by the drift her nephew was taking after she heard his first sermon:

She told him flatly that his sermon lacked "unction and authority and allusion to a venerable name." That was a shrewd thrust. The name of Jesus is nowhere mentioned in the sermon and there are but single allusions to "the Son of God" and "the Christian religion." (Macleer 86)

Emerson's desire to place far less emphasis on "The Lord's Supper," as expressed in his sermon of 1832, was so controversial that it eventually cost him his position as minister at the Second Church in Boston. He was never to retain another full-time appointment in the ministry. Though this was a difficult adjustment for Emerson, his integrity would not allow him to continue in a ministerial office when his steadfast heart and soul were no longer in it. To be a hypocrite and continue to practice what he no longer believed would be to go against all for which he stood.

Another religious movement that had a profound influence on Emerson was Quakerism. In fact, it was after reading Thomas Clarkson's *Portraiture of Quakerism* that Emerson formulated the ideas that he set forth in his Lord's Supper sermon. He later read William Sewel's *History of the Quakers* and Henry Tuke's *Memoirs of*



*the Life of Fox* . Both of these works furthered his attraction to the Quakers to such a degree that "he later told his cousin David Greene Haskins, an Episcopal clergyman, 'I am more of a Quaker than anything else'" (Macleer 120). That Emerson was impressed by the Quakers can be seen in one of his journal entries written while he was in New Bedford on a lecture tour. In his journal he quoted a portion of a record in which there was a debate in the Quaker's Monthly Meeting. Mary Newhall, a Quaker from Lynn, upset the Quaker meeting at New Bedford:

Feb. 1823, "M[ary]. N[ewhall]. rose in the meeting & began with  
As the stream does not rise higher than the fountain, & spoke  
of the Mosaic dispensation in which the performance of certain  
rituals constituted the required religion, the more spiritual  
dispensation of our Saviour, of the advent of Christ & the yet  
more inward & spiritual dispensation of the present day.

These dispensations she compared to the progressive stages of  
the human heart in the work of religion, from loving our  
neighbor as ourselves to loving our enemies & lastly arriving  
at that state of humility when self would be totally abandoned  
& we could only say Lord be merciful to me a sinner."

(Ferguson Vol. IV 268)

Emerson was impressed by the Quaker's ability to cut to the heart of

Christianity and question the validity and importance of ritual as a way to divinity.

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Just as various religious movements played a vital role in Emerson's life, Buber must be understood as a man who was greatly affected by his religious environment. There were two primary Jewish movements that impacted Buber's thought: Zionism and Hasidism. Buber became an important leader in the Zionist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Later, he was one of the most prominent scholars of Hasidism, a "popular mystical movement of East European Jewry founded by the Baal-Shem Tov (Good Master of the name of God), Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760)" (Friedman 37).

Like transcendentalism for Emerson, Zionism, for Buber, offered a movement that he could use to sound his ideas and a forum for publishing his essays and poetry. More than transcendentalism, Zionism was a political movement as well as a religious one.

Zionism was a political and secular movement started by Theodor Herzl. Its primary goals were to react to a growing sense of anti-Semitism throughout Western Europe and to begin to establish a

uniquely Jewish state in Palestine. The most political example of anti-Semitism that helped to spur Herzl into founding the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, was the unjust imprisonment of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army. Dreyfus was “imprisoned for years on Devil’s Island, until the great French writer Emile Zola won Dreyfus’s freedom in a controversial action that shook France to its foundations” (Friedman 23).

Buber joined the movement in 1898, a year after the first congress, and saw it as a chance to express his ideas of a Jewish Renaissance. From the beginning of his involvement, Buber saw the purpose of Zionism somewhat differently than its leader. Buber felt the movement should have a much deeper and more personal effect, emphasizing religion as much, if not more, than politics. By 1901, Buber became a leader in what was known as the “Democratic Faction” within the Zionist movement. This faction was primarily interested in moving the Zionists beyond mere political motivations to a spirituality embracing nature and art as a way to Jewish renewal. This mini-revolt created a division between Herzl and Buber that was never to be truly resolved. Friedman explains the issue as follows:

In 1901, at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, it was Martin



Buber who played the central role in the successful fight that the "Democratic Fraction" waged against Theodor Herzl for official recognition of the decisive importance of cultural Zionism. The one-sided spirituality of the ghetto, which regarded nature, the human body, and art as inimical, had been replaced in recent times, Buber stated in his speech on Jewish art, by a rebirth of creativity, the activity of the whole organism, and the renewal of seeing. (30)

For Buber, the Zionist movement provided him a vital opportunity to grow as a leader and teacher as well as an important forum for his personal expressions. Also, his controversial split with Herzl, a man whom he deeply admired and respected, brought to Buber a realization of the importance of dialogue. He came to understand that behind every issue is a person and to take one side of an issue against another was complicated by one's inability to separate the issue from the person.

Finally, one cannot separate Buber from Hasidism. In 1904, Buber came upon a book entitled *The Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal-Shem*. Buber described the impact this way:

It was then that, overpowered in an instant, I experienced the Hasidic soul. The primally Jewish opened to me, flowering to newly conscious expression in the darkness of exile: man's

being created in the image of God I grasped as deed, as becoming, as task. And this primally Jewish reality was a primal human reality, the content of human religiousness....

The image out of my childhood, the memory of the zaddik and his community, rose upward and illuminated me: I recognized the idea of the perfected man. At the same time I became aware of the summons to proclaim it to the world. (39-40)

Buber went on to write many books and translations devoted to Hasidism. For Buber, Hasidism became one of the main arteries that was to pump the blood of dialogical philosophy. Its focus on individual uniqueness, similar to Emerson's focus on self-reliance, became the framework to a true relationship between man and man, and man and God, "for one can be truly open and ready to meet others only if one stands on the ground of one's uniqueness and deepens that ground through each new meeting" (Friedman 49). Buber would later refer to this meeting as "the between" in which the spirit of God exists. Through the teachings of the Baal-Shem, Buber came to understand dialogue as panentheism rather than pantheism. Friedman explains this idea as follows:

This is clearly *panentheism*, in which existence is only potentially holy and needs to be hallowed, and not *pantheism*, in which the world is seen as already holy. It is life and world

affirming rather than life denying. (50)

This is where Buber and Emerson meet: rather than denounce the natural and creative forces of nature and man as something to be constrained and dealt with through asceticism, embrace these forces and turn them to the hallowing of God and the search for divinity.

Emerson and Buber became compelling figures in their own time and in their own right because they were able to build upon their pasts, their educations, and their religious fervor to create new and original ideas. Though each man denied that he should be seen as developing a particular system of philosophical thought, one cannot repudiate the important influence they had on many who read their works and understood their thoughts. For example, as will be revealed in the following chapter, one would be remiss if one did not see Emerson's influence on Walt Whitman and Buber's influence on Bernard Malamud. When viewing any work of art, it is important to take into account the influence that helped lead the artist to his or her creation. To read "Song of Myself" and not see Emerson, or to read *The Assistant* and not know Martin Buber, would be like listening to a string quartet with two members absent. What Whitman found in Emerson and what Malamud found in Buber was a sympathetic voice that helped them to better understand their own belief in the possibility of the human becoming divine. What binds



these men together is the ennobling of human life -each in his time- when writers were searching for voices to express a humanistic approach to divinity. The following chapter will attempt to show how Emerson and Buber, viewed as the artist's philosophers, affected Whitman and Malamud.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Influence of Emerson and Buber on Whitman and Malamud

"The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of love around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men" (Emerson, "American Scholar" 944).

In that dread and that love one finds the continuation of the philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Martin Buber flowing into the writings of Walt Whitman and Bernard Malamud. One begins by coming to a fuller understanding of Emerson's transcendental philosophy through Buber's *I-THOU*; one continues by seeking to understand the immense impact these men had on the writers of their day. How strongly were their beliefs embraced and where can this be seen? A close study of the poetry of Walt Whitman and the fiction of Bernard Malamud reveals that Emerson and Buber, each in his respective time and place, did have a very strong influence on their literary contemporaries. By placing "Song of Myself" under the Emerson impression, one finds numerous influences of the transcendental thought throughout Whitman's poetics. Likewise, *The Assistant*, a novel by Bernard Malamud, published in 1957, is saturated with the Hasidic influences and the *I AND THOU* philosophy of Martin Buber. What is striking is that even though "Song of Myself" and *The Assistant* initially seem as different as the north pole from Acapulco, one finds the primary result of a messianic message and a hallowing of the

everyday in both. It is as if two men reach the exact same destination by starting in totally opposite directions. Malamud is as much of a "pessimist who believes" (Richman 73) in the power of Buber's "holy insecurity" and ability to find hope in the everyday as a path to divinity, as Whitman is an optimist who sings Emerson's message of finding the miracles in the ordinary and renewed strength within one's own uniqueness. Both writers embrace the transcendental and the existential, and, though on the surface it seems the body of work they produce is very different, it is in the end, similar.

From the central character of Morris Bober to the complex relationship between Frank Alpine and Helen Bober, one sees throughout Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* the influence of Martin Buber. Though one can find many aspects of Buber's philosophy throughout Malamud's novel, there are two central ideas that Malamud chooses to bring into focus again and again: the human's constant fluctuation between the two-fold world of I-IT and I-THOU and one's ability to experience the **Eternal Thou** through one's relationship with others and ability to realize his or her own uniqueness by embracing these relationships.

Without even noting Malamud's obvious linking of one of his central character's names to Martin Buber, one may use Morris Bober as an example of a man who constantly displays the two-fold world of I-IT/I-THOU. If one looks at the I-IT relationship as that of the world to be used and the I-THOU relationship as that of the world to be met,



which is how Ronald Gregory Smith explains it in the introduction of his 1958 translation of Buber's *I and Thou* previously quoted, then through the character of Morris Bober, Malamud gives many examples of both forms of dialogue. It is important to understand that every person lives in the two-fold world of **I-IT/I-THOU**. That humanity measures itself by and uses the world of objects to survive is inevitable; yet, to do so exclusively is to deny one's being. "And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this: without */t* man cannot live. But he who lives with */t* alone is not a man" (Buber, *I and Thou* 34 ).

There are two primary relationships in which Morris is constantly engaged throughout the novel: his relationship with his wife, Ida ; and his relationship with the assistant, Frank. Though with both of these relationships the reader finds Morris, at times, using them as in an **I - It** attitude, the strength of the relationships is in their ability to return time and again to an **I-Thou** view that seems to be the most natural for all concerned.

One of the central relationships found in the novel is the relationship between Morris and Ida. Despite her constant nagging and whining, Morris is acutely aware of the important role that she plays in his life. This role is one that involves both an **I-It** dialogue and most importantly an **I-Thou** dialogue. Ida is very helpful to Morris when it comes to the running of the grocery store and the overall maintenance of the household. She helps to run the grocery during times when Morris is ill or needs to rest. She shows constant concern

for Morris's health as she stomps on the floor whenever he begins to cough from smoking, and she nags him not to shovel the snow so soon after his return from the hospital. She provides him with comfort and relief in times of sickness. In this sense, Ida's relationship is useful to Morris because she can answer or respond to his needs. Yet the reader is not blind to the uniqueness of their relationship and their ability to speak freely, though harshly at times, to each other about their losses and their gains. The fact that they are still together and share each other's pain and suffering is a testimony to the depth of their relationship. Though one is hard pressed to find moments of warmth and intimacy between them, there is little doubt that their relationship is strong and lasting. They celebrate moments of success with their children and their business, and they comfort each other in moments of pain and suffering, such as the death of their son Ephraim and the constant struggle to keep the grocery afloat. Though she nags at Morris about his willingness to give food and comfort that they can't afford to give to Frank, she does, in the end, give in to Morris' wishes. Their very character at times seems to be almost interchangeable as one sees how their attitudes toward Frank alternate back and forth. At first, Morris welcomes Frank and Ida rejects him; yet towards the end, Morris reluctantly rejects Frank as Ida begins to accept him. The reader becomes aware of this closely entwined relationship when Morris, returning from the hospital, desires to go down to the store:

"He [Frank] keeps open all day?"

"From morning till night---why I don't know."

"Why he stays here?" he asked with sudden irritation.

"He stays," she shrugged.

"What do you pay him?"

"Nothing--he says he don't want."

"So what he wants--my bitter blood?"

"He says he wants to help you."

He muttered something to himself. "You watch him sometimes?" .....

"Morris," she said hesitantly, "he gave you good help, believe me. Keep him one more week till you feel stronger."

"No." He buttoned his sweater and despite her pleading went shakily down the stairs. (236)

Though the reader is aware at this point that Morris knows something about Frank that Ida does not (namely that he has stolen from Morris), it is still a critical moment in which Malamud helps his reader understand the interchangeability and depth of Morris and Ida's relationship. The two in their concern for each other become as one.

Buber's idea of man's constant fluctuation between the I-IT/I-THOU leads the reader to an investigation of how Malamud treats one of the most prominent relationships in the novel: the relationship between Morris Bober and Frank Alpine. When continuing to investigate the fluctuation between the I-It/I-THOU realms, no



relationship offers the reader more examples of this complex reality than that of Morris and Frank. From the hold-up which occurs early in the novel to the very end in which the reader sees Frank standing on Morris' coffin, Malamud is constantly revealing to his reader Frank's evolution in the two-fold world of I-IT/I-THOU, an evolution that gradually moves Frank from viewing his world as one to be used, to one to be met. During the hold-up the reader sees Frank in a state of what Buber would call "heart-searching" as Frank experiences "A cracked mirror hung behind him on the wall above the sink and every so often he turned to stare into it" (28). This view of Frank created by Malamud is parallel to an Hasidic tale which Buber uses in the opening chapter of *The Way of Man*. In this tale the Zaddik explains to a prison guard that when God asks Adam, "Where art thou?" it is not because God does not know where to find Adam, but rather that God is asking Adam to ask himself, "Where are you in your world?" In other words I have come this far in my life, yet where am I? (10). This is precisely the attitude of Frank at this moment of the hold-up. Frank has entered the store with the motive to steal from Morris, therefore, using him for his own gains; yet by staring in the cracked mirror he looks deep within himself to search his heart and ends up offering water:

The one at the sink [Frank] hastily rinsed a cup and filled it with water. He brought it to the grocer, spilling some on his apron as he raised the cup to his lips. Morris tried to swallow but managed only a dry sip. His

frighted eyes sought the man's but he was looking elsewhere. (28-29)

Malamud gives his reader a stark contrast between Ward Minoque and Frank demonstrating Frank's ability to enter into a sympathetic relationship with Morris whereas Ward never views the Jew any differently than as a "Jew liar" to steal from: "I say he hid it," the heavy one [Ward] snarled, "and I'm gonna get it if I have to crack his goddam head"(28). This scene is crucial to the reader's understanding of Frank and Morris' relationship as it grows from a stormy beginning. The scene also reveals Morris' constant concern for others as he contemplates, after the hold-up, his failure to support Helen and Ida:

but Morris saw the blow descend and felt sick of himself, of soured expectations, endless frustration, the years gone up in smoke, he could not begin to count how many. He had hoped for much in America and got little. And because of him Helen and Ida had less. He had defrauded them, he and the bloodsucking store. (29-30)

In spite of Morris' pessimistic attitude the reader cannot help but be touched by his concern, not for himself, but for others.

Shortly after the hold-up incident, Frank begins his road to redemption as he endears himself to Morris by sharing his life's history. At first Morris is not receptive, "Whatever he wants to say, Morris thought, let him say it to somebody else" (39). However, he gradually finds himself listening with true compassion and sincere

caring, "The grocer was moved. Poor boy" (40). When Frank shares his feelings of nothingness and restlessness in his life, Morris understands. Frank says, "The result is I move into a place with nothing, and I move out with nothing, You understand me?" "Yes," said Morris (42). Slowly Malamud is creating a relationship between two men in which both, through this meeting, begin on a road to redemption. The reader gradually realizes that Frank replaces Ephraim, Morris' dead son, and Morris becomes the father that Frank never had, creating, though from the pessimist who believes in "holy insecurity," the messianic in both. "Happening upon happening, situation upon situation, are enabled and empowered by the personal speech of God to demand of the human person that he take his stand and make his decision" (*I And Thou* 136-137). Morris and Frank begin to take their stand and decide to form a relationship that may lead to a fulfillment of both lives.

Though their relationship begins to evolve toward an I-THOU dynamic, it will not be without many moments of fluctuation between love and skepticism. Frank is constantly floating between the urge to help himself by continuing to steal from Morris and putting money back in hopes of washing away the evil he has committed. He also struggles with his strong desire to confess his crime to Morris and the fear that, by confessing, he will lose Morris' trust. Morris struggles with how to view Frank. At some moments he is willing to embrace him like a son, yet at other moments he is plagued with doubts about



his character:

As for what he would do with Frank, after long pondering the situation, thinking how the clerk had acted concerning their increase in business--as if he alone had created their better times--Morris at length decided that Frank had not--as he had assumed when Karp told him the news--tried to trick him into believing that he was responsible for the store's change for the better. The grocer supposed that the clerk, like himself, was probably ignorant of the true reason for their change in luck. Maybe he shouldn't have been, since he at last got out during the day, visited other places on the block, heard news, gossip--maybe he should have known, but Morris felt he didn't, possibly because he wanted to believe he was their benefactor. Maybe that was why he had been too blind to see what he should have seen, too deaf to have heard what he had heard. It was possible. (189)

It is not until the end that Malamud fulfills the relationship of the two men by having Frank rise from Morris's grave after having slipped into it and eventually taking his place as the grocer and caretaker for his family; a vision which may well be seen as a type of descent, symbolizing the world of IT, to resurrection, symbolizing his turning towards THOU. From Morris, Frank is given a new beginning, and from Frank, Morris' primary concern for his family is resolved. Each man gains what would not have been possible without their meeting: Frank

comes to God by way of conversion to Judaism as shown to him by Morris' example, and Morris is rewarded by God for his unshaking devotion to man by having Frank continue his life of caring for others. Though in the end Morris feels as if his life were a waste,

He thought of his love with sadness. For his family he had not provided, the poor man's disgrace. Ida was asleep at his side. He wanted to awaken her and apologize. He thought of Helen. It would be terrible if she became an old maid. He moaned a little, thinking of Frank. His mood was of regret. I gave away my life for nothing. It was the thunderous truth.

Was the snow still falling? (272-73)

The reader is well aware that Malamud has shown God as giving Morris what he wants most: a purpose; that purpose being salvation for Frank and, therefore, a man to care for Morris' family. Frank now replaces Morris as both the grocer and the religious man. In the final paragraph of the novel, the reader finds Frank in the very same position as Morris at the beginning of the novel: Frank sells the Polish woman her rolls for three cents in the early morning, he stands by the window and reads the paper as Nick slights him by patronizing Toast's store, he talks with Breitbart (the light bulb salesman), and he suffers the reality that he "had only six customers all morning" (296). Yet it is in the final two paragraphs that Malamud reveals to his reader the transformation which has occurred and the true conversion that has

elevated Frank to a new height that curiously mixes both the Christian and the Jew, a possible sign of Buber's ideas of tolerance, which are, to this day, embraced by both Christians and Jews:

As he was reading he had this pleasant thought. He was St. Francis come dancing out of the woods in his brown rags, a couple of scrawny birds flying around over his head. St. F. stopped in front of the grocery, and reaching into the garbage can, plucked the wooden rose out of it. He tossed it into the air and it turned into a real flower that he caught in his hand. With a bow he gave it to Helen, who had just come out of the house. "Little sister, here is your little sister the rose." From him she took it, although it was with the love and best wishes of Frank Alpine.

One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew. (296-97)

Malamud has created within this paragraph a blending of ideas found in both Emerson and Buber. The Christian transcendental Emerson is seen in the image of St. Francis and his relationship to the divine through nature and the Hasidic Buber whose influence is seen in Frank's ability to create from garbage that which is beautiful and use it to offer himself in a relationship with Helen which also leads to a relationship with God. That which was dead and discarded becomes



real and embraced, a true example of Frank realizing his own uniqueness and his ability to "hallow the everyday," building upon his relationship with Helen.

Sidney Richman, in his book, *Bernard Malamud*, says, "Although Frankie Alpine and the Bobers are spilled on stage like the dregs of victimization, they pulsate with an ironic spirituality that suggests hope at the very moment their loneliness and frustrations seem beyond endurance" (52). This comment by Richman supports the idea that Malamud embraces Buber's contention, a contention that man is able to find hope and divinity only as he turns to others as a **Thou** and a means to realize the **Eternal Thou**. Richman describes this event as "a transcendent mystery" and states as he is talking about the relationship between Frank and Morris that

at the most there is, in Martin Buber's famous depiction of the holy men of Chassidism, the "hallowing of the everyday." However, it is a holiness maintained only by endless pain--a tortured merging of the ideal with the real that man sustains without external support. (70)

It is that very idea, that idea of coming to "the ideal with the real...without external support" that embraces Emerson's idea of realizing that which is deep within oneself. It is the idea of understanding one's uniqueness that connects Emerson's transcendentalism to Buber's existentialism and this idea is best found through the character of Frank. As Maurice Friedman states in

his biography of Buber, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber* :

Here is the link that makes explicit why the understanding of uniqueness is the necessary prerequisite for the understanding of dialogue, for one can be truly open and ready to meet others only if one stands on the ground of one's own uniqueness and deepens the ground through each new meeting. (49)

As much as the reader is aware of Malamud's display of the **I - Thou** relationship between Frank and Morris, he is even more aware of Buber's dialogical philosophy as it applies to Frank and Helen. In addition to the view of fluctuation between **I - It** and **I - Thou** one also sees the divinity in a true **I - Thou** relationship. Before the reader is allowed to experience the developing relationship between Frank and Helen, he is first introduced to the unfulfilling relationship between Helen and Nat Pearl. To emphasize the impossibility of Helen forming a meaningful relationship with Nat Pearl, to whom she loses her virginity, Malamud creates a scene early in the novel in which Nat meets Helen on the subway after having not seen her for a long time. He is immediately portrayed by Malamud as a man who shies from intimacy and is not willing to commit himself wholly to anyone:

"Hello, Helen." Nat touched a gloved hand to a new hat. He was cordial but as usual held back something--his future. He carried a fat law book, so she was glad to be protected

with a book of her own. But not enough protected, for her hat and coat felt suddenly shabby, a trick of the mind, because on her they would still do.

*"Don Quixote"?*

She nodded. (13)

Malamud makes clear to his readers what type of relationship Helen is seeking. Once again, one is shown the influence of Buber upon Malamud as one realizes that Helen is interested in a mutual love that asks for nothing short of a fulfilling relationship that can only be reached through each person as an I viewing the other as a **Thou**, a sense of divinity whose primary concern is not simply sexual satisfaction, but true intimacy:

She wanted simply, a future in love. Enjoyment she had somehow had, felt very moving the freedom of fundamental intimacy with a man. Though she wished for more of the same, she wanted it without aftermath of conscience, or pride, or sense of waste. So she promised herself next time it would go the other way; first mutual love, then loving, harder maybe on the nerves, but easier in memory. Thus she had reasoned, until one night in September, when coming up to see his sister Betty, she had found herself alone in the house with Nat and had done again what she promised herself she wouldn't. Afterward she fought self-hatred. Since then, to this day, without telling him why, she had



avoided Nat Pearl. (15)

The reader finds Helen determined not to make the same mistake again. She will work hard to search for more in a relationship; not sex for the simple filling of a passing appetite, but real intimacy that leads to depth and a sense of "mutual love."

Just as Malamud introduces to his reader the position of Helen's yearning early in the novel, he also gives his reader an early view of Frank as one who wishes to find intimacy through some divine consciousness that sacrifices the material in order to grasp the care of love. Frank explains to Sam his admiration for St. Francis of Assisi who "gave everything away that he owned, every cent, all his clothes off his back. He enjoyed to be poor. He said poverty was a queen and he loved her like she was a beautiful woman" (34). Malamud aligns Frank's yearning for intimacy with a religious man in such a way that the reader is given hints of his future relationship with Helen. One realizes the depth of Frank's conviction and the sense of his potential goodness as Frank says, "Every time I read about somebody like him I get a feeling inside of me I have to fight to keep from crying. He was born good, which is a talent if you have it" (34-35).

Malamud takes slow and patient care in developing the relationship between Frank and Helen. Words are not the key to a true **I-Thou** relationship and often Buber speaks of this phenomenon being that of simply a glance, a chance meeting, a sensation of intimacy that is difficult to explain. Even before Frank begins to see Helen on a regular

basis at the library, he begins to realize that "He had the feeling as he spoke to her a few hurried words, that he knew more about her than anybody would give him credit for"(72).

Malamud is careful to have his reader understand the complexity of Frank's feeling for Helen. The reader sees a difference between Frank's attitude towards Helen and Nat Pearl's attitude, though at times this difference is blurred by Frank who constantly deals with his sexual yearnings for Helen and is not secure as to the purity of his motivation. Frank yearns for a sincerity in their relationship that drives deeper than sheer selfish pleasures, yet he is forever struggling with his sexual appetite. Buber would explain Frank's frustrations as a struggle between viewing Helen as a **THOU** to be met or as an **IT** to be used. A clue to Frank's desire to form a more meaningful relationship and not one based upon selfish deceit and treachery may be found at the point in the novel where Frank tricks Helen into believing that she has a telephone call so that he might force her into an event that brings them together. True to Malamud's understanding of Buber's concept, an **I-Thou** event cannot be forced and can only occur through mutual readiness. Frank realizes after his scheme has failed that this is not the way to Helen. The following excerpt shows the reader Malamud's ability to combine Frank's sexual desire with his deeper desire to find love with Helen:

She gave him a long look. She was wearing a white blouse that showed the firmness of her small breasts. He wet his

dry lips, trying to figure out some quick way to square himself, but his mind, usually crowded with all sorts of schemes, had gone blank. He felt very bad, as he had known he would, that he had done what he had. If he had it to do over he wouldn't do it this way. (77)

To further emphasize Buber's idea that "All real living is meeting" (I-Thou) as rooted in sincerity and true identity, Malamud explains Frank's desire for his relationship with Helen to be lasting and deep:

He wanted to step clear of his mess but saw no way other than to keep on lying. But lying made their talk useless.

When he lied he was somebody else lying to somebody else.

It wasn't the two of them as they were. He should have kept that in his mind. (77)

Though Frank's desire to come into a relationship with Helen is passionate from the beginning, this is not the case for Helen Bober. She is skeptical, resulting from her past experiences with different men, as to Frank's true intentions. Helen is slow to accept Frank, and it is only through his constant efforts to show her his promising goodness and desire for a mutual love that she gradually does begin to feel deeply for him. Only after many meetings in the library and several exchanges of books as gifts does she begin to feel close to Frank. The reader becomes aware of her deepening feelings as the novel progresses:

After she had accepted his gift of a book their relationship



had subtly altered. What else, if whenever she read in her Shakespeare, she thought of Frank Alpine, even heard his voice in the plays? Whatever she read, he crept into her thoughts; in every book he haunted the words, a character in a plot somebody else had invented, as if all associations had only one end. He was, to begin with, everywhere. (158)

Using such phrases as "all associations had only one end" and "He was, to begin with, everywhere," Malamud clearly draws from Buber's idea that it is through one's relationship or meeting with the other that one comes to feel an omnipresence, or what he calls the "**Eternal Thou**." For Helen, Frank has become a **Thou** whom she feels, at times as an end, end as in purpose. Yet, even at this point, Malamud does not want the reader to lose sight of how complex a relationship can be, how easily one is tossed between full acceptance and skepticism. This complexity is best revealed at the moment that Frank and Helen first kiss:

Her lips parted---she drew from his impassioned kiss all she had long desired. Yet at the moment of sweetest joy she felt again the presence of doubt, almost a touch of illness. This made her sad. The fault was her. It meant she still could not fully accept him. (159)

Helen is reluctant to give herself fully to the relationship for she does not trust her own instincts. Her intuition tells her that Frank is a good man, yet her past tells her to beware. She is also afraid of how

the outside world will accept a committed relationship between a Jew and a Gentile; no small matter, considering the attitude held by her mother. Yet beyond all of these concerns, the reader becomes fully aware that Helen now sees Frank as a good man, perhaps even with a spark of divinity, and a man who is different from Nat Pearl:

And if she married Frank, her first job would be to help him realize his wish to be somebody. Nat Pearl wanted to be "somebody," but to him this meant making money to lead the life of some of his well to do friends at law school. Frank, on the other hand, was struggling to realize himself as a person, a more worthwhile ambition. Though Nat had an excellent formal education, Frank knew more about life and gave the impression of greater potential depth. (161)

Though plagued with constant skepticism and frustration, Helen and Frank yearn to view their relationship as intimate. They each wish to make sacrifices for the good of the other. Giving up fully oneself to enter into relationship with the other is the essence of an **I** for a **Thou**; not a sacrifice in the selfish attitude of surrendering one's identity as an **I**, but a commitment to the other, now viewed as a **Thou**, in order to form a more perfect union in search of the "**Eternal Thou**." Each gains from each other that which cannot be obtained in isolation: a mutual love and sense of intimacy that perpetuates feelings of hope in the future.

Though Frank and Helen's relationship experience highs and lows,

from beautiful moments of **I-Thous** (such as their meetings at the library and in the park) to shattering moments of **I-It** (such as Frank's selfish, drunken sexual advances on Helen after saving her from Ward MinoQue's attack), in the end, the reader realizes that their relationship has depth and is driving towards a sacred union. Malamud uses Helen's voice to convey the Jewish idea of man's ability to turn himself towards good. Helen knows that Frank, despite his moments of weakness, has turned to the good that is deep within him. She is moved by his sincere generosity and his willingness to suffer for her welfare:

It was a strange thing about people--they could look the same but be different. He had been one thing, low, dirty, but because of something in himself--something she couldn't define, a memory perhaps, an ideal he might have forgotten and then remembered--he had changed into somebody else, no longer what he had been. She should have recognized it before. What he did to me he did wrong, she thought, but since he has changed in his heart he owes me nothing.

(293-94)

Through the creation of this pivotal relationship in the novel, Malamud is able to convey what Buber means by finding divinity with another.

Likewise, by having the reader see both Frank and Helen as humans trusting the good that is within themselves, Malamud, though not intentionally, connects Buber's **I-Thou** philosophy with Emerson's



self-trust to find the divine within each person. Buber would explain this phenomenon as "heart-searching," as he does in the first section of his book, *The Way of Man*, and Emerson would explain it as a "primary faith" that "is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul"(947 DSA). It is the possibility of humans becoming Christlike in that Christ "was true to what is in you and me." Emerson saw that "God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world" (947 DSA). Helen and Frank are able to see what is true in each other at their best moments and, therefore, are able to go forth and take possession of their world. Malamud's *The Assistant* can be viewed as an investigation of man's ability to extract from humble and mean environments of the everyday the possibility of engaging in meaningful relationships that lead to mutual love and a coming to God. It is through Morris that Frank seeks redemption, and it is from Helen that Frank discovers the good within himself. Likewise, it is from Frank that Helen finds a sincere and meaningful love and a realization that here is a divinity within man. Each person gains from the other that which would never be found in isolation, and this is the strength of Malamud's ability to enact Buber's philosophy. All persons search within themselves to come to this relationship, and that is the quality most preached in the transcendental voice of Emerson.

Malamud further illuminates the importance of relationship as he destroys the relevance of time and space in this novel. Sidney

Richman, in his book, *Bernard Malamud*, describes the setting of *The Assistant* as that which is "suspended in the evocation of a gloomy every day "(51). He goes on to say,

The sense of human energy ground to static despair in a few disconsolate rooms is constant; and though rich in incident, events in the novel are so consistently underplayed by a tone of flat melancholy or ironic brevity that the reader is left finally not so much with a portrait of evolving history as with a blighting sense of routine. (51)

It is this "sense of routine" that Malamud wishes to reveal as a springboard to Buber's revelation that it is out of the ordinary that man finds true relation. It is not in the extraordinary events in one's life that one finds meaningful paths to God, but rather in the mundane events and the daily moments with those who we meet moment upon moment. It is the powerful sense of the spiritual that is rooted in each day's responsibility that Malamud wants his readers to see throughout *The Assistant*. This idea of divinity as a product of the routine is best described by Buber in his book, *Between Man and Man*, where he states:

I have given up the "religious" which is nothing but the exceptional, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fullness but each mortal

hour's fullness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response. (14)

Malamud conveys to his reader through *The Assistant* how Frank discovers his own uniqueness, lost from an orphan past, through his relationship with the Bobers. God, therefore, is seen as "the between" which is only realized through Frank's ability to come into a dialogical relationship with those he meets, and each new encounter strengthens his ability to discover, not only the divine within himself, but the understanding of the divine within others. As Richman states, "What is crucial for Malamud, as for so many writers currently adrift in a sea of fragmented values, is not so much being as becoming, not so much conclusion as possibilities"(74). Therein lies the central influence of Buber upon Malamud. *The Assistant* offers no secure conclusions, yet gives the reader possibilities. This is what Buber means by "Holy Insecurity"; each new event offers new possibilities and, therefore, continued hope; or as Buber says, "faith must encompass and not expunge doubt" (Diamond 89).

It is this primary concern for the journey itself to be embraced, the becoming, that is found throughout Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*; a concern that is flooded with optimism in the celebration of individuality and the deification of the ordinary that, though distinctly opposite the pessimistic tone found in Malamud, has a similar purpose:



to raise one's existence, through one's intercourse with the world, to a spiritual height of purpose and meaning with God. Just as Martin Buber had an important influence on the fiction of Bernard Malamud, so also one cannot deny the impact that Ralph Waldo Emerson had on the poetry of Walt Whitman; and just as it has been demonstrated that Malamud's *The Assistant* contains numerous examples of Buber's influential thoughts, so also does Whitman's "Song of Myself," from *Leaves of Grass*, reveal many of Emerson's ideas.

The fact that Ralph Waldo Emerson had a profound influence on Walt Whitman has been noted hundreds of times by many scholars, not to mention by Whitman himself. Gay Wilson Allen in his notable biography of Whitman, entitled *Walt Whitman Handbook*, points out to his readers early in the book that John Townsend Trowbridge, a friend of Whitman's from Boston, gives a "testimony that when the poet visited Boston in 1860 to see his ill-fated third edition through the press, he confessed to having read Emerson's *Essays* in 1854. "He freely admitted that he could never have written his poems if he had not first 'come to himself,' and that Emerson helped him to 'find himself' - - -I was simmering, simmering, simmering, simmering, Emerson brought me to a boil." (30) Further along in the book, Allen states, "Perhaps he was only dimly aware of his great debt to Emerson, but Transcendentalism, like a religion, opened up a new life to Walt Whitman. Like many a man who has experienced a religious conversion, from this time forth Whitman's whole life, outer as well as inner,

became harmonized. He had found a pattern and a purpose" (62).

It is now obvious that Whitman was much more than dimly aware of his great debt to Emerson. There are now seven volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, the chronicle of daily conversations between Horace Traubel and Walt Whitman which spanned the last ten years of the poet's life. Within these volumes, Whitman refers to Emerson many times and almost always with a sense of reverence that he expresses for no one else. Early on in these conversations, Whitman speaks of his relationship with Emerson:

The world does not know what our relations really were-- they think of our friendship always as a literary friendship: it was a bit that but it was mostly something else--it was certainly more than that--for I loved Emerson for his personality and I always felt that he loved me for something I brought him from the rush of the big cities and the mass of men. We used to walk together, dine together, argue, even, in a sort of a way, though neither one of us was much of an arguer. We were not much for repartee of sallies or what people ordinarily call humor, but we got along together beautifully--the atmosphere was almost sweet, I don't mind saying it, both on Emerson's side and mine: we had no friction--there was no kind of fight in us for each other--we were like two Quakers together. Dear Emerson! I doubt if the literary classes which have taken to coddling him

have any right to their god. He belonged to us--yes, to us--- rather than to them. Then after a pause: I suppose to all as well as to us--perhaps to no clique whatever. (61)

What is even more interesting to note is that even here Whitman cannot resist, when talking about Emerson, that very germ and influence of Emersonian thought: the whole as one; the idea that Emerson belongs to all and to "no clique whatever."

Whitman's passion for reading Emerson remained strong even to his final years. This is evident as one reads the June 3, 1888 entry in the first volume of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* when Whitman says to Anne Montgomerie, who was visiting that day, "Read all the Emerson you can---it is the best preparatory soil. Emerson is not conclusive on all points, but no man more helps to a conclusion"(256). What better evidence of Emerson's influence on Walt Whitman than to have the poet refer to him as preparatory soil. One cannot resist adding that Emerson may have been the preparatory soil from which the *Leaves of Grass* was grown.

An example of Whitman aligning his strong characteristics towards optimism with that of Emerson's occurs in an entry in the second volume of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* during a conversation between Traubel and Whitman where Traubel brings up the question of Emerson's optimism:

'It is sometimes complained of as too general.' W. said dissentingly: 'No--no--it could not be--it can do nothing



but good--be nothing but right. I have no patience with people who start out to blacken the face of the earth.

Whether it is constitutional or what not with me, I stand for the sunny point of view--stand for the joyful conclusions.

This is not because I merely guess: it's because my faith seems to belong to the nature of things--is imposed, cannot be escaped: can better account for life and what goes with life than the opposite theory.' (430)

To find yet one more powerful argument that Whitman was more than dimly indebted to Emerson, one need only read from Traubel's third volume in which Whitman comments on a phrase written by John Burroughs about Emerson. Burroughs states:

'To me Emerson filled nearly the whole horizon in that direction.' [the direction of optimism] W. said: 'I guess I enjoy that: I guess I do.' He had me read the line over again.

'John was right: Emerson *was* the whole horizon: Ralph Waldo: Emerson: the gentle, noble, perfect, radiant, consolatory, Emerson.' (353)

Even in the final published entry to date of Whitman's conversations with Traubel, which is found in volume seven, an entry dated Tuesday, February 10, 1891, the reader finds Walt Whitman once again giving his highest praise to Emerson:

With his brawny neck swept by his silver beard open clear to his breast, Walt Whitman, the poet of the Delaware, was

sitting on the sunny side of one of the Camden ferry boats, taking his daily two or three trips across the river before dinner. His blue-grey eyes looked bright and cheery and with a blue pencil he was noting impressions in a little pass-book he always carries.

"Mr. Whitman, what is the sublimest poetry in existence?" he was asked.

"The Bible, Shakespeare, and Homer. They contain the most vital livingest poetry we know."

"And what American poets will posterity rate highest?"

"One star differeth from another star in glory, but they are all stars nevertheless. Emerson, I suppose, takes the highest place. (461)

When one surveys the complete seven volumes of these conversations and correspondences given to the public through Traubel's persistent and diligent journalistic style, one will find over three hundred references to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Though many references are mere mentions, as many more speak to the depth and magnitude that the American master of transcendental thought had on Walt Whitman. In fact, there are several occasions where Whitman refers to Emerson as "Master," not the least of which, though not in the volumes of Traubel, can be found in Whitman's open letter to Emerson which he included in his second edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in 1856. In the first two sentences of the second paragraph of this

letter one reads, "Master, I am a man who has perfect faith. Master, we have not come through centuries, caste, heroism, fables, to halt in this land today"(733). This letter also contains many of Whitman's primary themes and ideas found throughout *Leaves of Grass*, and particularly "Song of Myself," serving as an important link between Whitman and Emerson that will be explored at a further time in this section. As to the letter being seen as a testimony of Whitman's gratitude to Emerson, one may also look to the final two paragraphs for confirmation. In the final section of the letter, Whitman speaks of the character and passion found in the "new moral American Continent," a character that "is to stand compact upon that vast basis of the supremacy of Individuality." Referring to this idea as "ever-satisfying and ever-unsurveyable seas and shores," Whitman closes with his voice directed squarely towards Emerson:

Those shores you found. I say you have led The States there  
 - have led Me there. I say that none has ever done, or ever  
 can do, a greater deed for The States, than your deed. Others  
 may line out the lines, build cities, work mines, break up  
 farms; it is yours to have been the original true Captain who  
 put to sea, intuitive, positive, rendering the first report, to  
 be told less by any report, and more by the mariners of a  
 thousand bays, in each task of their arriving and departing,  
 many years after you.

Receive, dear Master, these statements and assurances



through me, for all the young men, and for an earnest that we know none before you, but the best following you; and that we demand to take your name into our keeping, and that we understand what you have indicated, and find the same indicated in ourselves, and that we will stick to it and enlarge upon it through These States. (741)

Aside from the fact that, once again, Whitman refers to Emerson as "Master," the reader cannot leave this closing section, or for that matter the entire letter, without a firm realization that Whitman viewed Emerson as the beginning and the inspiration for all future utterances and accomplishments to be found in America. With Whitman's promise to enlarge upon what Emerson began, one may even be inclined to interpret Whitman's vision of Emerson as messianic. This idea would by no means be considered radical, given the way that both men, indeed most serious transcendentalists, viewed Christ and his role as divinity. Whitman believed in the greatness of Emerson, yet in the most Emersonian way also believed that he and others in the future would do greater things still.

It is this unique understanding and interpretation of the messianic message that binds Emerson to Whitman, Buber to Malamud, Emerson to Buber, and yes, Whitman to Malamud. Yes, *The Assistant* is filled with void, isolation, despair, darkness, and doubt, yet it is also the story of renewal, resurrection and life. What separates it from "Song of Myself" is that Malamud is not able to speak with Whitman's

confidence about the future. Frank will continue where Morris ended. Whether or not Frank will build upon Morris' past and bring his family to a better future, Malamud is not willing to say. Whitman is also concerned with building upon the past, yet he is willing to say, as he does in "Song of Myself," that the future will be enlarged by the evolutionary process of the present. Once again one sees not a being, but a becoming, "myself waiting my time to be one of the supremes"(76).

The possibility of becoming divine is at the very core of "Song of Myself." If Emerson is the soil from which *Leaves of Grass* is grown, transcendentalism is the spawning spirit. At the very heart of the transcendental movement is how man should view Jesus: who is Christ and how should he be understood? Make no mistake, the transcendentalist movement was primarily a religious movement spawned from the Unitarian church. As Perry Miller explains in the introduction to his book, *The Transcendentalists*,

Unitarianism taught the youth that it was no longer fruitful or necessary to argue the problems of life and the intellect in the crabbed language of systematic divinity.

"Unitarianism," said Brownson, "has demolished Calvinism, made an end in all thinking minds of everything like dogmatic Protestantism." Therefore this revival of religion had to find new forms of expression instead of new formulations of doctrine, and it found them in literature. It

found them in patterns supplied by Cousin, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle. (9)

If one sees the Unitarian church as the parent of the transcendental movement, then one may also see the children of this thought (Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Parker, Fuller and many more) go further to reject even the dogmas of the Unitarian church. Crucial to understanding this movement is understanding two major utterances sounded by Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson: Parker's *A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* and Emerson's "Divinity School Address at Harvard." Both works primarily concern themselves with how one should view Christ and, therefore, how one should view Christianity as a religion. Parker, in his sermon says:

The end of Christianity seems to be to make all men one with God as Christ was one with him; to bring them to such a state of obedience and goodness that we shall think divine thoughts and feel divine sentiments, and so keep the law of God by living a life of truth and love. Its means are purity and prayer; getting strength from God, and using it for our fellow-men as well as ourselves. It allows perfect freedom. It does not demand all men to *think* alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible at truth; not all men to *live* alike, but to live holy, and get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine . . . But Christianity



gives us the largest liberty of the sons of God; and were all men Christians after the fashion of Jesus, this variety would be a thousand times greater than now; for Christianity is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method of attaining oneness with God. It demands, therefore, a good life of piety within, of purity without, and gives the promise that who so does God's will shall know of God's doctrine. (277-78)

Parker's principal argument was that one should not concern oneself with so much emphasis on the dogmas of the past or even the pure divinity of Christ, but rather realize that Christ, or rather the teachings of Christ, offers one the possibility of becoming one with God and therefore Christ-like. Even more to the point are the words of Emerson in his "Divinity School Address." Throughout this address, Emerson argues that humanity has concerned itself too much with the divinity of Christ and the great miracles revealed through the Gospels and not yet understood the humanity of Christ and His example of how one always has the possibility of divinity within oneself. To continually become divine like Christ is the key:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw

that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see god, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think. (947-48)

It is from this view of Emerson's understanding of the humanity of Christ that one sees the possibility of humans as divine, and therefore one begins to understand the central themes flowing throughout Whitman's "Song of Myself." It is not some egotism from which Whitman sings, but rather from his belief in the divinity of humans. Edward H. Bodie Jr. in his article entitled "Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'" explains this connection:

Whitman's admiration for Emerson is widely known. Thus it is by no means farfetched to suggest that Whitman's employment of Christ imagery might be influenced by Emerson's view of Christ. Central to that view is Emerson's assertion that the first great error of Christianity was an undue exalting of the person of Jesus and an insistence that God was incarnate in Jesus alone of all humankind. Emerson, on the other hand, revered Jesus as the one figure in history to perceive and appreciate the full potential--the divinity--of all humanity. (2)

Throughout the fifty-two sections of "Song of Myself" the reader finds over and over this idea of man's potential to become divine. The

influence of Emerson is seen in two very powerful aspects: one is the human as divine and the other is the one whole and universal soul of all, what Emerson referred to as the 'over-soul,' an idea that may have had its roots in Hinduism and particularly the *Bhagavadgita*, the Hindu book that is a form of dialogue between the hero Arjuna and his charioteer, the avatar Krishna, in which a doctrine combining Brahmanical and other elements is evolved. The avatar is to be seen as the incarnation of a god and the Arjuna as the instructor of morality. T.R. Rajasekharaiah devotes an entire book, *The Roots of Whitman's Grass*, to the strong influence that Indian religion had on Whitman's poetics: "The most important of these intellectual influences that are held to explain the genesis as well as the 'stuff' of his poems is Emerson, the High Priest of Oriental thought in nineteenth-century America" (15). Rajasekharaiah leaves little doubt that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was heavily influenced by Indian thought; whether or not Whitman came to this influence second hand through Emerson or first hand through his own readings and studies is hard to determine. What is not hard to see throughout "Song of Myself" is the influence of Emerson's insistence on the idea of Christ as human and the 'Over-Soul':

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch  
or am touch'd from,  
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,  
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.



Whitman is able to create from all of his influences. From Emerson, from transcendentalism, from Hinduism, from all that was in the air, he creates a voice that sings away the veils of doubt and presses to the very body of the soul:

Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the  
veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.  
I do not press my fingers across my mouth,  
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and  
heart,  
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.  
  
I believe in the flesh and the appetites,  
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag  
of me is a miracle. (53)

It is not that Whitman rejects the words of the ages, but rather he embraces *a//* that has been said as useful to him in establishing his own voice. Even the scientist is important to him as he creates his new voice, "Gentlemen, to you the first honors always! / Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling, / I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling" (51).

The opening section of "Song of Myself" reveals to the reader

Emerson's idea of the 'Over-Soul' and the transcendentalist idea of looking within oneself for spirit. This is not a rejection of past articulations, but rather an establishment of individuality and a recognition of "original energy":

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer  
grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil,  
this air,

Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and  
their parents the same,

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,

Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never  
forgotten,

I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,

Nature without check with original energy. (29)

The strength of these first thirteen lines lies in the fact that they are

able to express nearly every important theme throughout all of "Song of Myself." The first line is a celebration of individuality. The second and third lines assure the reader of that universal connection, that "Over-Soul." Lines four through nine speaks of origin and biological heritage, while the final four lines of this opening section establish Whitman's intentions: He will gather all that is good and bad that has touched his life, and he will then move forward with his own "original energy."

Nowhere can the unification of past and present, body and soul, the extraordinary and the ordinary, old and new, human and divine be seen more clearly than in the forty-first section of "Song of Myself" where Whitman embraces all and declares the human as creator:

Magnifying and applying come I,  
 Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,  
 Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,  
 Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his  
     grandson,  
 Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,  
 In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the  
     crucifix engraved,  
 .....  
 Discovering as much or more in a framer framing a house,  
 Putting higher claims for him there with his roll'd-up  
     sleeves driving the mallet and chisel,



Not objecting to special revelations, considering a curl of smoke or a hair on the back of my hand just as curious as any revelation. (75)

These lines, which continue to list numerous examples of the ordinary man in his ordinary condition, reveal to his reader Whitman's intense belief in human divinity and in the mutuality of the human's soul. He expresses his desire to view life's most ordinary events as revelations. It is interesting to note how this attitude is in harmony with Buber's belief of bringing a sacredness and reverence to the everyday experience.

There are two very prominent refrains throughout "Song of Myself" which should not be ignored and are at the very heart of Whitman's voice, refrains that may be considered the fire which caused Whitman to move from a simmer to a boil after having read much of Emerson's writings: the divine celebration found in the every day within man and nature, and the important role of comradeship and intimacy in discovering and experiencing the divine, or what man calls God. These are the refrains which bring one full circle to the fiction of Malamud as influenced by Buber and secure the connection between the transcendentalist and the existentialist. It is the I of Whitman who boldly goes forth to meet the THOU of the world to experience the spirit of the between. Whitman realizes that it is only through touch and relationship to his moment that he becomes divine: "The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats, / The brood of the turkey-

hen and she with her half-spread wings, / I see in them and myself the same old law"(41). Each moment is seen as precious: "This minute that comes to me over the past decillions, / There is no better than it and now" (50), and "Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy"(54). This belief in the divinity of each moment and the possibility of God in each contact is best seen in the forty-eighth section where the poet says,

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and  
each moment then,

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face  
in the glass,

I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is  
sign'd by God's name,

And I leave them where they are, for I know that whatsoe'er  
I go,

Others will punctually come for ever and ever. (86-87)

Yes, Whitman is the ultimate optimist who believes in the positive forces of evolution continuing for thousands of years to come and yes, one cannot ignore the stark difference between this attitude towards the future and the doubtful tones emanating from Malamud at the end of *The Assistant*, where the future may not seem so bright and may even be viewed as a torpid continuation of the past; yet one cannot deny that both men believed that humanity's only hope is through its

coming into relationship with each other and with nature to give humans a glimpse of the divine. This brings one back to Buber's entire concept of **I AND THOU**: God can only truly be found through one's relationship with others, or nature, or both.

What more powerful contact can be found than through the intense contact of sex? Sex is central to this belief and is given emphasis by both Whitman and Malamud. Sex is seen as one more, if not the ultimate, expression of God. It is important to address both men's treatment of this issue for it drives to the essence of their work. For both Malamud and Whitman, sex is to be understood as the apogee of intimacy, the most heightened act of contact by which humans are able to come into relationship with each other. Where they differ in their treatment of this issue is in the complexity given to the attitude towards the sexual act. Malamud, in true Buber fashion, finds the act of copulation to stem from two contrary motives: the act may be motivated selfishly, viewing the partner as an **IT** to be used for self-gratification, or it may find its motivation in a more sacred desire to engage in a sincere intimacy that searches for a selfless feeling of love leading to the merging of souls in pursuit of the **"ETERNAL THOU."** In *The Assistant*, one finds examples of both motivations. Helen Bober loses her virginity to Nat Pearl, whom she discovers is wanting "without too much trouble a lay and she, half in love, had obliged and regretted. Not the loving, but that it had taken her so long to realize how little he wanted. Not her, Helen Bober"(14). The reader



understands that sex, in this instance, is not a full expression of sincere love and intimacy, but rather an opportunity to indulge in self-gratification, a love not committed to any sense of deep relationship.

Frank is also tormented with his own motivations for wanting Helen. He continually fluctuates between his view of Helen as an IT to be had for his own physical gratification, as shown at the times that he sneaks up to get a view of Helen through her bathroom window, and a **Thou** to develop a true and complete relationship with her,

He was the victim of the sharp edge of his hunger.

So he wanted her to the point where he thought up schemes for getting her into his room and in bed. He wanted satisfaction, relief, a stake in the future. She's not yours till she gives it to you, he thought. That's the way they all are. It wasn't always true, but it was true enough. He wanted an end to the torment of coming to a boil, then thank you, no more. He wanted to take her completely. (163)

Yet, unlike Nat, after Frank had taken advantage of Helen while he was in a drunken state of intoxication, he was tormented by the notion that he had turned a good thing into bad:

He lived in his prison in a climate of regret that he had turned a good thing into a bad, and this thought, though ancient, renewed the pain in his heart. . . . He thought endlessly of escape, but that would be what he always did last--beat it. This time he would stay. They

would carry him out in a box. When the walls caved in they could dig for him with shovels. (232-33)

Also, in contrast to Nat, Frank is committed to turning from his selfish motivations and starting anew towards a total commitment to his relationship with Helen and the Bobers. Rather than continue to use Helen, he would dedicate himself to her good. This revelation not only stresses Frank's understanding of true intimacy but also serves as his redemption from the purely physical appetite of flesh to a higher spiritual appetite for good; therefore, what was the selfish attitude of **I T** becomes the more hallowed attitude of **THOU**.

For Whitman, the struggle of sexuality seemed not as complex as Malamud's and grows from his belief in the body and soul as one. If nature and the body are always to be embraced and viewed as sacred, then the act of copulation is its most precious display of spirit. Though similar to Malamud's vision of intimacy as redemption, one finds less struggle with purity of motivation. If the body is an expression of the soul, then every act of the body is revered. Though Emerson had high praise for Whitman's poetry, as proven by his famous letter to Whitman after having read the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, he was bothered by Whitman's open treatment of sexuality.

For Whitman, sexuality was as vital an element and expression of amorous divinity as any other aspect of humanity. It is the touch that awakens one's spirit and moves one into that realm of self-identity and self-realization. Opening oneself completely to another is the

primal urge that leads to a perfect intimacy. Whitman cannot take Emerson's advice. If his audience interprets something evil and nasty in his words and treatment of sexuality, it is because they do not understand his point. If one returns to the open letter written by Whitman to Emerson in 1856, one finds several lines in which Whitman addresses Emerson's concerns. Whitman uses this opportunity to express to Emerson the justification of treating sex in a bold and open manner. A poet should "recognize with joy the sturdy living forms of the men and women of These States, the divinity of sex, the perfect eligibility of the female with the male," (738) and further along in the letter, "I say that the body of a man or woman, the main matter, is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is" (739). And nowhere does the poet express the cause with more spirit and passion than when he says,

To me, henceforth, that theory of any thing, no matter what, stagnated in its vitals, cowardly and rotten, while it cannot publically accept, and publicly name, with specific words, the things on which all existence, all souls, all realization, all decency, all health, all that is worth being here for, all of woman and of man, all beauty, all purity, all sweetness, all friendship, all strength, all life, all immortality depend. The courageous soul, for a year or two to come, may be proved by faith in sex, and by disdaining concessions. (739-40)



Though Emerson was a bit troubled by the open treatment of sexuality in Whitman's poems, one cannot escape the compelling influence that Emerson had on Whitman's thoughts. The core of Whitman is the all-embracing attitude that accepts every energy as a part of all nature, both male and female, "I am the poet of the woman the same as the man" (48) and, therefore, a part of God. This embrace of nature and the divinity of humanity is one of the more potent themes that one finds throughout Emerson's writings and is at the very foundation of the transcendental movement. And just as surely as one finds numerous examples of Emerson's influences throughout "Son of Myself," one cannot deny the uncanny resemblance between the I-THOU philosophy of Martin Buber and the fiction of Bernard Malamud. This brings the reader back to that common strain that is found between Emerson and Buber: the way to the divine is through one's relationship with humanity and one's world and the true religious experience is found in the moment by moment hallowing of the ordinary and common every day. Here is where the transcendentalist of the nineteenth century and the existentialist of the twentieth century meet. It is through the thoughts of Buber that one finds the connection between the belief that one must transcend towards the divine and pull it into the existence of the every day and grasp that moment upon moment as a way to God.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

Certainly it is possible to read Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Malamud's *The Assistant* without having much knowledge of their outside influences, specifically that portion of their language that seems to point to Emerson and Buber. However, if one uses Emerson and Buber as flashes of light that bring a clearer view of these artists, it will enrich and deepen one's comprehension. To enrich one's understanding of Whitman's poetry it helps to investigate how the thoughts of Emerson influenced Whitman's ideas. Likewise, a reading of Malamud will only be strengthened if one is familiar with Buber's *I and Thou*. Each of these men is unique in his original thoughts, yet not one was without influence from his own particular history. The creative principle found in all of them was a result of each one forming his unique voice out of the many voices that entered his being.

The principles that connect all four of these men deal with the human search for divinity which involve: not being, but becoming; exploring the humanity of Christ; meeting the world moment upon moment; and finding the divine in the ordinary. Though each of these men had his own individual way of expressing these principles, they were speaking from kindred motivations and reaching related

conclusions.

Emerson was concerned with exploring Christ's humanity and, therefore, unveiling each human's possibility in becoming Christ-like - - divine in the sense of realizing the unique and creative possibilities that can be found in each individual at any given moment. It was not the miracles of extraordinary events that one should consider, but the daily miracles of one's relationship with the world and others. The individual as creator is one of the constant expressions throughout Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's verses that sing of the human's divinity are drawn from Emerson's view of Christ. Throughout his life, Whitman gave credit to Emerson as one of the most important influences on nineteenth-century American thought and, more specifically, as a man whose writings had a profound influence on him. If one looks at the mind as a sieve that collects everything that enters but only saves that which is worthy, then certainly Whitman, as an artist, saved much of Emerson's thought and used it in his poetry. The philosophical directions that Emerson was mapping out felt good to the ears of Whitman and found a home in his soul.

As Whitman found much in Emerson that was sympathetic to his own thought, so Malamud saw the writings of Martin Buber to be congruous to his own. One may say that the principal focus of



Buber's *I and Thou* is the realization that the human being only comes into a true relationship with the divine through his or her ability to come into a relationship with another human being. The spirit of God lies in the *between*. This world of relationships dominates the fiction of Malamud, and particularly *The Assistant*. Buber's two-fold world of I-IT/I-THOU is seen everywhere in the pages of Malamud's novel. That constant fluctuation of the world of IT and the world of THOU can be found between Morris and Ida, Morris and Frank, and Frank and Helen. Each character, at times, uses the other in the attitude of IT for selfish reasons and the attitude of THOU in total selflessness moving toward love. Even human sexual desire is treated by Malamud with Buber's philosophical thought. Sex is seen in Malamud's novel as the human attitude of IT, something to satisfy a greedy personal appetite. Yet it is also seen as the human attitude of THOU, an expression of true relationship and an opportunity to find the divine spirit. Since the focus of Malamud's novel lies primarily on the world of relationships, he creates, for his reader, a setting that is extremely mean and ordinary. Buber believes that it is through the human's ability to find meaningful existence within the ordinary moment upon moment situations that he or she comes to a fulfilled relationship with others and with God. Malamud understood this

belief and finds it consistent with his own. The Morris' store is the epitome of the commonplace and the mundane, creating the perfect opportunity for his characters to struggle with their lives and turn to each other for comfort.

These four men were driven by the belief that the true spirit of God is found only in the realization of the uniqueness of the individual and his or her ability to find true relationships with others. They believed that the messianic message is the human's ability to be reborn moment upon moment into a world of relationship that hallows each event as an opportunity to realize the many miracles that exist in our world.

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