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FOUNDED BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

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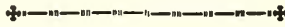
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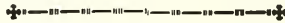


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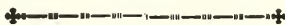
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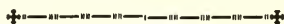
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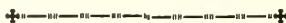
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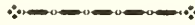
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ETHAN ALLEN AND HIS *MAGNUM OPUS*

BY CLARENCE GOHDES

Reason now reigns, and by her aid we hope
Truth may revive and sickening Error droop:
She the sole judge, the Rule, the gracious Light
Kind Heaven has sent to guide our minds aright.

But what too deep in mystery is thrown,
The wisest preachers chuse to let alone,
How Adam's fault affects all human kind;
How three is one and one is three combined;
How certain prescience checks not future will;
And why almighty Goodness suffers ill;
Such points as these lie far too deep for man,
Were never well explained nor ever can.

George Smalridge, *Art of Preaching*.¹

WHAT has commonly been denominated American Puritanism, like all other movements in thought, bred the giant that was to destroy itself. In that whimsical performance, *The Christian Philosopher*, which is best characterized, perhaps, by the profound observation, "The bladder is an admirable vessel," Cotton Mather delivers himself of this incipient heresy:

Reason, what is it but a faculty formed by God in the mind of man, enabling him to discern certain maxims of truth which God himself has established, and to make true inferences from them! In all the dictates of reason there is the voice of God. . . . Reason extends to points of morality with as much evidence as to those of mathematics.²

¹ This imitation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, by the Englishman George Smalridge (1663-1719) was very popular in certain circles in America, being reprinted in Philadelphia, in 1739 and 1741; in Boston, 1747; in New York, 1751; and again at Philadelphia, in 1762. (Cf. Evans, *Am. Bibliography*).

² London, 1721, 283.

His admiration for Newton, Boyle, Hooke, and their like, no doubt, prompted his surrender of the Utter-depravity notions that had marked the Calvinism regnant in earlier New England. The secret of the much-remarked "heresy" of Cotton Mather, of course, lies in the transitional nature of the age in which he lived—an age which was confronted by the necessity of adjusting inherited religious beliefs to the exigencies of a new "science." The general tenor of the period in question is reflected in numerous sermons like Experience Mayhew's *Discourse Shewing that God Dealeth with Men as with Reasonable Creatures*,³ and Benjamin Colman's *God Deals with Us as Rational Creatures*.⁴ The party of progress in eighteenth-century thought merely developed the capacity of the later Puritans to establish categories and subtle theological distinctions, into an exaltation of the faculty by which such categories and distinctions were fashioned; namely, Reason.

Another favorite catchword of the period, and of every other, for that matter, was Nature. For the devout among the intelligent people of the century, particularly in America, the problem of most consequence was that of "Natural Religion." As one would expect, there existed upon this subject a wide divergence of views—from the vehement insistence upon revelation as the sole authority for principles of conduct, through the "pale negations" of early Unitarianism, to the emphatic declarations of the deists. The most general attitude of enlightened conservatives is, perhaps, expressed by the following words of Jonathan Edwards:

Indeed there is what is called natural religion or divinity.

There are many truths concerning God, and our duty to him, which are evident by the light of nature. But Christian divinity, properly so called, is not evident by the light of nature; it depends on revelation. . . .⁵

A perusal of the lectures delivered at Harvard on the Dudley foundation during the latter half of the eighteenth century will indicate how varied were the opinions rife among the eminent Americans chosen to speak. In addition to sermons on popery, church organization, and the like, one finds such titles as *The Coincidence of Natural with Revealed Religion*,⁶ and *Natural Religion*

³ Boston, 1720.

⁴ Boston, 1723.

⁵ "Importance of the Knowledge of Divine Truth," preached in 1739, *Works*, Worcester, 1899, VIII, 7.

⁶ Preached in 1775, by Pres. Samuel Langdon, Boston, 1776.

*Aided by Revelation and Perfected in Christianity.*⁷ In the latter these words appear:

To affirm . . . that the reason of man cannot come to the knowledge of God and his duty to him by any contemplations and deductions of his own is to say a great deal too much . . .⁸ But Gad Hitchcock, their author, was notoriously liberal. More representative, unquestionably, were the sentiments of Andrew Eliot, who granted that the "high priori" road was too intricate for ordinary men, but insisted that the exercise of reason was not designed to be the only guide for human activity.⁹ Peter Clarke, in 1763, maintained that the religion of Christ, "as to its practical part, is founded in the reason and nature of man, and so may in some sense be said to be natural."¹⁰ Four years earlier, Ebenezer Gay recommended a judicious combination of both natural and revealed religion, and informed his audience that in the Bible could be found "the religion of nature in its greatest purity."¹¹ Such was the attitude of the leaders of religious thought at the most liberal institution in New England. No doubt, some of them were more discreet than honest.

The emancipation of New England ideas from the rigid self-sufficiency of "Neo-Puritanism" was, of course, largely effected by the reading of such theologians as Samuel Clarke and Tillotson.¹² But the influence of John Locke is in a good many cases more striking. If, as Leslie Stephen says, Locke "became the intellectual ruler of the century"¹³ in England, in America he became a veritable Allah, with Newton as his prophet.

William Livingston, afterward Governor of New Jersey, allowing his muse to amble through *Philosophic Solitude*, had no hesitation in passing from Milton, Dryden, and "gentle Watts," to Sagacious Locke, by providence design'd

⁷ Preached in 1799, by Gad Hitchcock, Boston, 1779.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *A Discourse on Natural Religion*, Boston, 1771, 7 and 32.

¹⁰ *Man's Dignity and Duty as a Reasonable Creature and His Insufficiency as a Fallen Creature*, Boston, 1763, 46.

¹¹ *Natural Religion as Distinguished from Revealed*, Boston, 1759, 20 and 31.

¹² Cf. S. G. Hefelblower, *Relation of John Locke to English Deism*, 1918, 183. As early as 1698 Tillotson was read in Boston, if one can judge from the receipt of 10 vols. of his works by King's Chapel, from William the Third, *Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, XVIII, 429.

¹³ *Hist. of Eng. Thought in the 18th C.*, London, 1902, I, 35.

T'exalt, instruct, and rectify the mind;
or to

Immortal Newton, whose illustrious name
Will shine on records of eternal fame.¹⁴

When the boys at Harvard wanted to express their appreciation for the activities of Stephen Scales, who forsook the teaching of philosophy to practice law, they had Paul Revere make a silver cup upon which were pictured two books, Price's *Morals*, and Locke's *Essays*.¹⁵ Locke was quoted in sermons,¹⁶ a commonplace book was designed after the method he approved,¹⁷ and he was used as a trusted authority in most of the philosophical effusions written during the period—from the iron-clad arguments of Jonathan Edwards, to the despised immaterialism of Samuel Johnson, Berkeley's chief American disciple.

Although the students at Yale just began to hear of such names as Descartes, Locke, and Newton in 1714, and were duly cautioned against "thinking anything of them,"¹⁸ in 1743 a number of seniors in the college had Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* printed at their own expense, as an aid in thwarting the policy of the President and Governors.¹⁹

Once established, the philosophy of Locke, or, better, what was esteemed to be his philosophy, prevailed for an incredibly long period. In 1816 no one seems to have been aroused when a certain A. Cummings held forth at a Harvard "exhibition" on "The Value of the Metaphysical Researches of Locke."²⁰ Thirteen years later, in perhaps the first notable manifestation of American transcendentalism, James Marsh, of the University of Vermont, wrote:

Let it be understood . . . that by the prevailing system of metaphysics, I mean the system of which in modern times Locke is the reputed author.²¹

¹⁴ *Philosophic Solitude, or the Choice of a Rural Life*. . . , N. Y., 1747, repr. Boston, 1762, 38 and 39.

¹⁵ Benjamin Rand, *Philosophical Instruction at Harvard*, MS., 23.

¹⁶ See, for example, Andrew Eliot, *op. cit.*, 21 and 29ff.

¹⁷ Strange to say, the commonplace book of George Ripley is of that type, MS. in Widener Library.

¹⁸ E. C. Smyth, "The New Philosophy Against Which Students at Yale College Were Warned. . . ." *Proc. Am. Antiq. Soc.*, New Series, XI, 252.

¹⁹ Trumbull, *History of Connecticut*, II, 183.

²⁰ B. T. Hill, "Life at Harvard a Century Ago. . . ." *Proc. Am. Antiq. Soc.*, New Series, XX, 230.

²¹ *Preliminary Essay to Coleridge's 'Aids to Reflection,' Coleridge's Works*, ed. Shedd, 1856, I, 86.

However, with all the interest aroused by Locke in the more intellectual circles, comparatively few editions of his works were brought out in America. According to Evans' *American Bibliography*, the essay sponsored by the Yale boys, Boston, 1743, was the first to appear. It was reprinted at Wilmington, in 1764; at Windsor, Vermont, in 1788; and at Stockbridge, in 1790. Up to 1795 the only other works of the Englishman to be reprinted in this country were the *Essay on Civil Government*, Boston, 1773; an abridgement of the *Essay on the Human Understanding*, Boston, 1794; and selections from his letters, appended to an *Extract of a Letter Wrote by the Earl of Essex. . .*, edited by A. Benezet, Philadelphia, 1775(?). One needs to remember, however, that during the period in question, and long after it, books of a more esoteric appeal were almost always imported.

With all the discussion of natural religion on the part of the better educated clergy, and with all the veneration of Locke, there is, nevertheless, no evidence for believing that free-thought cut much of a figure in America before the palmy days of Jefferson and Tom Paine. The enormous popularity of Watts's pious lucubrations alone would prove the point. True enough, there must have been some grounds for John Walton's *Religion of Jesus Vindicated, occasioned by some deistical writings lately printed at Newport*, Boston, 1736, or George Gillespie's *Treatise Against the Deists or Free-Thinkers*, Philadelphia, 1735. More famous than these, of course, was Charles Leslie's *Short and Easie Method With the Deists*, first reprinted in America at Boston, in 1719; and afterward at Williamsburg and Annapolis, 1733; at New York, 1745; and at Philadelphia, 1783. But this work may have owed some of its popularity to the appended arguments for toleration and the account of the trial of John Checkley, who, in 1724, was fined for having published a "false and scandalous libel."²²

It will be observed from the preceding account of some phases of the development of thought in America during the eighteenth century, I believe, that up to the period immediately following the Revolution there were rationalistic tendencies, more or less adroitly expressed, in the more cultivated elements of society. Yet the spirit of the fathers was heavy in the land. It was not until even the people of the backwoods were reading Tom Paine that a man

²² Every American edition afterward, and all of the later English editions I have seen, appeared with the account of Checkley's trial, etc.

with authority could say, "The fashionable bias of the present time will be readily acknowledged to be unfavorable to Christianity."²³

Accordingly, one is not a little surprised to find among the most significant attempts at slitting the throat of Puritanism by means of rationalistic argument, *Oracles of Reason*,²⁴ by Ethan Allen, published at Bennington, Vt., probably in 1785. This work, usually considered to be the first printed attack on the Christian religion brought out in America, has been called by Woodbridge Riley "a good example of the popular recoil from Puritanism,"²⁵ and as such, is of no ordinary significance to an appreciation of the character of the age. The preface, dated July 2, 1782, provides this information:

An apology appears to me to be impertinent in writers who venture their works to public inspection for this obvious reason, that if they need it, they should have been stifled in the birth and not permitted a public existence. . . . I have as good a natural right to expose myself to public censure . . . as any of the species . . . and I ask no favor at the hands of philosophers, divines or critics. . . .

In my youth I was much disposed to contemplation, and at my commencement in manhood I committed to manuscript such sentiments or arguments as appeared most consonant to reason. . . . I was deficient in education. . . . I have struck the outlines of a consistent system, which I recommend to abler writers to perfect.

The Bible and a dictionary have been the only books which I have made use of since I have been correcting my manuscripts and making the following composition, though in those manuscripts I had copied sundry passages from certain authors. . . .

I have invariably endeavored to make reason my guide.

In the circle of my acquaintance (which has not been small) I have generally been denominated a deist, the reality

²³ Timothy Dwight, *Nature and Danger of Infidel Philosophy*. . . , New Haven, 1798, 63.

²⁴ The full title is "Reason the only Oracle of Man, or a Compendious System of Natural Religion. Alternately adorned with Confutations of a variety of Doctrines incompatible to it; deduced from the most exalted ideas which we are able to form of the Divine and Human Characters and from the Universe in General," Bennington, printed by Haswell and Russell, MDCCLXXXIV.

²⁵ *American Philosophy, The Early Schools*, N. Y., 1907, 47.

of which I never disputed, being conscious I am no Christian, except mere infant baptism make me one; and, as to being a deist, I know not, strictly speaking, whether I am one or not, for I have never read their writings.²⁶

For the material treated in *Oracles of Reason* the reader is referred to Riley's *American Thought*. Suffice it to say here that there is in it a fairly complete system of natural religion, with a discussion of such matters as the nature of God, creation, free will, etc., based wherever possible upon cold logic, and, wherever that fails, upon "conscious intuition." Moreover, there is included an attack upon some of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, such as the inspiration of the scriptures, the possibility of miracles, the atonement, etc. The Virgin Birth is esteemed to be unworthy of "serious confutation."^{26a} Two examples will illustrate, I believe, the general character of the work. The first will indicate the method of Allen's application of "reason." On the doctrine of man's depravity he writes:

Without the exercise of reason we could not understand what reason is, which would be necessary for us previously to understand in order to distinguish what it is not. . . . But for us to have the knowledge of what reason is, and the ability to distinguish it from that which is depraved, or is irrational, is incompatible with the doctrine of the depravity of our reason. . . .²⁷

More vigorous is the following, perhaps:

When we consider what a diabolical, powerful, malicious, spiteful, designing, cunning, and ensnaring rascal the Devil, Satan, the Dragon, or the Old Serpent is represented to be, we cannot reconcile it to divine providence to have permitted so pernicious and artful a being to have transformed himself into the likeness of a serpent, thereby capacitating himself to work his premeditated villainy with a woman who just before had been taken out of Adam's broadside, whose experience had been none, or trifling, and by deluding her, pave the way to ensnare Adam also, together with their numerous offspring.²⁸

²⁶ In all quotations I have changed s's, and made the use of capitals and punctuation marks conform to modern practice.

^{26a} *Oracles*, 356.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 377.

However, the book is, unlike Tom Paine's, occupied chiefly with metaphysical discussion.²⁹ Its religious system is closely akin to the Unitarianism that came into vogue after Emerson and Theodore Parker had carted away a few heirlooms from Puritan days.

The sources of Allen's philosophical notions are not to be readily stated. His main inspiration, according to his chief critics, seems to have been the mental *Sturm und Drang* of the Revolution. But, like most concocters of "systems" of the day, he owed much to the "exalted reasonings of a Locke or a Newton."³⁰ Allen's ideas on supernaturalism and creation are "substantially the same" as Newton's; and the indebtedness of his psychology to that of Locke is not to be questioned.³¹ There are in the *Oracles of Reason* apparent references to Jonathan Edwards,³² to Pope,³³ and to Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*.³⁴ Of the "certain authors" mentioned in the preface as being "transcribed with proper quotations" only a few can be identified. Allen is not above quoting from Watts,³⁵ and refers to a pamphlet, by "a Mr. Rathburn," dealing with the Shakers, who are made to feel the weight of his scorn for "enthusiasm."³⁶ The longest quotations are from "Mr. Ditton, a celebrated writer in vindication of the Christian revelation."³⁷ In the final work of composition most assuredly he depended upon the Bible and the dictionary.³⁸

Conway asserts that the mountain philosopher borrowed his title

²⁹ Cf. Moncure D. Conway, *Life of Thomas Paine*, Putnam's, 1892, II, 193. Conway is "doubtful whether Paine ever read Allen."

³⁰ *Oracles*, 182.

³¹ See Riley, *Am. Phil.*, *Early Schools*, 49; and M. D. Conway, "Ethan Allen's *Oracles of Reason*," *Open Court*, VI (Jan., 1892), 3119.

³² P. 232. Cf. Riley, *op. cit.*

³³ P. 278. The *Essay on Man* was frequently advertised in the *Vermont Gazette*, 1783—.

³⁴ P. 269.

³⁵ P. 94.

³⁶ P. 328.

³⁷ P. 429ff. Humphrey Ditton (1675-1715) was a writer on Mathematics, etc., whose treatises were approved by Newton. In 1714 he brought out a *Discourse on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (*Enc. Brit.*). This is probably the work referred to by Allen. The *Discourse* is a "discussion of the principles of 'moral evidence,' with an appendix arguing that thought cannot be the product of matter." By 1727 it had gone through four English editions. (*D. N. B.*). The appendix may also have been used by Allen.

³⁸ Allen refers to two dictionaries, Samuel Johnson's (428), and Fenning's (452). The latter is probably Daniel Fenning's *Royal English Dictionary*, London, 1741(?).

from Charles Blount's *Oracles of Reason*,³⁹ London, 1693. However, I do not believe that Allen read the work, not only because he stated in his preface that he had never perused the writings of the deists, but because what he could have understood of it would have aroused his scorn. "I do not understand Latin, Greek or Hebrew," Ethan Allen states;⁴⁰ and as a consequence a large part of Blount's tract would have been unintelligible to him. Its partial acceptance of the Manichean explanation of Good and Evil⁴¹ would have had no reception from Allen other than that of hearty contempt. A similar reception would have awaited such astute reasoning as is exhibited in the following:

Who knows but this race of men was first of angelic degree, till by the bewitching smiles of women (the most lovely brute of the universe) betrayed to mortality in her embraces. Or, then, perhaps Columbus might be the first of the sons of Noah that enter'd the new discover'd world of America, which might be a race deriv'd from some other deluded angels, won by the same destructive bait.⁴²

If Allen got his title from the work of Blount, it must have come indirectly, possibly through some attack on deism that made its way to the Green Mountains.⁴³

The facts that we have that deal with the early life of Allen also are meagre and do not afford an adequate explanation of his sudden blossoming out as a philosopher. That he was educated far better than the average New Englander of his day cannot be questioned. From an early age he resided with his mother's relatives till the "early years of manhood."⁴⁴ His mother's family was altogether above the average in intelligence, if one is to judge by such of its number as Remember Baker and the group of physicians who came in the following generation. In a letter from Ira Allen to Dr. Samuel Williams, written in 1785, it is stated that Ethan began to prepare for college, but that "the death of his father left the family

³⁹ *Life of Thomas Paine*, II, 192.

⁴⁰ *Oracles*, 426.

⁴¹ *Miscellaneous Works of Charles Blount*, n. pl., 1695, 194.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 191-192.

⁴³ Leslie's *Short and Easy Method*. . . was prompted by Blount's work, but the title of it does not appear in the editions I have seen. Cf. Stephen, *op. cit.*, I, 194.

⁴⁴ Wm. Cothren, *History of Ancient Woodbury, Conn.*, Waterbury, 1854, I, 414.

in such circumstances that the design was not pursued."⁴⁵ Two of his brothers, Ira and Heman, were authors of printed works. Indeed, the former was not only the foremost political figure of his state during his day, and the man directly responsible for the founding of the University of Vermont, but his *History of the State of Vermont*, London, 1798, has been called by Daniel P. Thompson "in many respects the best ever published."⁴⁶ That another brother was capable of commanding a worthy style is indicated by the following excerpt from a letter of Levi Allen to Ira, dated June 28, 1793:

If you are deficient in lands I can help you to one hundred thousand acres, which will soon come in course, and shall not have the least objection on proper condition, for I am not over-anxious as to the property I leave after Time with the crooked scythe makes his last stroke; for who knows whether it shall be left to a wise man or a fool, a penurious wretch, or a gasconading spendthrift who will laugh at and deride the memory of him whose early labour, industry, and frugality enables the thoughtless and thankless villain to be a genteel blackguard, or a Ceaux de Ville.

These things may be worth casually thinking of in the midst of our pursuits in the worldly way; yet I would not have you think I have turned Methodist preacher nor set up a praying school. . . .⁴⁷

There can be no reason for the frequent claim that Ethan Allen was no more than an ignorant mountaineer with a smattering of education as a surveyor.

In the account of his captivity, which extended from September, 1775, to May, 1778, Allen tells his readers that he began to learn the French language, about 1777;⁴⁸ but there is no evidence of his having done more than the then fashionable reading, since no material is at hand to indicate that Voltaire and the like interested him. He also gives an account of a visit of two English clergymen who were most anxious to see the notorious rebel who had captured Ticonderoga. Speaking of the interview, he writes:

⁴⁵ Hiland Hall, *Early History of Vermont*. Albany, 1868, 452.

⁴⁶ "Ira Allen," *Proc. Vt. Hist. Soc.*, 1908, 91. Ira Allen in 1791 gave 4000 pounds to start the university.

⁴⁷ *Proc. Vt. Hist. Soc.*, 1917-1918, 155.

⁴⁸ *A Narrative of Col. Ethan Allen's Captivity*. . . , Walpole, N. H., 1807, 44.

We discoursed on several parts of moral philosophy and Christianity; and they seemed surprised that I should be acquainted with such topics, or that I should understand a syllogism or a regular mode of argumentation.⁴⁹

His ability to fashion neat premises must have astonished his hearers, if the following quotation from the *Oracles of Reason* is typical:

God is perfect.

The laws of nature were established by God.

Therefore, the laws of nature are perfect:

or, admitting miracles,

The laws of nature were in their eternal establishment perfect.

The laws of nature have been altered.

Therefore, the alteration of the laws of nature is imperfect:

or,

The laws of nature have been altered.

The alteration has been for the better.

Therefore, the eternal establishment thereof was imperfect.⁵⁰

Like Hudibras, Ethan Allen was "in logic a great critic"; his skill in "analytic" is another matter.

As for his religious training, again only a few facts and inferences provide the bulk of the information that we have. Those not inclined to adhere to the principles of the modern philosophical Calvinism, known as Behaviorism, might give some weight to the fact that one of his paternal ancestors left Massachusetts in company with Thomas Hooker,⁵¹ or consider the possible influence of the original proprietors of the country around Bennington, who were "chiefly Congregational Separates . . . weary of the restraints of authority."⁵² More pertinent, however, is Allen's own statement that he was brought up in what are "called the Armenian principles,"⁵³ and that he had frequently discussed religion with Armenian ministers.⁵⁴ Still more significant is the information that in the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁰ P. 235-236.

⁵¹ "Ancestry of Gen. Ethan Allen," *Salem Press Hist. and Gen. Register*, Jan., 1892, 102 (later, the *Genealogical Magazine*).

⁵² David Avery, *Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Difficulties . . . between the Minister and People of Bennington. . .*, Bennington, 1783, 5.

⁵³ *Oracles*, 386.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

"early years of manhood" he "dared not distrust the infallibility of revelation, much more to dispute it."⁵⁵ One can only express a wish to know just what came into his intellectual horizon to embolden his spirit to write this:

His Song of Songs appears to be rather of the amorous kind, and is supposed to have been written at the time he was making love to the daughter of Pharaoh King of Egypt, who is said to have been a princess of exquisite beauty, and exceedingly coy, and so captivated his affections that it made him lightheaded, and sing about the 'joints of her thighs' and 'her belly.'⁵⁶

There was in Ethan Allen's nature a rugged capacity for profanity of the most eloquent quality, and a coarse frontier humor that puts one in mind of the Elizabethan apprentices shouting "Clubs," and merrily battering the doors of the bawdy-houses on Shrove Tuesday. Alexander Graydon, who was a fellow captive to the British, observed that the Vermonter's style of speech was "a singular compound of local barbarisms, scriptural phrases, and oriental wildness, and though unclassic and sometimes ungrammatical, highly animated and forcible."⁵⁷ Yet, with all his impetuosity and reckless border manners, he must have displayed qualities of sterner stuff to attract the friendship of such men as Thomas Young⁵⁸ and St. John de Crèvecoeur.⁵⁹

Like the Squire in Howells' *Leatherstocking*, Ethan Allen was, quite naturally, a notorious backwoods "atheist." He is supposed to have engaged in frequent altercations as a result of his opinions;⁶⁰ and at times, the legends have it, he inflicted his ideas upon his hearers under most inopportune circumstances. Among the stories that survive, "not exactly credible," is this one:

It is related that on one occasion, when Ethan Allen was in the congregation, and Mr. Dewey was preaching on the char-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁵⁷ *Memoirs of His Own Time*. . . , Phila., 1846, 243. Washington remarked in a letter that there was in Allen "an original something that commands attention." Irving, *Life of W.*, N. Y., 1856, 111, 408.

⁵⁸ E. S. Isham, "Ethan Allen, a Study of Civic Authority," *Proc. Vt. Hist. Soc.*, 1898, 36.

⁵⁹ See, for example, J. P. Mitchell, *St. Jean de Crèvecoeur*, Columbia Press, 1916, 19ff.

⁶⁰ H. W. De Puy, *Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Heroes of '76*, Buffalo, 1853, 426.

acter of God, some remark in the discourse displeased Col. Allen. He arose in his place at the head of a prominent pew in the broad aisle, and saying with an audible voice, "It's not so," started to go out of the pew, evidently with the intention of leaving the house. Mr. Dewey, lifting up his right hand, and pointing with his fore-finger directly at Col. Allen, said, "Sit down, thou bold blasphemer, and listen to the word of God." Allen, who had too strong a taste for that style of doing things not to like it under any circumstances, immediately resumed his seat and gave respectful attention to the remainder of the discourse.⁶¹

Another anecdote describes the marriage ceremony of Allen and his second wife, the handsome widow Mrs. Buchanan. Conforming to the "customs of society," he is said to have hastily engaged a judge to perform the rite, whom he interrupted with a shout when the words of the service did not suit his own views.⁶²

The records of the General Assembly of Vermont, according to B. H. Hall, prove that he refused to accept and subscribe to a test creed required of the members of the legislature. However, his participation in the deliberations of the session (1778) indicate that his non-conformity did not stand in the way of his acting as the representative of his constituents in Arlington.⁶³

But Ethan Allen was famous in his day not only as a military hero and a heretic, but as an author of no mean ability—some years before he went through the "wearisome reasoning of the philosophers" and "pursued the old natural road of ratiocination."⁶⁴ His first work, *A Brief Narrative of the Proceedings of the Government of New York. . .*, Hartford, 1774, prompted one of the Green Mountain Boys to produce one of the earliest specimens of bad verse made in the district. Here it is.

On Reading Gen. Ethan Allen's Animadversions on the Proceedings of the Senate of New York against Vermont.

By T. Rowley, Esq.

May Allen live to use the quill,

While York in envy reigns,

⁶¹ J. Jennings, *Memorials of a Century*, Boston, 1869, 86. This work contains a number of very entertaining anecdotes about Allen.

⁶² H. W. De Puy, *op. cit.*, 426.

⁶³ *History of Eastern Vermont*, Albany, 1865, II, 570.

⁶⁴ *Oracles*, 471.

With ready mind and active will
 T'expose their wicked plans.
 May all contagion flee away,
 And at a distance stand;
 No hypochondrics plague his mind,
 Nor palsy shake his hand,
 Till nature's great diurnal wheel
 Some future day rolls on,
 When all the Yorkers' courage fail,
 And all their hopes are gone.
 Then may our Allen have repose,
 Before his days shall cease,
 And sing and see his labours close,
 And leave Vermont in peace.⁶⁵

Two other political pamphlets came from the pen of the mountain philosopher;⁶⁶ he was responsible for part of a third, and still another is sometimes attributed to him.⁶⁷ But his literary fame rested most of all upon the lively narrative of his captivity, which came out at Philadelphia, in 1799, and seems to have been a best-seller despite the price of "ten paper dollars." So popular was it that another edition appeared in the Quaker City the same year. Editions followed at Boston, Newbury, Norwich, and so on. Gilman's *Bibliography of Vermont* mentions altogether twelve editions, the last one, apparently, having been brought out in 1849, at Dayton, Ohio. The popularity of the account of his captivity, no doubt, was partially responsible for Ethan Allen's philosophical treatise and for his purpose to write a subsequent volume on the "subject of human agency."⁶⁸ That it served as an effective preparation for more extended composition, and saved Priscian more than the casual scratching he received in the *Oracles*, is also apparent.

"No thought is contented"—and particularly unsatisfactory is the material at hand which throws such a dim light on the mental hinterland back of *Oracles of Reason*. However, enough facts

⁶⁵ *Coll. Vt. Hist. Soc.*, II (1871), 420-421. For Rowley, see P. H. White, "Early Poets of Vermont," *Proc. Vt. Hist. Soc.*, 1917-1918, 96.

⁶⁶ *An Animadversory Address to the Inhabitants of the State of Vermont*. . . , Hartford, 1778; and *A Vindication of the Opposition of the Inhabitants of Vermont to the Government of New York*, n. pl., 1799 (printed by Alden Spooner, printer to State of Vt.).

⁶⁷ See M. D. Gilman, *Bibliography of Vermont*, Burlington, 1897, 6.

⁶⁸ *Oracles*, 101.

have been presented to show that Allen's work was not the result of a sudden brain-storm induced by contact with the skeptical officers who directed the war against the Indians, or the free-thinking followers of Lafayette.

When Allen's chief work was ready for the press, it seems, he was confronted with the problem of finding a printer, because the owner of the publishing company at Hartford, who had brought out his earlier effusions, refused to have a part in the spreading of such a book.⁶⁹ The fact that the preface is dated 1782 also seems to give some basis for the assertion. Moreover, after he had prevailed upon Haswell and Russell, at Bennington, to print the work, a fire, said to have been caused by lightning, destroyed all of several signatures, thus delaying binding until the fall of 1785. From the following portion of Allen's letter, addressed to Benjamin Stiles, November 16, 1785, it will be seen that the date 1784, which appears on the title page, needs correction:

As to my Philosophy, that you mention, forty of the books are bound and will be sent to New York tomorrow; 1500 are printed, and contain 487 pages [477], in large octavo. The curiosity of the public is much excited, and there is a great demand for the books. They will in all probability reach Woodbury in the course of the winter. In one of them you read my very soul, for I have not concealed my opinion, nor disguised my sentiments in the least; and however you may, as a severe critic, censure my performance, I presume you will not impeach me with cowardice. I expect that the clergy and their devotees will proclaim war with me in the name of the Lord, his battles they effect to fight, having put on the armour of Faith, the sword of the Spirit, and the artillery of Hell Fire. But I am a hardy mountaineer, and scorn to be intimidated by threats. If they fight me they must absolutely produce some of their tremendous fire, and give me a sensitive scorching. . . .⁷⁰

A portion of a letter to Crèvecoeur, dated March, 1786, is also delightfully revelatory,

⁶⁹ "It lay a long time in the hands of a printer at Hartford, whom the writer of this has heard the author abuse for want of moral courage," *Reason, the Only Oracle*. . . , published with critical remarks on the four Gospels. . . by a free-thinker, N. Y. and Phila., 1836, Introduction. (This work is an abridged edition of the *Oracles*).

⁷⁰ Wm. Cothren, *op. cit.*, 415.

Sir, after many difficulties and procrastinations, last fall I published my theology entitled "Oracles of Reason," and have sent a number of books to sundry capital places and parts of America. One of the volumes I herewith transmit to Mr. St. John, in consequence of the unexpected correspondence with which he has been pleased to honor me. Though it may be repugnant to the policy of the monarch of France that such kinds of writings (whether true or false) should circulate among the commonalty of his subjects, yet I am well apprised that the independent literary gentlemen of France think and converse with one another and with foreigners as freely and liberally as any in the world, and as a nation have cultivated and extended the arts and sciences at least equal to any people in the annals of mankind, have encouraged genius and learning in other nations, and, finally, in a great variety of instances have become the patrons of the improved part of our species.

I am not so vain as to imagine that my theology will afford any considerable entertainment to the enlightened mind of Mr. St. John or to any learned gentlemen in France, yet it is possible that he or they may be somewhat diverted with the untutored logic and sallies of a mind nursed principally in the mountainous wilds of America. And since it is the almost universal foible of mankind to aspire to something or other beyond their nature or acquired abilities, I feel the infection. I desire that Mr. St. John would lay the "Oracles of Reason" before the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences at Paris.

Should my productions meet with the disapprobation of the capital of science in the old world, I shall have the satisfaction of reflecting that I have made a bold attempt in philosophy, though unsuccessful.

The clergy of this country reprobate the work and anathematize the writer of it, but they have not so great power in America as they had previous to the late Revolution. On its first publication it has pleased more individuals than I expected, and caused considerable speculation and argumentation. I am, however, sensible that my reputation as a reasoner (even in America) will depend in a great measure on the re-

ception that the work may meet with in the learned cities of Paris and London. . . .⁷¹

When Marlowe wrote that nature has taught all of us to have "aspiring minds," he was not in a falsifying mood.

The chief critics of Allen's work have been content with passing by his ambitions, and, instead, remarking upon his indebtedness to Newton, Locke, and their like. The similarity of many of his opinions to those of Spinoza has also been pointed out.⁷² The most vulnerable portion of Ethan Allen's system has generally been considered to be his discussion of free will and moral agency.⁷³ To my knowledge, no treatment of this phase of his argument has based any of its conclusions on the proposed appendix to the *Oracles of Reason* which Allen intended to supplant Chapter Two, Section Eight, of his work. This essay, first printed in 1872-1873, has this title: "On the Universal Plenitude of Being and on the Nature and Immortality of the Human Soul, and Its Agency, by Ethan Allen, Esq. Proposed as an appendix to a system of moral philosophy, lately published at Bennington, entitled 'Oracles Of Reason.' To which is subjoined a letter to Dr. Benjamin Gale in answer to one of his on the subject of eternal creation."⁷⁴ In accordance with his promise made in the preface to the *Oracles*, Allen sought to revise his assumption that the soul was incapable of occupying space. He used the essay, however, to set at rest various doubts about the cogency of his arguments involving other matters, principally that of free will.

Lest there be any misunderstanding about the sincerity of his efforts, I quote his introductory sentence:

If we make any new discoveries we are wiser than we were before; and if we do not succeed in the investigation of the nature of the soul or of the universal entity, we shall have done the most that we could do to discover the truth; and we shall have the satisfaction of reflecting that, had we not been

⁷¹ *Record of the Governor and Council of the State of Vt.*, III (1878), 390-391.

⁷² Jonathan Edwards is also charged with having stated opinions akin to those of Spinoza. See, for example, James Dana, *An Examination of Edwards's 'Enquiry on Freedom of Will'*. . . , Boston, 1770, 128.

⁷³ Cf. Riley, *op. cit.*, 54; and Conway, *Open Court*, VI, 3120.

⁷⁴ Published in *Historical Magazine*. . . , ed. H. B. Dawson, Third Series, I, 194, 274, 330; and II, 29 and 76. The MS. of the "subjoined letter" seems to have been lost.

thus inquisitive, we should not have improved so far in knowledge as to have known but that we might have gone farther.⁷⁵

But, however interesting the appendix may be as an example of what we call the scientific spirit, its chief value, to my mind, lies in the fact that Allen's philosophy tended more and more to fall back upon intuition as an aid in the explanation of metaphysical problems.

"That the soul resides in the body in this life," he says, "we have an intuitive certainty."⁷⁶ Moreover, he is also "intuitively certain" that the soul is a "thinking being,"⁷⁷ although it is composed of "some specific substance mysterious to us" which makes it capable of "possessing place."⁷⁸ There are two means of acquiring knowledge, he explains, one gained by immediate "consciousness," and the other by reason. The promptings of the former are always right.⁷⁹ With this in mind, he approaches the subject of moral agency. A conviction of the fact of free or spontaneous agency, he insists, "does not result from reasoning or argumentation, but from a conscious intuition of it to all mankind."⁸⁰ The shrewd old bear Samuel Johnson dodged the same issue by silencing Boswell with the words, "All theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it." More piously, Ethan Allen wrote,

All our argumentations and conclusions that militate against the intuitive (or conscious) knowledge that we have of our spontaneous agency are so many blunders, mistakes or deceptions of our own making, for the intuition of natural conscience is God's revelation to us, who cannot, and will not, deceive us. . . .⁸¹

However, Allen did not give up altogether his method of arguing from neat premises. Just two syllogisms clinch the matter of the soul's immortality. Here they are:

God is infinitely good.

The immortality of the soul is the greatest possible good that God could bestow upon the soul.

Therefore, the soul is immortal:

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 274.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 275.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 276.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 276-277.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 29 and 31.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 31.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II, 81.

and

God is ultimately just.

Justice in all events does not take place in this world.

Therefore, there must be an existence beyond this life wherein the ultimate justice of God will take place.⁸²

Sic probatur!

The appendix is, to my mind, more interesting than any part of the *Oracles* proper, because it reveals so plainly Allen's appreciation of the failure of "reason" to get him out of many a blind alley of thought. His consequent dependence upon intuition, if put upon its inferences, indicates that his beliefs about nature and God were not altogether "dualistic." The full reconciliation of the two aspects of his thought may not have been effected in America before the days of Emerson,⁸³ but his final words relative to his philosophy show no ordinary appreciation for what the Sage of Concord termed "the untaught sallies of the spirit."

But what was the result of the attempt of the hardy Vermonter to bare his soul and take his fling at "Reason and Truth"? His letters already quoted indicate how well justified were his expectations of receiving the full broadside of the *odium theologicum* that he had anticipated even in the preface to his work. His own Green Mountain folk seem to have been little surprised at his philosophical effusion. But he was already a notorious "atheist." And, too, there were in the hills of Vermont men of sufficient breadth of interest and freedom from merely parochial problems to found a medical society and a philosophical association deep in the backwoods.⁸⁴

However, a certain G. V. conceived a novel plan of genially annoying the Vermont philosopher, as well as sundry others of his fellow citizens. In the *Vermont Gazette* for September 19, 1785, he inserted a mock advertisement bearing the following caption:

Just imported in the Balloon Sarcastic (Imported from France) and now opening for sale . . . by the Genius of Vermont at her store on the top of Mount Anthony in Bennington, a large assortment of valuable books, among which are the following . . .

"The following" included titles of treatises on drunkenness, "money catching," and the like—and each bore after it the initials of a

⁸² *Ibid.*, I, 332.

⁸³ Riley, *op. cit.*, 57.

⁸⁴ See *Vermont Gazette*, Bennington, Jan. 31, and Dec. 27, 1784.

member of the community whose characteristics seemed to fit. This one heads the list,

Deism Confessed and Good Manners Defended, with a chapter in favor of Oracles and a section on the heat of good blood near the grand clymacteric, and the animation of youthful charms. By E. A.

The last thrust seems to have been directed at the "most amiable young widow" whom Allen had married not long before.

In the *Vermont Journal* for October 2, 1786, appeared an unsigned bit of verse,

On General Ethan Allen

Lo Allen 'scaped from British jails,
 His tushes broke by biting nails,⁸⁵
 Appears in hyperborean skies,
 To tell the world the Bible lies.
 See him on green hills north afar
 Glow like a self-enkindled star,
 Prepar'd with mob-collecting club
 Black from the forge of Belzebub,
 And grim with metaphysic scowl,
 With quill just pluck'd from wing of owl,
 As rage or reason rise or sink
 To shed his blood or shed his ink.
 Behold, inspired from Vermont dens,
 The seer of Antichrist descends,
 To feed new mobs with Hell-born manna
 In Gentile lands of Susquehanna;
 And teach the Pennsylvania Quaker
 High blasphemies against his maker.
 Behold him move, ye staunch divines!
 His tall head bursting through the pines;
 All front he seems like wall of brass
 And brays tremendous as an ass;
 One hand is clench'd to batter noses
 While t'other scrawls 'gainst Paul and Moses.⁸⁶

The author of the satire was Doctor Lemuel Hopkins, of Hartford, Conn., now remembered as a lesser light of the Pleiades known as the Hartford Wits.

⁸⁵ "He used to show a fracture in one of his teeth, occasioned by his twisting off with it, in a fit of anger, the nail to which was fastened the bar of his hand-cuffs. . . ." Graydon, *op. cit.*, 243.

⁸⁶ This effusion is included in *American Poems, selected and original*, Litchfield, 1793, 142.

A more famous member of that group, Timothy Dwight, the renowned Yale hammer of heretics, not only called Allen "the great clodhopping Oracle of man" in swinging metre,⁸⁷ but delivered himself of a more extended attack in better prose. He sums up matters in these words:

Sunderland formerly was the residence of Col. Ethan Allen, a man who as a prisoner excited some interest in Great Britain, and who for many years was notorious in the United States. This man was born at Salisbury in Connecticut. His education was confined, and furnished him with a mere smattering of knowledge; but his mind was naturally haughty, restless and enterprising. Licentious in his disposition, he was impatient of the restraints either of government or religion, and not always submissive to those of common decency. In his conversation he was voluble, blunt, coarse and profane; in his pretensions to knowledge, daring; and in his assertions, bold and peremptory. The confidence which he seemed to possess in himself naturally inspired confidence in others still less informed; and they readily believed that he, who asserted so positively, must be sure that his assertions were true. With these advantages, and these only, he early obtruded himself upon the public as an opposer and ridiculer of Christianity; and gloried in the character of an infidel. A little circle of loose persons will always gather about a man of this description. "Qui fidit sibi, dux regit examen" is a maxim extensively applicable; but in no case more so than where profligate principles have become necessary to shelter the character and quiet the conscience of licentious men. . . . At length he assumed a bolder tone, and determined to become an instructor of the public. This was a fatal step. He neither understood the subject, nor knew how to write, and therefore, although not destitute of native talents, he appeared as a pigmy in the field of literary contention. He named his book the Oracles of Reason, after a wretched publication of Charles Blount, one of the pertest and weakest of all the British infidels, but probably Allen's favorite author, and not improbably the only one whose works he had ever read. This was the first formal publication in the United States openly directed against the

⁸⁷ *The Triumph of Infidelity*, printed in the world, 1788, 23. Dwight did not mention Allen in his *Nature and Danger of Infidel Philosophy*. . . , New Haven, 1798.

Christian religion. When it came out I read as much of it as I could summon patience to read. Decent nonsense may possibly amuse an idle hour; but brutal nonsense can be only read as an infliction of penal justice. The style was crude and vulgar, and the sentiments were coarser than the style. The arguments were flimsy and unmeaning, and the conclusions were fastened upon the premises by mere force.⁸⁸

The Reverend Josiah Sherman, who signed himself "Common Sense, A. M.," brought out at Litchfield a tract with the title,

Oracles of Reason as formed by the deists are husks for deistical and heathen swine; but the truths of the Gospel are bread for God's children. A concise but plain answer to Gen. Allen's Oracles of Reason.

He soon followed this up with another, "Sermon to Swine. . . ." But, as Allen wrote to Crèvecoeur, more people were pleased with his *Oracles* than he had counted on.⁸⁹

The biographers of the Hero of Ticonderoga usually "regret to say" that their subject promulgated heterodox sentiments, and provide a sop by asserting that only a few copies of his book escaped the fire at the printer's office.⁹⁰ Frequently, also, there appears an anecdote calculated to show that, after all, the rugged border leader suffered a change of heart. The story goes that one of Allen's daughters was sick in bed. A sudden relapse in her condition was noticed, and the father was hastily summoned from an adjoining room, where, fittingly enough, he had been expounding deistic sentiments to a friend. Distracted in mind by the incompatibility of her mother's religious views and the ideas expressed by her father, the child asked which she should believe. "Believe what your mother has taught you," the reply is supposed to have been.⁹¹

But other biographers have not made the attempt to palliate the enormity of his errors. Like Tom Paine, Ethan Allen has been

⁸⁸ *Travels in New England and New York*, New Haven, 1821, II, 406. (Allen is usually considered to have been born in Litchfield, Conn.).

⁸⁹ In Jefferson's letter to his nephew, dated Paris, 1787, this sentence appears: "Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision." *Writings of J.*, ed. P. L. Ford, 1894, IV, 432. Had he read Allen's work?

⁹⁰ The story is also told that Haswell regarded the fire as a judgment of God, committed what was left of the edition to the flames, and joined the Methodist Church. Cf. Int. to the 1836 (abridged) edition of *Oracles*.

⁹¹ Cf., for example, H. W. De Puy, *op. cit.*, 423; and Hugh Moore, *Memoirs of Col. Ethan Allen*, Plattsburgh, 1834, 244.

very frequently the victim of an almost inconceivable prejudice based upon mere legend, and surviving for an equally incredible period of time. Less vitriolic than the attack of Dwight are these words of Jared Sparks, referring to the Vermonter's *magnum opus*:

It is nevertheless a crude and worthless performance, in which truth and error, reason and sophistry, knowledge and ignorance, ingenuity and presumption are mingled together in a chaos, which the author denominates a system. Some of the chapters on natural religion, the being and attributes of God, and the principles and obligations of morality should perhaps be excepted from this sweeping remark. . . .⁹²

At any rate, the worthy Harvard saint had discretion enough to save himself from an altogether unmitigated disparagement of his own Unitarianism.

Almost a hundred years after *Oracles of Reason* was first carried by the post out of the mountains of Vermont, its author was thus described:

He was an infidel of the Tom Paine-Voltaire school, and seemed to take pleasure in offending public opinion by expressing views that, to most people of 'orthodox' sentiments, were abhorrent or distasteful. His nature was so essentially offensive and belligerent that he apparently took up the heterodox merely to have the pleasure of a word contest with the orthodox. Being a person of limited education, narrow reading and not extensive observation, his influence on the religious thought and feeling of his day was small.⁹³

But the choicest bit of biographical sculpturing is done by Allibone's so-called *Critical Dictionary*, which states,

As might be expected of one silly enough to espouse the absurdities of infidelity, Mr. Allen held some very foolish opinions; viz., that man after death would transmigrate into beasts, birds, fishes, reptiles, etc., and that he himself should live again in the form of a large white horse.⁹⁴

It was Irving, I believe, who first dubbed the mountain philosopher "The Robin Hood of Vermont"—and such he is, if legends are a criterion.

⁹² *Memoir of Col. Ethan Allen*, Middlebury, 1848, 220.

⁹³ O. J. Victor, *Life and Times of Col. Ethan Allen, the Hero of Ticonderoga*, N. Y., co. 1876, 77.

⁹⁴ 1858, I, 53.