

Amos Bronson Alcott: A Case for Romantic Education

ABSTRACT

As one of its ideologues, Amos Bronson Alcott constitutes one of the most relevant figures of Transcendentalism or American Romanticism. Confronted with the radical changes of the times he was living in, Alcott will come up with his most daring proposals in the realm of education. The objective of this article is to place Alcott's reformation drive within its philosophical context and to reveal his singular position. Self-awareness, in perspective with nature, constitutes an unavoidable previous step to any educational intent. It is from here that the most useful learning takes place, that which allows for establishing a relationship between the material world and the spiritual world. Alcott identifies the general laws of thought, as series of Maxims, that must at all times guide the instructor. Due to the divine nature of human beings, education will, in the end, be concerned with self-education.

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Those who in modern times attempt in education anything different from the old established modes are by many regarded as publick innovators on the peace and order of society, as persons desirous of destroying the structure which secures present happiness, and of substituting in its place anarchy and confusion. They are regarded by some as dangerous and by others as ignorant and imbecile members of society – as visionary projectors against intelligence and wisdom, as persons beside themselves.
(Alcott, 1938, p. 4)

1. INTRODUCTION

The consecration of equality in the American Revolution had a tangible impact on the future political and societal organization of the United States. Both the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution* expressly guaranteed the equality and inalienability of rights. Education appeared, from the very beginning, to be the most appropriate instrument to enable the materialization of full citizenship and, consequently, the implementation of all republican values, amongst which was the ideal of human perfectibility.

In the 19th century a steady drive towards laicization was slowly beginning to take hold of America. Nevertheless, God was still being looked at as the ultimate cause in a society that had taken the path of commerce and industry and was already showing signs, if not of openly violating any divine design, at least of corrupting it by widening the gap of inequality and injustice. Despite the novelty brought about by democratic America, and all the initial utopian visions and opportunities offered by an immensely rich continent, the specter of the “fallenness of man” had become as much a European concern as an American one. For Bronson Alcott (1799-1888), the assumed goal of recovering the “divinity of man” implies a state of awareness, a real responsiveness to the world and its needs, and the overall renovation of all aspects related to human life and creativity:

The faded Image of Humanity is to be restored, and man reappear in his original brightness. It is to mould anew our Institutions, our Manners, our Men. It is to restore Nature to its rightful use; purify Life; hallow the functions of the Human Body, and regenerate Philosophy, Literature, Art, Society. The Divine Idea of a Man is to be formed in the common consciousness of this age and genius mould all its products in accordance with it. (Alcott, 1836, p. 7)

At the time of Amos Bronson Alcott, Unitarianism was the prevailing creed in New England and held a more than fair amount of influence, not only because it was the faith of the dominating cultural and commercial elite but also because the Unitarian Church was at the center of the debate for a generally perceived much-needed social and cultural reformation. Although Unitarianism was based upon Calvinism and Puritanism, it was already characterized by its departure from some of their fundamental tenets such as those of the Trinity and the conception of man as predestined and naturally inclined towards depravity. The nature of Unitarianism was rather loose and was soon to be contested from the inside by a group of young clergymen, of whom Ralph Waldo Emerson was the most prominent and influential figure. Emerson was associated with the formation of the “Transcendental Club” which, with time, would become synonymous with American Romanticism and, most importantly, it was Emerson himself who was credited with writing what is considered to be the cultural proclamation of independence of the United States, *The American Scholar* (1837)¹.

Transcendentalism took its name from Kantian philosophy and is characterized by its adoption of German Idealism: directly from F. W. Schelling or, indirectly, from the British philosopher Thomas Carlyle, or the poet-philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The main criticism the Transcendentalists directed at the Unitarians was their absolute dependence on John Locke’s empiricism, which was perceived as an insurmountable impediment for any whole (religious) experience. Accordingly, Transcendentalists were intent on the discovery and exploration of the life of the spirit in an intuitive way that intended to be rational, liberal and, as rightly corresponds to the romantic period, personal. Human beings, endowed with the gifts of God – among them imagination – occupied the center of the universe and had the power

1. Its main points state the necessity for a new generation to take hold of the reins of culture, breaking with the predominant existing tradition while, at the same time, stress is put on the action of individuals directed to moral reform. In its search for “man thinking” it can rightly be considered as utopian aimed.

to, and were entitled to, change reality. But man, nevertheless, needed tutelage, education to become apt to carry out his duties. Alcott's view on man, and on man's capacities, is sufficiently clear:

Man is the noblest of the Creator's works. He is the most richly gifted of all his creatures. His sphere of action is the broadest; his influence the widest; and to him is given Nature and life for his heritage and possession. He holds dominion over the Outward. He is the rightful Sovereign of the Earth, fitted to subdue all things to himself, and to know no superior, save God. And yet he enters upon the scene of his labors, a feeble and wailing Babe, at first unconscious of the place assigned to him, and needs tutelage and discipline to fit him for the high and austere duties that await him. (Alcott, 1836, p. 3)

2. HUMAN CULTIVATION

Most notably, Transcendentalists approached reformism with a cultural perspective, as both their utopian projects of Brook Farm (1840-1847), subtitled as an "Association for Industry and Education," and Fruitlands (1843-1844) attest². The importance Bronson Alcott attributes to education is suggested in the motto chosen for his program of educational and social reform: *Education is All*. This is already symptomatic of his holistic approach towards education which Alcott accordingly saw as the art of cultivating the moral, emotional, physical and psychological dimensions of a growing child. This comprehensive view on education was again reinforced by his choice of terminology; Alcott used the term *Human Culture* instead of *Human Education*, suggesting, in this way, the organic nature of education:

Human Culture is the art of revealing to man the true Idea of his being – his endowments – his possession – and fitting him to use these for the growth, renewal and perfection of his Spirit. It is the art of completing a man... It seeks to realize in the Soul the Image of the Creator. Its end is a perfect man. Its aim, through every stage of influence and discipline, is self-renewal. (Alcott, 1836, p. 3)

Alcott's plan had an obvious religious nature, evidenced by explicitly desiring to *realize* in the human Soul the Image of the Creator and through his concern towards what he perceived as the core of human superiority over the surrounding nature: the Soul or the Spirit. For Alcott, not until the soul, as the commanding entity of the individual, is understood and put under the influence of "perfect forms" can it be said that the path towards comprehensive education is open. This ideal of human perfection is to be realized by attaining a state of self-awareness by means of introspection. Despite the far-reaching focus on religion, it is the teacher, not the pastor, who occupies the central role in the correction of all evils.

It would soon become clear that Alcott's attempts at the "renewal of man" would enter into conflict with financial and industrial interests. The challenge to the ruling classes in the reformation of man is evident.

2. Interestingly enough, neither Emerson nor Thoreau, two key figures of Transcendentalism, ever showed any interest in any of the experimental utopian societies, showing always a great distrust for any initiatives of organized society.

Transcendentalists would soon become known for their patent discontentment towards the pervading religious and social *status quo*, and by their growing disaffection with materialism.

In line with Bacon's inductive methods, and rejecting Locke's dependency on sensory organs, Alcott embraces Neo-Platonism and, accordingly, the use of inductive methods came to constitute his privileged didactic initial approach. A close observation of children would not only favor the aims of education but, more importantly, it would also help to reveal the spirit of the human being. Alcott's purpose was to infer the laws that regulate the souls of children with the aim of being able to reach any clues about the relation between the Body and the Soul³. In an entry in his journal dated March 25, 1831, Alcott gives us an accurate idea of what he believes to be the result of his use of observation, in relation to one of his three daughters⁴: "An account of the Development of the intellectual and Moral Conduct of my little girl, from birth, to be continued as her mind and heart make progress". (Alcott, 1938, p. 28)

By precisely developing the spiritual, transcendental, dimension, man has the capacity of communicating with, and accessing, the realm of the "absolute reality" of all things. Alcott would, therefore, focus on the importance of the role played by Understanding (a faculty dependent on the senses). By assuming the cultivation of this faculty, as a preliminary move, he anticipated that other realities would consequently come to be known. It was in Samuel Taylor Coleridge⁵ that Alcott was able to find the connection between natural phenomena and the Absolute principle, man and the Supreme Being. Not only was Coleridge the most influential religious thinker for liberal clergymen, but also one of the fundamental figures in the introduction of Neo-Platonism in America, especially with his *Aids to Reflection*⁶ (1825). In this respect, it is worth mentioning that Emanuel Swedenborg's (1688-1772) Christian Platonism, and the consideration of the physical world as a reflection of the spiritual world, was also highly influential in Transcendentalist circles:

The human soul has had a primordial experience in the infinite Spirit. The infinite is embodied in the finite, to be developed and returned again to the source of infinite energy from whence it sprang. This is spiritual and earthly experience, and all the phenomena of humanity arise from the union and evolution of these elements. The finite is but the return of the soul on the path of the infinite – the wheeling orb attracted toward, and yet preserved in the cycle of, the central sphere. (Alcott, 1938, p. 35)

Bearing influence on Alcott's thought, and from a didactic perspective, authors such as the Edgeworths⁷ with their *Practical Education* (1798) stand out in different aspects such as the need for an affectionate pedagogical approach, and the fostering of active participation of children in education by resorting to practical matters. Among the publications that certainly influenced Alcott, *The American Journal of Education*⁸ stands out. Through the *Journal*, Alcott became familiar with the most recent European pedagogical

3. It must not be forgotten that, according to Kantian philosophy, there is a similarity between external and internal natures. Approaching the mind and the soul would make available their internal structures and be fundamental in the understanding of each other.

4. His daughters, Anna, Louisa and Lizzie were the starting point for most of his observations.

5. Coleridge's *The Friend* (1809-1810) offers a Christian conciliation between Bacon's materialism and Plato's idealism. The gap between objects and minds can be bridged by the gift of imagination.

6. It is worth stating that the full title of *Aids to Reflection* is: *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Man's Character on the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality and Religion*.

7. Both Maria and Richard Edgeworth stand out as the most famous British educators of the time. Their book *Practical Education* (1798) made their educational thought widespread.

8. *The American Journal of Education* was founded in 1826 and edited by Alcott's friend William Russell, a disciple of George Jardine and a forerunner to the man who would be known in history as the creator of the American public school system, Horace Mann.

developments and, most especially, with Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's methods. Despite the fact that Pestalozzi (1746-1827) is present in a variety of ways in Alcott's teaching practices, and in certain philosophical pursuits such as an organic perspective on the development of children; the view of education as a tool for the regeneration of man; the rejection of physical punishment and the use of the inductive method, there are, nonetheless, some important differences, especially in regard to the overall religious and philosophical scope with which Alcott's methodology is imbued. One of the points where there is a marked discordance with Pestalozzi is that of the role to be attributed to what can be termed in a general way as the literary. Alcott favored the use of allegory in instruction, something that may be associated with his perusal of the Bible in teaching. In a related way, Alcott was keen to attribute to writing an outstanding role, thus his students were trained in the writing of journals as a means to reach self-awareness, through reflection on the daily events of their lives. In Alcott's thought it is worth noting a characteristic feature of Transcendentalism: it is through individual action that changes are worked out within society and that any betterment changes will ultimately feedback on the individual:

The art, which fits such a being to fulfill his high destiny, is the first and noblest of arts. Human culture is the art of revealing to man the true ideas of his being – his endowments – his possessions – and of fitting him to use these for the growth, renewal, and perfection of spirit, it is the art of completing man. It includes all those influences, and disciplines, by which his faculties are unfolded and perfected. (Alcott, 1938, p. 105)

3. SCHOOL REFORMATION: SEARCHING FOR THE LAWS OF THOUGHT

Alongside the personal account of Alcott's methods made by his assistant, Elizabeth Peabody, in her book *Record of a School* (1836)⁹, Alcott's liberal and novel didactic ideals are expressed in his *General Maxims of Teaching by Which to Regulate the Instructor's Practice in Instruction*¹⁰, which can dutifully be regarded as the summary expression of his educative credo.

The romantic emphasis on the conception of man as a totality of potentialities was translated into the search for educational reformation projects that would take into account all of the matters involved in teaching. Bronson Alcott's reformation of school practices is best exemplified by his experiments in Cheshire (1825-1827) and in the Temple School (1834-1839). With them, Alcott not only changed the way in which subjects were taught and the goals to be reached, but he also changed the physical appearance and the organization of the space in schoolrooms in order to create "pleasing associations with the space of study." As part of an unprecedented change, big windows let in light and air, new areas were introduced for indoor exercise and play, and decorations created an environment of study where learning and happiness were allied. In Connecticut public schools, Alcott was the first to introduce blackboards and desks, of his own design, which included both slates and, for the first time, backs on the seats for maximum comfort.

9. Elizabeth Peabody worked for Bronson Alcott as an assistant from 1834 to 1836. She kept a record of Alcott's innovative teaching practices that she published in 1836. The book became a success, and, as a consequence, drew attention to Alcott's school and methods.

10. Bronson Alcott, "General maxims by which to regulate the instructor's practice in instruction," retrieved from: <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/ideas/alcottmaxims.html/>

In the context of nineteenth century teaching, Alcott's methods meant both innovation and revolution, certainly not without their due reaction from more conservative quarters. The teacher approached students in the physical space of the schoolroom and his conduct was to be one of *kindness, tenderness and respect* (Maxim XLV). Bronson Alcott was, nevertheless, and according to reports, the strictest of disciplinarians; his unbending observance of discipline is suggested by a list of twenty-eight *Prohibitions* that constitute an authentic code of behavior regulating student activity and conduct. They included a wide range of aspects from punctuality, to class participation and a series of regulations that dealt with lack of attendance and behavior at mealtimes and during reading times.

Teaching goals stressed the importance of the practical, the concrete, as an example and model for young students. If education was to leave a mark on mankind it had to adapt to the needs of its times. It is with this thought in mind that teaching acquired a practical orientation, things taught must be *useful* (Maxim XVII) and be related to *the practical business of life* (Maxim LIV) something which was a commonsense imperative, especially for the Temple School where students came from the financial and aristocratic families of Boston. Highlighting an example, Peabody mentions that the experience of a just action should be enough to provide students with an exact idea of what justice actually meant. This possibility of transition from the particular to the general demanded to be considered under the framework of Transcendentalism and the consideration of things as nothing more than symbols for spiritual realities. Peabody describes, in regard to students, this process in quite graphic terms: "The perception of the finite, seems with them, to be followed immediately, by a plunge into the infinite". (Peabody, 1835, as cited by Myerson, 2000, p. 100)

The use of *inductive methodology* (Maxim XX) made teaching and learning dependent on revealing aspects of the self that remained, or had become, unconscious. Education is about making evident, and bringing out, the innate qualities that all human beings naturally possess. As is the case with other romantic thinkers, Bronson Alcott was fully engaged in the philosophic-religious discussions of his time, such as in the debate concerning the relation between mind and matter (spiritual reality and physical reality). It was, then, perceived that the Transcendentalist and the man of science were engaged in a search with common objectives: the admiration for the scientific spirit led Alcott to search for the discovery of general organizing principles, the "laws of thought." In consequence, nature and its laws were to be deciphered so as to provide clues about the transcendental world. Following Neo-Platonism, Transcendentalists believed that the structure of Nature, an authentic epiphany of God, could be induced by means of contemplation. In this respect, and relating to pure Kantianism, Alcott believed that there was an analogy between the operations of nature and the operations of the mind. Thus in his "On the Nature and Means of Early Intellectual Education as Deduced from Experience" (1832) he expresses the following :

The analogy between the mind and the outward world is the parent of thought. Objects surrounding the child interest and influence him. They form the elements from which the intellectual fabric is built up within him... An early experience fraught with the sympathetic and inspiring forms of nature, is the origin and spring of genius. What, indeed, are the artist, the poet, the philosopher, but children whose deep interest in nature, and trust in its teachings, have preserved their beings, in mature life, a faithful mirror of outward analogy. Their minds are pure and undefiled. Truth flows through them as from a sweet and lucid fountain. They behold in the vivid light of nature those deep truths, which by the perverted eye, are but dimly perceived. (Alcott, 1832, cited by Dahlstrand, 1982, p. 91)

According to Platonism, the seed of perfection, a copy of the Primal Idea, remained uncorrupted at the early stages of life: displaying naturally goodness, simplicity, curiosity, love of beauty and spiritual insights beyond the natural world that are associated with the superior gift of imagination. Alcott's stress on the development of the spiritual life of students did not mean, in any way, a lack of preoccupation with, or abstraction from, the natural outward reality, since external reality was always to be considered as a manifestation of the spiritual entity. The student would then center his activity upon himself: this self-study was to stress the confrontation of the *I* with the *Not-I* consequently generating conscience about the self. For this reason, Alcott adopts a Socratic method of dialogue with students, an innovation that drew much attention and some sharp criticism due to the fact that his students were, after all, children:

My theory of Conversation as the natural organ of communicating, mind with mind, appears more and more beautiful to me. It is the method of human culture. By it I come nearer the hearts of those whom I shall address than by any other means, I reach the facts of the case. I am placed thereby in the simplest relations. There is nothing arbitrary, nothing presuming. Conversation must be my organ of address to the public mind. (Alcott, 1938, p. 105)

The Socratic approach was in consonance with the innovative democratic principles of the fledgling American democratic experience, centered upon the autonomous action of the individual and on the desirability of consensus between dialoguing opposing factions. Not only were children encouraged to participate in teaching with their own views and perspectives, but also all the teaching was done by *consulting the collective happiness of the school* (Maxim XLVII) and by consulting their *feelings* (Maxim XLII). This was deliberately done with the obvious intention of providing students with an experience of self-government, and a sense of their importance and responsibility in the project of education, since they were granted the chance of becoming aware of the *hope which mankind placed in their conduct* (Maxim XXXVIII).

In a move that was typical of Transcendentalism, one of exemplification and ascension from the particular to the general, students were also given a notion of what was really to be understood by self-government by selecting among their peers a *superintendent of conduct*, in charge of attitude, appearances and inattention. Because of the intervention of the Spirit, Alcott believed, conduct could well become moral conduct. Regarding this superintendent of conduct, Elizabeth Peabody mentioned in her *Record of a School*:

This is delegated to scholars selected for the day, whom sometimes he chooses himself, and sometimes the scholars choose, and to whom the whole always agree, promising to submit without complaint to any punishments [...] This creates a sense of responsibility and the worst boys, when put into that office, become scrupulously just, and get an idea of superintending themselves. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, p. 110)

As claimed by Alcott, teaching had to begin by bearing in mind the concrete and tangible: familiar objects and occurrences were to be the first aims of both teaching and learning. The process must be carried out as a progressive movement of ascension from *the more easy and known, to the more difficult and unknown* (Maxim XXI). The religious inclination of Alcott's reformist efforts always placed the activity of teaching in relation to *Eternity* (Maxim II) and, as a result, teaching was regarded as an agent of the *Great Instructor* (Maxim III). It is, in this way, that it can be perceived that the process of learning is one of ascension that will, in due course, be centered upon spiritual matters, having God as its ultimate goal.

4. AWARENESS OF NATURE AND SPIRIT

Whereas Alcott's focus on the divine must always be acknowledged, it is important not to forget that education was considered as the fundamental tool for the amelioration of society, for the restoration of the original divine plan. In this regard, we can confirm how the concrete, amongst which was human society, was the starting point for a transcendental search that led to spiritual quests. Since students were made an active party in social regeneration, education was, therefore, perceived to be a communitarian experience that required the involvement of society as a whole in a wider perspective. This engagement of students was also reflected in their participation in what Alcott considered the most important of all tasks, that of self-education.

Education was, therefore, instrumental to a gradual personal inner-growth that would culminate in a higher degree of self-awareness or self-realization. In this process, thought and soul are both differentiated from any possible relation to the qualities of sensible objects. This disengagement from the world of senses is operated through the intervention of the all-powerful and, assumedly, God-granted gift of imagination. Education has, therefore, the capacity of making possible a much-longed-for ultimate goal of transcendence from both time and the material world, in order to reach the realm of the

conceptual and the emblems of inner and super-sensual life. Alcott will refer to education as the “opening of thought to the soul”. Without any doubt this process is very close to that of a mystical exercise:

Education is that process, by which *thought* is opened out of the soul, and, associated with outward... things, is reflected back upon itself, and thus made conscious of its reality and shape. It is *Self-Realization*. As a means, therefore, of educating the soul out of itself, and mirroring forth its ideas, the external world offers the materials. This is the dim glass in which the senses are first called to display the soul, until aided by the keener state of imagination... it separates those outward types of itself from their sensual connection, in its own bright mirror recognizes again itself, as a *distinctive* object *in* space and time, but *out of it* in *existence*, and painting itself upon these, as emblems of its inner and super-sensual life which no outward thing can fully portray. (Alcott, 1936, p. 4)

It must be pointed out that the process of education, or self-awareness, is precisely based on the assumption of man’s god-like nature. The foundations of education are, thus, to be centered upon man’s spiritual constitution as a starting point for all knowledge. According to Elizabeth Peabody’s “Explanatory Preface” to *Record of a School*, in Bronson Alcott the initial preparatory step is the contemplation of one’s own spiritual dimension. In her words: “In general terms, – Contemplation of the Spirit is the first principle of Human culture; the foundation of Self-Education”. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, p. 98)

In opposition to traditional teaching practices, considered defective because of its “one-sided and narrow” nature, education is ultimately to be concerned with an all-encompassing non-material, general, dimension it should get its initiation concerned with what in man possesses those features, the soul. It is very clear in the mind of Transcendentalists that any activity of study, in order to prevent any exclusivity and partialness, should be devoted to the study of the spirit. Alcott’s practices reflect, thus, a close conformity with Transcendentalist philosophy such as proclaimed in the foundational essay *Self-Reliance* (1841) by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Elizabeth Peabody mentioned this spiritual preoccupation in her *Record of a School* in this way:

Instead, therefore, of making it his aim to make children investigate External nature, after Spirit, Mr. Alcott leads them in the first place, to the contemplation of Spirit as it unveils within themselves. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, p. 99)

Transcendentalism expresses in this indirect way the Romantic belief that Nature is related to Spirit which, in turn, corresponds back to Nature. In a likewise manner, this circularity is translated in the reflection of education upon itself, revealing self-awareness about its reality and shape. A type of knowledge that chooses an inward path will, in the end, be as much concerned with self-knowledge, through the contemplation of the self,

as with outward reality. This knowledge, centered on the human subject, was vehemently blamed for egotism, an accusation that Peabody countered by considering it simply as “analysis of human nature.” Moreover, in the “Explanatory Preface” of her *Record*, Peabody provided an adequate account of what Alcott considered to be the primary objective of his teaching methodology, the “Contemplation of the Spirit,” – as compared to this same contemplation of spirit in religion and in scientific undertakings:

To contemplate Spirit in the Infinite Being, has ever been acknowledged to be the only ground of true Religion. To contemplate Spirit in External nature, is universally allowed to be the only true Science. To contemplate Spirit in ourselves and in our fellow men, is obviously the only means of understanding social duty, and quickening within ourselves a wise Humanity. In general terms, Contemplation of Spirit is the first principle of Human Culture; the foundation of self-education. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, p. 98)

Contemplation of the Spirit, as focused on the essence of human nature was, therefore, not only a very comprehensive term, on which Religion, Science and the regenerated humanity stood connected but, most importantly, one concept that summarized the real meaning of civilization or “Human Culture”, and one also connected to any effort of human betterment.

If in poetry William Wordsworth explored the contemplation of nature as a way of divining the laws of the human mind, in relation to education, Alcott tried to grasp the meaning of the infinite and the presence of the spiritual in all of God’s creation. Thus, Elizabeth Peabody mentions:

For as the word finite gives meaning to the word infinite, so the finite virtue always calls up in the mind, an idea which is henceforth named, and becomes an attribute to the Eternal spirit. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, p. 99)

Again the Platonic connection was made evident from a Hegelian perspective, inherent to Alcott’s dialectic approach, in which conflict and contradiction are essential for revelation. Children seem to take naturally to the connectedness between the inner reality (spiritual) and external reality (physical). This explains the necessity for the study of words and their definitions. Etymology, therefore, holds the key to know things about the world in their original uncorrupted sense. Furthermore, words are vehicles for the expression of those realities that are not evidenced by sensory organs: words are, thus, revealed as highly conceptual expressions. In this scope, Alcott’s view bears resemblance to the idea of language harbored by Emerson in his *Nature* (1836), as a vehicle of thought with three dimensions:

1. Words are *signs* of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are *symbols* of particular facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of the *spirit*. (Emerson, 1984, p. 84, my italics)

According to Alcott, the connection between the external and spiritual is to be made by language, reserving, therefore, for language the privileged role of being an inescapable conceptual tool for the crucial end of comprehending reality. Children must conquer reality and its essence, its spiritual makeup, by language. It is apparent that for Alcott, what is ultimately to be desired is that a child may inhabit the realm of the symbolic, in language:

Nature concretes Soul. God publishes himself in facts, whether of the corporeal or spiritual world. These are his words. He composes his Gospel in facts. He reveals himself in faculties and organs, and the one is but an instrument to the other. What is physical science but an illustration of the order, and statement of the laws, of spiritual science? What but the cipher in which souls is denoted in the forms of matter? What but a language by which soul is made palpable and obvious to the human senses? And hence the need of arming the intellect with such facts, as instruments of scientific demonstration. The poet, seer, philosopher, saint – each perceive the significance of such facts, and each, according to this faculty of insight, presents it to the same faculty in others of this race. (Alcott, 1938, p. 100-101)

Another important ingredient in education is the appeal for the declaration –clarification – of feelings by the students. Literature, by creating a reaction in students, brings “feelings” forth and, consequently, intellectual faculties in their logical taxonomy (or calculated exercise) of Perception, Imagination, Judgment and Reason are brought into play as a preparatory exercise for the study of Science:

On these stories, he asks questions, in order to bring out from each, in words, the feelings which have been called forth. These feelings receive their name, and history, and place in the moral scale. Then books, and passages from books are read, calculated to exercise various intellectual faculties, such as Perception, Imagination, Judgment, Reason (both in apprehension and comprehension); and these various exercises of mind are discriminated and named. There can be no intellectual action more excellent than this, whether we consider the real exercise given to the mind, or its intrinsic interest to the children, and consequently the naturalness of the exercise. And its good influence with respect to preparing for the study of Science is literally incalculable. There is not a single thing that cannot be studied with comparative ease, by a child, who can be taught what faculties he must use, and how they are to be brought to bear on the subject and what influence on those faculties the subject will have, after it is mastered. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, p. 112)

5. THE POWER AND BENEFITS OF IMAGINATION

Regardless of the fact that imagination is exalted in this period, Alcott's appeal and praise of the imagination drew very sharp criticism. Literature and, most particularly, novels, were considered a pernicious and corrupting influence, most especially upon the mind of the young. It did not help that Alcott used some of the most admired classical fables and some of the most praised works of literature related to the subject of education, such as *Frank* (1801) by Maria Edgeworth, or books of religious and moral intent, such as John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Despite all the pressure to abandon the use of literature, Alcott decided in its favor, considering it under the control of a superior principle, "the realms of ideal beauty," and, thus, away from the danger posed by the dominance of the senses. It is the interest in, and the search for, the absolute, ultimate divinity, suggested by beauty that finally justifies the stress on imagination. Imagination permits human beings to transcend their limitations at the same time that it exercises a controlling function. In this respect, it should be noted that while both Alcott and Emerson, and Transcendentalism in general held what can be termed an anti-rationalist approach, they nevertheless also stressed, at the same time, man as a totality of potentialities in which "intellectual intuition"¹¹ (or imagination) was presented as a leading faculty followed by reason and feelings. Peabody, when referring to the restrictions on the power of imagination, provides us with a view worthy of note regarding the cautiousness with which imagination is to be treated and, at the same time, presents us with some of the perils to be avoided from the inadequate use of imagination:

It is said that Mr. Alcott cultivates the Imagination of his scholars, nothing is to be gained by neglecting the uses of this faculty...Freeing it from the dominion of the senses and passion and placing it under its true lawgiver – the idea of beauty...The victims of uncultivated Imagination are all around us, - in the wild speculators of commercial life; in the insane pursuers of outward goods, to the destruction of inward peace; in the fanatics of all sects of religion, and all the parties of politics, and all the associations for general objects. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, p.118)

The special status attributed to Beauty, as part of the absolute, and the harmony existent in the reconciliation of the opposites of the natural world, brings to mind John Keats's most eloquent verse "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" or Ralph Waldo Emerson's more philosophical words in his essay *Nature*:

The true philosopher and true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both... It is, in both cases, that a spiritual life has been imparted to nature; that the solid seeming block of matter has been pervaded and dissolved by a thought; that this feeble human being has penetrated the vast masses of nature with an informing will, and recognized itself in their harmony, that is, seized their law. (Emerson, 1984, p. 67)

11. Elizabeth Peabody would mention in this regard "Mr. Alcott, by pursuing this course faithfully, has found that the Imagination is the first faculty which comes forth, leading all the others in its train," *Record of a School in Transcendentalism: A Reader*, p. 119, Oxford University Press, New York (2000).

Elizabeth Peabody's observations on Alcott's educative practices, concerning the use of Imagination, also bring to mind William Wordsworth's definition of good poetry, as the zenith of imagination, as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". In the much ignored second part of his definition, its origin is established under the control and organization of "tranquility" as an effective reflective filter. For Peabody, Alcott's use of the faculty of imagination brings along the benefits of preparing the soul for the various departments of intellectual activity. It has, therefore, an educational and preparatory nature and is characterized not only by its concentration of reason and perception but also as a faculty under restraint which makes us, again, consider Wordsworth and his "emotion recollected in tranquility." (Wordsworth, 1936, p. 740). In Peabody's words:

He begins with analyzing the speech children use. In doing this they are led immediately, to consider the action of the Imagination, since it is this faculty which has formed language. If he were to allow it to degenerate into fancy, or phantasy, or stray from the Principle of Beauty, which is the Law of Imagination, I should be the last to defend it. But wisely fed and governed, the Imagination need not be feared. It is the concentration of Profound Feeling, Reason, and the Perception of outward nature, into one act of the mind; and prepares the soul for vigorous effort, in all the various departments of its activity. (Peabody, 1835, as cited in Myerson, 2000, pp. 118-119)

In this "Principle of Beauty," Peabody finds a definite unifying action. In its relationship to the outward world it prepares the mind for a vigorous effort of activity that gathers and ties Feeling, Reason and Perception. In the mental activity of making sense of reality, or re-organizing reality, reality is conformed to a prior existing internal harmony, to the idea of organic or connatural Beauty. This conception resembles the Coleridgean secondary imagination, a faculty which is God-like but, at the same time, submitted to the divine commands. Imagination, for Coleridge is the synthesis of opposite or discordant qualities:

(...) of sameness with difference; of the general, with the concrete, of the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects... (Coleridge. 1983, pp. 16-17)

In his own search for a *coincidentia oppositorum*, Alcott is determined to achieve the total elimination of the gap between the mind (spirit) and matter (outward reality). Imagination is the tool to bridge the gap by going beyond the world of objective experience. Again, according to Wordsworth's depiction of imagination in *The Prelude* (Wordsworth, 1936, p. 535), imagination is a power which emerges from the "mind's abyss" in order to make up for the inability of man to render reality verbally, and takes up the place of rational thought and proceeds to reveal the invisible. This same effort, to reach out for the invisible in Emerson, may also be a result of a rational effort that eliminates differences, as he evidently states in *Nature*:

If the reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God. (Emerson, 1985, p. 64)

In this respect, the similarities with Coleridge's thought are deep. Coleridge longed for a synthesis of subject and object through the exercise of "poetic imagination", termed as secondary imagination, and differentiated from sensorial perception:

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events its struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Coleridge, 1983, p. 304)

6. CONCLUSION

God represents the ultimate unity of mind and matter and the realization that unity for man is possible, if he uses his imagination. Learning, in this way, would be equivalent, in Coleridgean terms, to the activity led by the finite I AM seeking the infinite I AM which represents the totality of knowledge. With the contemplation of nature the mind adjusts to nature assimilating it, eliminating the difference between mind and matter. This is patent in literary criticism with the uses of the chameleon poet, or Wordsworthian sublime, which refer to that possibility of leaving behind any vestiges of the poet's personality and reaching total identification with the thing observed. In such a way, the fragmentation of the self (mind / body) is solved. The secondary imagination replicates God in reaching unity or communion with nature and, what is more important for us now, knowledge becomes self-knowledge when unity is attained: a unity which begins its realization when the I becomes "self-aware" by the recognition of its limits and difference with the *not-I*. According to Coleridge's epistemology, all knowledge becomes, ultimately, self-knowledge. Mind (spirit) in becoming an object of itself can be reconciled with the infinite spirit (God).

The human soul has had a primordial experience in the infinite Spirit. The infinite is embodied in the finite, to be developed and returned again to the source of infinite energy from whence it sprang. This is spiritual and earthly experience, and all the phenomena of humanity arise from the union and evolution of these elements. The finite is but the return of the soul on the path of the infinite – the wheeling orb attracted toward, and yet preserved in the cycle of, the central sphere. (Alcott, 1938, p. 35)

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Amos Bronson Alcott: Um contributo para uma educação romântica

RESUMO

No contexto dos EUA do século XIX, deparamo-nos com a figura incontornável de Amos Bronson Alcott. Por ser um dos ideólogos do Transcendentalismo, romantismo norte-americano, e por estar confrontado com as alterações radicais dos seus tempos, faz da exigência de reforma o garante para um futuro melhor. No âmbito da educação, Alcott concretiza as propostas mais arrojadas, as quais, posteriormente, serão desenvolvidas por outros educadores. No entanto, o objetivo deste artigo é situar o contributo de Alcott no seu contexto e apontar para a sua posição singular. A consciência-de-si, em contexto com a natureza, constitui a condição prévia a toda aprendizagem, daqui surgindo a possibilidade de estabelecer uma relação entre o mundo material e o mundo espiritual. Alcott, num contexto quase panteísta, determina as leis gerais do pensamento, numa série de Máximas como guias para todo o educador. Devido à natureza divina do ser humano, a educação revela-se como autoeducação.

Palavras-chave: Educação; Reforma; Transcendentalismo.

Amos Bronson Alcott: Una contribución a la educación romántica

RESUMEN

En el contexto de los EEUU del siglo XIX, la personalidad de Bronson Alcott es ineludible. Ideólogo del Transcendentalismo, o Romanticismo norteamericano, Alcott enfrenta los cambios radicales de los tiempos en los que vivía y hace del reformismo en el ámbito de la educación el camino para la consecución de un futuro mejor. El objetivo de este artículo es localizar la contribución de Alcott en su contexto y revelar la singularidad de su posición. La auto-consciencia, en contacto con la naturaleza, se revela como paso previo a toda educación. Es de aquí que surge el aprendizaje más útil que permite una relación entre el mundo material y el espiritual. Alcott determinará una serie de leyes generales de la mente, Máximas que en todo momento deben guiar al maestro. En un contexto panteísta, donde se subraya la naturaleza divina de la humanidad, la educación se convertirá en auto-educación.

Palabras clave: Educación; Reforma; Transcendentalismo.