

Varieties of Transcendental Experience: A Study in Constructive Postmodernism

Donald L. Gelpi

Collegetown, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000

364 pp. \$34.95.

For the most part, insofar as major and well known histories of classical American philosophy have been open to the spiritual and religious aspects of American thought, they have tended to come from either left wing Protestant, or post-Protestant perspectives, on the one side, or from secular Jewish perspectives on the other. What has been missing, and what Donald L. Gelpi now amply provides, is a Roman Catholic perspective that honors the unique features of American thought, while also weaving that thought into a broad and liberal theological perspective that resonates with the more creative moments in evolving Catholic thinking.

Father Gelpi, as a creative and increasingly important Catholic theologian, has his own take on theological reconstruction and its relationship to the classical American traditions. This book is part of his much larger undertaking, one that emphasizes strong communal and anti-Augustinian features in building a constructive postmodernism that rejects both the French frenzy of elitist deconstructors, and the pallid bourgeois fantasies of process metaphysicians, who now claim, quite ironically to be sure, to be the true postmoderns. Gelpi makes it clear that the French versions of postmodernism are anti-democratic and contain hidden heteronymous, even Fascist, seeds (cf. pp. 339-340). His argument here is that their measure for the real devolves into a highly subjective manifestation of the will to power that abjects and abhors nature in its utter thereness. I would add that French deconstruction manifests an act of castration against the propped up father Saussure, whose very structuralist presence seems to evoke castration anxiety in his unwitting heirs. He takes the still popular (at least among theologians, though not philosophers) process perspective to task for its regnant atomism, nominalism, and its ironically simple-minded understanding of the self-in-process (cf. p. 344). Further, for Gelpi, its understanding of the di-polar divine ends up sounding more like a science fiction narrative (my language) designed to soften the power of evil (I write this post-September 11th) than a realism-based metaphysics that takes evil seriously.

The anti-Augustinianism strain in his narrative can be seen in his worry that the American (Emersonian and Jamesian) focus on individualism, especially in its Neo-Platonic forms, makes communal and moral renewal well nigh impossible. His counter-Augustinian heroes turn out to be Orestes Augustus Brownson (who became a Roman Catholic after his transcendentalist phase), Francis Ellingwood Abbot (admired by Peirce for his constructive metaphysical work and despised by Royce for his alleged intellectual parasitism), C.S. Peirce, and

Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society
Summer, 2002, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3

Josiah Royce — especially the later Royce who weaves together Peirce's early semiotics with his own rich reading of the Pauline Epistles.

In unfolding his own narrative history, Gelpi traces the American philosophical movement from the Calvinism of the Puritans, through the Deism of the political founders of the new Republic (which turns out to be fully entwined with its arch enemy Calvinism), through Unitarianism and its wild child Transcendentalism, to the battle between nominalistic pragmatism and Absolute Idealism (with Peircean realist pragmatism serving as a meliorating force between them). His focus is predominately metaphysical and moral, while also paying attention to the political and social implications of the writings of his interlocutors, for example in his treatment of Benjamin Franklin. Were I, like Penelope, to unravel his tapestry and present it in a simplified form, I would say that he is not sanguine about our Puritan and Enlightenment intellectual beginnings, but finds far more commendable doings at the end of the nineteenth century and slightly beyond, precisely when the insidious damage of the Enlightenment is overcome in religious pragmatism.

Emerson, about whom Gelpi has written a great deal elsewhere, turns out to be a complex kind of anti-hero, while James and Dewey are placed very much on the outside of the 'genuine' American trajectory. Gelpi envisions an Emerson whose native introversion pulled him into a Neo-Platonism, with South Asian dimensions, that stultified his prospects for creating a genuine American vision that could affirm a realist metaphysics as the basis for communal action. Emerson is repeatedly charged with maintaining a "dualism" between spirit and matter, in spite of the fact that Emerson, precisely because he was a Plotinian and Neo-Platonist, maintained a non-dual identity theory, akin to Advaita Vedanta.¹ Here is Gelpi's strange Emerson in a nutshell:

We need not rehearse here and in detail the flaws in Emerson's Neo-Platonic hypothesis. Suffice it to say that the multiple dualisms in Emerson's vision of the cosmos — cosmic dualism, spirit-matter dualism, operational dualism, subject-object dualism, and individualism — rendered his metaphysical vision problematic in the extreme (p. 278). ... Emerson fallaciously and uncritically assumed that he needed only to describe his Neo-Platonic metaphysics to others for them to grasp its truth self-evidently in their own subjectivity. (p. 277)

Special pleading? Indeed. Is this a fair reading of Emerson's perspective? Hardly. For one thing, Emerson's concept/experience of subjectivity includes, that is, is encompassed by, the Oversoul that is never an object of experience, but the light by and through which experience is possible at all. For another thing, Emerson's

so-called “individualism” is unique in kind, more akin to Karl Jaspers’ “consciousness as such” or to *Geist* than to a social atomism of the libertarian variety. From my perspective, the Neo-Platonic strain in Euro-American thought is probably the most important, fecund, and lasting, especially as it opens itself to pragmaticist semiotics, as antedated, for example, by Jonathan Edwards.²

James doesn’t fit in because he “reduced” religion to the domain of finite and personal psychological experience, which in turn stripped the god problematic of its necessary ontological elements. And yet Gelpi makes this claim in spite of the fact that James totally regrounded psychology and the theories of psychopathology and religious psychology in order to make religious experience normative for other forms of experience. Dewey doesn’t fit in because he reduced the sphere of religious value to an aesthetic form of a Kantian as-if, primarily as expressed in his very un-religious book *A Common Faith*, where he argues that so-called religious values are little more than instruments for social unification.³ Here Gelpi and I are in agreement.

From my perspective, serious shortcomings and biased readings emerge in his reworking of several major thinkers. For example, Gelpi does not give Emerson nearly enough credit for his true anti-slavery feelings and his Abolitionist activities. He does not refer to the recent anthology *Emerson’s Anti-Slavery Writings*,⁴ which presents several previously unknown addresses that clearly show that Emerson, in his own way, was fully engaged in the Abolitionist campaign along with his mother, wife, brother, and his colleague Thoreau. His courageous friendship, which never wavered, with John Brown and his daughter (after Brown’s execution had cast her adrift), cost him a number of friends and readers, but he kept to his moral principles nonetheless. Secondly, in dealing with the arch-hero Peirce, Gelpi does not give enough stress to Peirce’s deep misogynism, his racism, and his elitism. It is doubtful than any of us would want to live in a society built on Peircean lines, yet an Emersonian society could actually succeed in combining radical democracy and deep spirituality (which would still honor the Jeffersonian divide between Church and State).

More specifically, while it is a blessing to see Orestes Brownson, author of such books as *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church*, and *The Convert*, so well highlighted, it is not clear that his intellectual development represented an advance beyond the Transcendentalism from which he came so much as a backsliding due to a failure of nerve. Gelpi argues that Brownson overcame the so-called dualism of Emerson around 1844 when he developed a “dynamic vitalism” which showed itself to be not only compatible with the U.S. Constitution (read here, Jeffersonian views on Church and State), but also with Roman Catholic theology.

Two strategic and rhetorical moves continue to vex this reviewer. First, Gelpi frequently uses the term “acquiesced” when dealing with thinkers whom he thinks fell into some kind of Neo-Platonic fog, e.g., Theodore Parker (alas,

too dependent on Schleiermacher), but he does not use this term when he treats figures like Brownson, Peirce, and Royce. Clearly, to “acquiesce” is to lose one’s integrity and intellectual/spiritual powers in the face of some encompassing social reality. But is this what Brownson’s colleagues were doing, and is Brownson the only one of the great transcendentalists who did not acquiesce? This language, with its strong pejorative force, does not help his historical query, even when Gelpi is otherwise extremely thorough and detailed in his exegesis. Secondly, whenever a meliorating perspective, such as that of Unitarianism, does not persuade Gelpi he tends to argue that it is a mere compromise, often tainted with less than honorable motives. He does not envision the possibility that some of the thinkers of our tradition actually believed in what they did for good solid philosophical and theological reasons. Obviously they must have acquiesced and made a quixotic compromise rather than think things through from the ground up (as I would argue). Pity those poor Unitarians who did a slapdash conjoining of Enlightenment rationalism with muted Calvinism.

On the positive side, he succeeds in showing that Brownson was a thinker of high rank, too often overlooked by those biased on the other side of the theological side. Gelpi quite rightly counts Brownson among the intellectual forebears of reconstructed Catholic thinking. Gelpi’s *overall* narrative is condensed here:

No Enlightenment nominalism for Brownson. Besides concrete, sensible actuality, the human mind knows real generality, universality, but it grasps the universal ideal only in the concrete, in the sensible, in the actual. Ontology and realism in the end coincide. As we shall see in the final section of this study, Abbott, Peirce, and the mature Royce, like Brownson, endorsed a form of realistic ontology. Of the three, Peirce would offer the most precise account of the relationship between logic, semiotics, and ontological realism. (pp. 170-171)

I find Gelpi’s affirmation of the concrete, the sensible (read in non-Kantian ways), and the actual (alas, a hopeless term — one wonders what the “non-actual” would be), commendable. And clearly Peirce’s logic of relations, which overcomes dyadic logic, and his triadic semiotics, which renders French semiotics moot, has contributed powerful new tools for both philosophy and theology. But Peirce, as we shall see, had some serious limitations of his own.

Gelpi’s plea for a realist ontology entails that nominalist perspectives are also dualistic, especially insofar as they entail or evoke some kind of alleged divide between nature (never really analyzed *per se* by Gelpi) and the super-natural. This comes out clearly:

Moreover, in overcoming dualism with a dynamic vitalism Brownson also learned to think incarnationally rather than dialectically and dualistically. As a consequence, Brownson saw in a way [,] which finally eluded Emerson [,] that the human mind grasps real generality not by ascending to some pure and eternal realm of Spirit, but in the concrete, sensible individual. (pp. 172-173)

My quibble here is two-fold. I do not see Emerson as wishing to “ascend” to another realm outside of nature, but rather to clear away the illusions (*Maya*) that keep us from seeing the true depth dimension of nature (which he refers to as *natura naturans* in his 1844 essay “Nature”). This dimension, which “publishes itself in creatures,” is as fully a part of nature as is any order of relevance that we can point to. Secondly, the concept of incarnationality is fully Emersonian, with the crucial addition that he generalizes the locus of the incarnation to cover anything whatsoever. Again, I argue that Emerson’s “dualism” is more in the mind of Gelpi than in the mind of Emerson.

The Peirce case is, for me at least, the most interesting. Gelpi has worked through Peirce with great care and has let Peirce speak in his own language, even where it is most vague, as in his implicit, and endlessly frustrating, philosophical theology. Gelpi notes quite correctly that some creative theologians are now becoming seriously engaged with Peirce, especially insofar as they can stretch even further Peirce’s notion of scientific inquiry. I am less sure than some that Peirce’s concept of “interpretive musement” will deliver the goods that seem promised for and by it, but it is clear that for some Peirce provides a kind of panpsychism that avoids the atomism of process forms (with the possible exception of Neville’s much richer quasi-Peircean process perspective which avoids atomism). Here is his mature Peirce:

Like Abbot, Peirce saw that a metaphysics of relationship overcomes philosophical dualism, but Peirce’s fallibilism kept him from acquiescing as facilely as Abbot did in a pantheistic explanation of cosmic relationship. Peirce seems to have conceived the relationship of God to the cosmos in more traditional terms as the relationship of creator to creature. Moreover, while Peirce affirmed some kind of continuity between uncreated Mind and created minds, he left the precise nature of that relationship vague. (p. 278)

Did Peirce leave the divine/created relationship vague out of wisdom, or because of a serious failure in his categorial structure? I would argue the latter. Peirce’s

“acquiescence” is manifest in his reluctance to open out the full implications of his Schellingian (read as Neo-Platonic) objective idealism/realism which has its own pantheistic unsaid. Gelpi correctly understands the importance of Episcopalian Trinitarian thinking in Peirce, but does not give enough play to the deeper strain of Unitarian non-dualism that Peirce abjected. The vagueness in Peirce’s philosophical theology is caused by both a personal abjection (fear and denial) of Schelling’s “unruly ground” (*im Grund das Regellose*) and by a strain in his competing conceptual structures and insights. One aligns with Peirce for the project of Christian reconstruction with some real peril.

Gelpi’s final chapter, “Toward a Constructive Postmodernism,” hints at where a genuinely American religious and pragmatist perspective should go. The bad kind of postmodernism “wallows all too promiscuously” (pp. 346-347) in its individualism, nominalism, and amorality. “Enlightenment Fundamentalism” also needs to be assaulted, especially as it is embodied in the academy, so that a fallibilistic, melioristic, sin-accepting common-sense realism can help to usher in a new religious consciousness. Any specific conception of the divine, which, for Gelpi must include the feminine dimension (obviously a problematic notion), must be seen as a “working hypothesis” rather than as the culminating expression of a self-validating intuition or as emerging from the appeal to authority.

But for this reviewer, all of this seems a bit tepid. Missing is the surge and flavor of the energies and potencies so well lived in and by Emerson. Missing is the exaltation of the erotic and sensual dimensions of the senses. Further, and most importantly, the encounter with the full mystery of *natura naturans*, which antedates and post-dates any and all religion, is displaced from its primary role in American thought. Father Gelpi has certainly given us a must read narrative, and I say this in spite of my quibbles and irritations. Any future dialogue on our traditions must now include him as a major interlocutor. He knows his own dialogue partners better than many of us, and he knows the social contexts within which they worked. Of the many histories of classical American thought that I have read over the decades, this one produced the strongest emotional and intellectual resistances in me. That in itself puts the book in the honorific category, especially since I honor the scholarship behind Gelpi’s narrative. Were I to attempt to write such a history, I would eulogize different thinkers and different aspects, with my own eschatology culminating in what might be called an ecstatic pantheism with strong family resemblances to the Shiva traditions of India, but I would do so knowing full well that James would be right in the end — it is fundamentally a matter of temperament, and Donald Gelpi and I live in very different worlds and have, thankfully, very different temperaments.

NOTES

1. Here I urge the reader to peruse Emerson's poem "Brahma", which shows as clearly as anything in his writings his absolute commitment to non-dualism.

2. See my review of James Hoopes' book, *Consciousness in New England: From Puritanism and Ideas to Psychoanalysis and Semiotic*, in *SAAP Newsletter*, No. 56, June 1990, pp. 39-41.

3. On this issue in Dewey, see my review of Jerome Sonesson's book, *Pragmatism and Pluralism*, in this journal, Vol. XXXI, No. 3, Summer, 1995, pp. 430-437.

4. *Emerson's Anti-Slavery Writings*, edited by Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

