

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

**OpenSIUC**

---

Alexander Wilder: Eclectic, Platonist, and Master of the Arcane

---

2021

## Alexander Wilder: Eclectic, Platonist, and Master of the Arcane

John Haller Jr

Follow this and additional works at: [https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/histcw\\_aw](https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/histcw_aw)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Alexander Wilder: Eclectic, Platonist, and Master of the Arcane by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

# **Alexander Wilder: Eclectic, Platonist, and Master of the Arcane**

---

**By**

**John S. Haller, Jr.**

Men and parties, sects and schools are but the mere ephemera of the world's day. TRUTH, high-seated upon its rock of adamant, is alone eternal and supreme. Centuries of subjection have not quite congealed the life-blood of men into crystals around the nucleus of blind faith. Our work, then, is a plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the ancient universal Wisdom Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology.

(Alexander Wilder, *New Platonism and Alchemy*, 1869)

## Introduction

The erudite philosopher, philologist, physician, and historian Alexander Wilder (1823-1908) decried that science had taken control of the portals of knowledge by demanding scientific verification for each claim. For him, vital issues of life and being existed outside the scope of rational science which he considered fragmentary and limited. Instead, the most complete knowledge came from a unitary or universal science consisting of sense, reason and wisdom. His idea that the laws governing the natural and spiritual worlds were one, and that in either realm they were equally and effectually operative, resonated at a time when skepticism and agnosticism had obtained traction among intellectuals questioning the meaning of life. An early member of the Theosophical Society, Wilder saw two discrete realms, one material, the other spiritual, with man as the connecting link. On one side was the supersensible realm; the other belonged to the sensible. The transition from one to the other was not a matter of distance but of vision.

Over the course of his long professional career, Wilder taught at three medical colleges, served as editor or associate editor of *The New York Teacher*, *College Review*, *Journal of the American Akadêmê*, *Medical Advocate*, *Medical Eclectic*, *Medical Tribune*, and *Transactions of the National Eclectic Medical Association*. He also was a frequent contributor to *The Platonist*, *Theosophist*, *The Word*, *Metaphysical Magazine*, and *Universal Brotherhood*. Wilder wrote a myriad of monographs on speculative philosophy, science, literary criticism, political economy,

education, and the arcane including *Egypt and the Egyptian Dynasties* (1846); *New Platonism and Alchemy* (1869); *Perils of Premature Burial* (1871); *Plea for Collegiate Education of Women* (1874); *Vaccination a Medical Fallacy* (1875); *Prophetic Intuition and the Demon of Socrates* (1876); *Mind, Thought and Cerebration* (1880s); *The Soul* (1884); *Paul and Plato* (1885); *Later Platonists* (1887); *Philosophy and Ethics of the Zorasters* (1894); *The Birth and Being of Things: Creation and Evolution* (1895); and *The Antecedent Life* (1896). He also translated, edited, or annotated *Theurgia, or, the Egyptian Mysteries* by Iamblichus and serialized in *The Platonist* (1884-88); Hodder M. Westropp's *Ancient Symbol Worship* (1875); ); Hyde Clarke and C. Staniland Wake's *Serpent and Seva Worship* (1875); Thomas Taylor's *Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (1891); R. P. Knight's *Symbolism of Ancient Art and Mythology* (1892); and Madam Helena Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877). His last work, a nine-hundred page *History of Medicine* (1901) recounted the rise of Reform medicine in the United States.

Tall, sparely built, with piercing eyes, Wilder was a striking man whose command of language and wealth of knowledge seldom failed to impress readers and listeners alike. Independent in his thinking, partisan in the causes he supported, and a strong believer in freedom of expression, he most often chose paths that challenged the status quo. During his many years in the public eye, he opposed slavery, ran for office against the Tweed administration, lectured at the Concord School of Philosophy, and fought for greater medical reform. Reflecting on his life, Wilder concluded he had little to offer the world of business and competition. "In my tastes and aspirations I am a philosopher," he insisted. "I have always desired to know for myself what is right as between one human being and another, and know no law higher or more sacred than that."<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter 1

### Finding ‘Alick’

I am rather a philosopher than a religious man. As my parents were of the Calvinistic school, I was early inducted into it, but became a dissenter at the age of seventeen. I have a strong attachment for the Swedenborgian doctrine and was for years a friend and correspondent of Professor George Bush . . . . I am a Theist, believing in a Supreme Being, in and by whom all things subsist and exist; in a universe peopled by spiritual essences who more or less watch over and inspire the actions of human beings. . . . . In 1842 I was a ‘Transcendentalist’; I am now a Platonist.

(Alexander Wilder, *The Eclectic Medical Gleaner*, 1908)

A year prior to his death in 1908, Alexander Wilder prepared a short biography in which he recalled his childhood and the challenges he faced as a youth. The eighth of ten siblings of Abel and Asenath (Smith) Wilder, he grew up in a family setting whose father expected all six sons to follow his footsteps into a life of farming. Gifted with a strong sense of his own individuality, he outgrew his father’s sphere of influence but not before facing multiple instances of insecurity and drift. Henry W. Percival, editor of *The Word*, and a close friend, remarked that Wilder’s life was an example of “the ability of man to live through difficulties, endure hardships and overcome obstacles.” Such individuals were the ones “who made civilization what it is, who . . . brought people closer together and established a nearer relationship between mankind.”<sup>2</sup>

### Early Years

Wilder's English, Scotch, and Irish genealogy traced back on his father's side to Thomas Wilder, a yeoman farmer who migrated from Lancashire, England, to the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1638, settling first at Charlestown, and later at Nashua, where he labored as a farmer and manufacturer of potash. His mother's lineage came through her father, William Smith, of Scotch descent who migrated from County Derry, Ireland, to participate as a soldier in the Revolution and who later worked as a farmer and millwright in Barre, Massachusetts. Wilder's parents, once residents of Lancaster and Petersham, moved to Vermont in 1808, and then to western New York in 1813.<sup>3</sup> "My parents were deeply tinctured with the spirit of the New England Puritan," Wilder wrote. "I never knew what it was to have families or confidential intercourses with them. That they should command and I must obey was about all I thought or knew."<sup>4</sup>

'Alick,' as he was called by his parents and siblings, entered school at age five in a rural area of Verona, New York, known as the Tildon Hill District. With books difficult to come by, his parents outfitted their offspring with five basic primers in reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and geography, all of which were handed down to younger siblings. After mastering Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* and Jacob Willett's *Geography*, Wilder remembered moving on to Hugh Blair's *Rhetoric* and Alexander Fraser Tytler's *Universal History*. He also recalled the time when the Verona library closed and his father purchased a half dozen books for the family, including Ralph Wardlaw's *Systematic Theology*, James Meikle's *The Traveler*, William Harvey's *Divine Meditations*, John Styles' *Life of David Brainard* and Jane Porter's *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, some of which he committed to memory. Once read, he had no further use for a book. "I suppose that phrenologists will consider that to be the legitimate operation of the organ which they call *Destructiveness*," he opined. From the vantage point of later years, Wilder

suggested that his treatment of books implied that material things of whatever form were useful only so long as they benefitted the individual and society but were otherwise useless if kept solely for the sake of retention.<sup>5</sup>

Wilder attributed his love of learning to his mother whose family had great respect for literature and who had urged her children to read all they could. On the other hand, because of the daily demands of farm work, his father minimized what educational ambitions they had by pulling them from school whenever necessary. This was not uncommon in the day as boys typically attended school in the winter months and worked on the farm for the remainder of the year. Given expectations, Wilder and his brothers found themselves in a veritable tug-of-war with their parents who seemed intent on checking their ambitions. He observed that most of his brothers were followers rather than leaders but equal to the task of leadership when challenged. “We were made to do our full share of work all through boyhood,” he recalled. It wasn’t that he found farming disagreeable but that his father’s insistence on making his sons into farmers had become an oppressive and unwanted burden. “I was taken from school in summer at seven years old for this purpose, and it became distasteful to me.”<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on his siblings, he believed that they would have made more of their lives if given the opportunity. “In school they were superior to others of the same age. But they were not permitted to expect or think anything possible beyond.”<sup>7</sup> As for himself, he found it difficult to reconcile his own ambitions with those of his father. “It was no specific hardship of mine,” he admitted, “for everybody that I knew was in as bad or worse condition.” Accordingly, he made the best he could of his circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

In 1838, Wilder’s parents after much deliberation agreed that he could continue with his education, and the issue then became what of three professions—clergy, physician, lawyer—might he be allowed to pursue. Given his parents’ dislike of lawyers and the fact that he had yet



to experience conversion, he was left with only one option, that of physician which he very much desired to pursue. He was therefore permitted to try his hand at teaching school and embark on the study of botany and chemistry with an eye to a career in medicine. But not for long. With his parents deeply skeptical of the prevailing healing methods (no doubt due to the fact that several of their children had died before reaching adolescence) and disappointed in their son's failure to experience conversion, they enrolled him in religious revivals where church members sought to save his soul. The endeavor eventually proved successful and Wilder became a member of "New School" Presbyterianism which opposed doctrinal precision, attuning itself to the more emotional outpourings stemming from Charles G. Finney's Second Great Awakening. Less concerned with the proper training of ministers, New School proponents favored revivalism and moral reform.<sup>9</sup>

This change, which occurred when he was fifteen, redirected Wilder from medicine to a clerical vocation. For the next two years he studied the classics, math, Latin, and Greek with the idea of attending a seminary, only to be derailed by an older brother who convinced him to leave Presbyterianism for the Baptist church.<sup>10</sup>

## **Perfectionism**

In the drama of Christendom, the *Book of Revelation*, the last book of the Bible, provided a prophetic revelation of an imminent cataclysm, giving meaning to the Second Coming and the full gambit of expectations raised by it. Written as a sequel to the drama of the *New Testament*, it was meant to sustain the authenticity of Jesus' words before the final chapter of man began with the Antichrist and ended with the return of Christ who sets up the Kingdom of God. Confidence in these predictions was repeated over and over again in the ensuing centuries as the books of

*Daniel* and *Revelation* were reinterpreted to explain why the kingdom of God had not yet arrived but the declarations remained true. This required that before the end was “at hand,” the gospel had to be preached through the entire world (*Matthew XXIV*); there would be wars and rumors of wars (*Matthew XXIV*); there would be famines and pestilences (*Matthew, XXIV*); and that the seven seals would be opened one by one (*Revelation VI*). While individuals like Swedenborg would explain in his *Last Judgment* that the “last days” had already taken place in the spiritual world in 1757 and William Miller calculated the grand consummation would occur in 1843, the major denominations projected the Judgment far into the future with its actual battlefields occurring in the arena of individual consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

In his search for something outside his parents’ control, Wilder discovered the Perfectionist beliefs of John Brownson Foot, a theological student of Rev. Edward Norris Kirk, pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Albany, who had been strongly influenced by Finney’s revival.<sup>12</sup> One of a score of preachers who joined the radical side of New School Presbyterianism, Foot adhered to the theoretical possibility of spiritual perfection made real by the Second Coming. Like John Humphrey Noyes, Jarvis Rider, Luther Myrick, James Boyle, James Latourette, Hiram Sheldon, and other antinomian and New School preachers, Foot traveled through the “burnt over” counties of central and western New York teaching a particular brand of Perfectionist audacity and repudiating all others as heretical.<sup>13</sup>

Called “Bible Communists,” the Perfectionists were a product of the religious excitement in the 1830s and 40s that produced such groups as the Millerites, Mormons, Oneidans, and Rappers. An outgrowth of the epidemic of religious “awakenings” that accompanied the migrations of New Englanders as they traveled westward along the Erie Canal, Perfectionism transformed sinners into bold and sometimes reckless saints whose fundamental mystical

proposition was the indwelling Christ. As a sign of their beliefs, they withdrew from their church affiliations to live a distinctly logical, albeit narrow, life. Perfectionism came to its proponents as an experience that gave their lives meaning apart from the laws of society. Living in the new order, they felt emancipated from worldly matters. Intensely individualistic and believing they had the inward Christ directing their lives, they concluded they could do no wrong; to the pure, all things were pure. Each wishing to be a law to himself, the Perfectionists nonetheless submitted to a covenant and to restraints imposed by the community's leadership. In effect, the Perfectionists turned to spiritual demagogues who recalibrated the community's extreme individualism into beliefs that were mystical in doctrine, antinomian in practice, but under the control of a single dominating personality. As historian Baring Gould explained, the spiritual exaltation of Perfectionism often degenerated "into licentiousness, unless held in the iron bands of discipline to the moral law."<sup>14</sup>

After a year with Foot's Perfectionist community, Wilder left, concluding he was "unreliable as a leader."<sup>15</sup> Though disappointed, he did not give up on his Perfectionist beliefs and, in the winter of 1842, at age seventeen, he and his brother David joined the community of John Humphrey Noyes in Putney, Vermont, who believed Jesus had returned in 70 A.D. and that heaven was now and perfection possible. Noyes would later move his followers to Oneida, New York, where he instituted a practice he called "complex marriage," where every male member was married to every female and adhered to a form of birth control ("male continence") that required the male to refrain from orgasm (*coitus reservatus*). For those given permission on the basis of phrenology to be suitable parents, the community endorsed a form of eugenics called "stirpiculture," the offspring of which were raised by the entire community. In addition, the

Oneidans indulged in a form of community-based analysis (“mutual criticism”) to ensure everyone adhered strictly to its beliefs and practices.<sup>16</sup>

As a member of the Putney community, Wilder had the opportunity to witness the operation on a patient who had been anesthetized with mesmerism; as a result, he developed an interest in both mesmerism (hypnotism) and clairvoyance. It was a decision he later regretted because he developed “a sensitiveness acute even to abnormality” which he believed ultimately affected his power of will. Nevertheless, Wilder acknowledged using mesmerism on a Mrs. H. A. Hall who had been confined to bed for several years before becoming a disciple of Noyes. Wilder claimed to have successfully magnetized her at Noyes’s wishes to relieve her suffering, but he eventually abandoned the practice, believing that it was “more corrupting and enervating than beneficial to the persons engaged in it.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, what he learned from its study opened his eyes to a “spiritual region to which we really belong, and with which, under certain conditions, we may have perceptible intercourse.” Depending on one’s state of mind, the connection could be heaven or hell. Along with this observation, he concluded there were no rewards or punishments in the afterlife, thus ridding himself of one of the heavy holdovers from his Calvinist upbringing.<sup>18</sup>

While a member of Noyes’s community, Wilder attended a meeting held at the Methodist Chapel in Putney only to discover that his participation had been reported back to Noyes who judged his actions “out of fellowship.” Before long, Wilder felt that the “peculiar espionage” of his fellow perfectionists had left his health in jeopardy. He admitted to parting with Noyes on terms of “unfeigned good will,” but eventually concluded that he had suffered severely from Noyes’s influence. As Wilder explained, after being made the subject of experimentation by Noyes and several members of his community using animal magnetism to produce “a diseased

state of mind and body” from which he was unable to escape, he felt influences “which caused the keenest mental anguish” but knew not how to free himself. “A nameless fear, despondency, gloom and despair, paralyzed my strength of mind. A morbid attachment for individuals was induced; and the whole corporeal system partook of the disorder. The intervals of pleasure, like the exhilarations of intoxicating drugs, gave relief for a little season, but only to plunge me into a deeper gloom.” This he stated in an affidavit published in Hubbard Eastman’s *Noyesism Unveiled: A History of the Sect Self-Styled Perfectionists; with a Summary View of Their Leading Doctrines* (1849).<sup>19</sup>

Wilder remained in Noyes’s Putney community for fifteen months, until February 1844, when his eyes “were opened,” and he knew Noyes “to be a despot—an ambitious self-seeker” and a “venomous serpent.” Reflecting on his experience years later, he blamed his time among the Perfectionists to youthful ignorance and inexperience, admitting that he “lacked courage and power to extricate” himself from the community. Treated “as a false brother and a hypocrite,” he concluded that the community failed to fulfill what it promised and, by 1847, he claimed to belong to no sect or religion. “I am identified with no body of people.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Enlightenment**

On leaving the community, Wilder described himself as someone who was “adrift, out of the Church, and seeking knowledge in many different directions.” Restless in search of a career and still weakened by domineering parents whose willfulness had so often trampled his aspirations and those of his siblings, he oscillated from farming to type-setting, healing, and reading arcane literature. For a brief time, he moved to Orange, Massachusetts, where he worked

for a season cutting trees and where he claimed to have experienced several visionary moments that once saved him from being crushed by a falling tree and then again from a domineering and aggressive individual.<sup>21</sup> Feeling that he had been kept “in abnormal subjection” most of his youth, Wilder found himself unable to determine “how to act wisely or properly.” As a result, he admitted to blundering along “with much anguish of mind.” His worst errors, he admitted, were the result of “blindly following the advice of others.”<sup>22</sup> Entering a period of angst complicated by the strict nature of his upbringing, it was not until he was nearly twenty-eight that he felt comfortable enough to go out in the world on his own.<sup>23</sup>

After having described his youth as “overborne by the cruel despotic will of another . . . till the digestive and nervous functions were impaired,” Wilder turned to Plato’s contemplative belief that life lived in harmony is a healthy life. In his study of the ancient texts, he looked to Plato and Socrates to explain that justice was intrinsically better than injustice regardless of “whether the result was hidden from gods and men or was in full view, or whether it was fortunate or unfortunate.” Socrates understood justice as a principle that worked to the good of the entire community. The health and welfare of the community depended on each individual contributing his labor in the art he was most skilled and for which he took the greatest personal enjoyment. In both instances, education was of “transcendent importance.”<sup>24</sup>

The doing of injustice, or the condition of being unjust in mind and purpose, as well as the doing of justice, were plain to perception. They corresponded to what was healthy and that which was diseased, the one being in the body and the other in the soul. For Wilder, those material foods and activities that were wholesome produced health and those that were unwholesome produced disease. A similar rule existed, by analogy, with the soul. Generally speaking, Wilder viewed bodily health as something that was best sustained by the proper

balance of the senses and the reasoning faculty. “The individual who combines the two most perfectly, and gives them their proper place in the soul, is the most fitted.” The person who was always worrying was likely to image himself to be sick. The body was not healed by remedies of a physical nature; rather it is cured by the soul.<sup>25</sup>

## Chapter 2

### A Reformer's Life

I hope and believe that it is from this side of the Atlantic that Europe, which has taught so many other things, will be led into sound principles in this branch of Science, the most important of all, being that to which we commit the care of health and life.'

(Thomas Jefferson)

After leaving the Oneida community, Wilder spent the next several years attempting to find his true bearings and in the process, a worthwhile career. He returned to his earlier interest in medicine, spending several months in Massachusetts reading with Dr. George H. Lee, a cousin who was a practicing orthodox physician. Having taken a stand like his parents against medical allopathy, Wilder chose to include in his reading the works of the herbalist Samuel Thomson. Though he admired the courage of Thomson whose patented proprietary healing system had spread via agents to all parts of the country, he preferred a more comprehensive system of therapeutics. A long-time admirer of empirical medicine's early Botanic brotherhood (i.e., Samuel Thomson, Elisha Smith, Horton Howard, Wooster Beach, Thomas Hersey, T. V. Morrow, Alva Curtis and John J. Steele), Wilder set his sights on carrying forward this uniquely American or Reform practice into the next generation. It was urgent, he reasoned, to raise a cadre of practitioners who would advocate for a native practice whose methods and remedies were suited to the "flora, the medicinal waters, and innumerable resources of the Western Hemisphere."<sup>26</sup> In achieving this objective, he viewed the second leg of the journey to a truly



Reform medicine to be the adoption of the term *eclectic* as the most attractive title distinguishing it from regular or orthodox medicine.

## The Eclectics

Over the centuries, western medicine was divided into competing schools reflective of orthodoxy's discordant doctrines. Not without reason did President Thomas Jefferson despair of these competing schools of medicine: "I have seen them succeed one another like the shifting figures of a magic lantern; and their fancies, like the dresses of the annual doll-babies from Paris, becoming from their novelty, the vogue of the day, and yielding to the next novelty, their ephemeral favors." Jefferson had the fullest warrant for his sweeping utterance: "I believe we may safely affirm that the inexperienced and presumptuous herd of medical tyros let loose upon the world destroys more lives than all the Robin Hoods, Cartouches and Macheaths do in a century."<sup>27</sup>

In his effort to distinguish the different types of medical practices in his day, the gifted botanist Constantine Rafinesque, who immigrated to the United States in 1815 and for a time held the chair of Botany at Transylvania University before making his residence in Philadelphia, proposed three main groups: Rationalists, Theorists, and Empirics. The *Rationalists* who were thought to be liberal and well informed, and comprised the Improvers, Eclectics, and Experimentalists. The Improvers studied nature and the human frame and wrote their observations with the intent of improving medical knowledge; the Eclectics adopted whatever methods they found beneficial to the patient; and the Experimentalists were directed by their experience, observations and experiments. The second major group, the *Theorists*, was

considered illiberal, intolerant of other viewpoints, and typically followed the narrow teachings of a single teacher or sect. Examples included the Brownists, Galenists, Mesmerists, Sceptics, Chemicalists, Calomelists, and Entomists. Finally there were the *Empirics* who were commonly thought to be illiterate and ignorant and who followed secret modes of practice, including patent medicines. Examples included Herbalists, Indian, or Root Doctors, and Steam Doctors.<sup>28</sup>

Among the group known as the Rationalists, Wilder felt most comfortable with the Eclectics whose very name resonated with his knowledge of those schools of thought that flourished centuries before and during the Roman Empire and which coincided with what Rafinesque admired most, namely “those who select and adopt in practice whatever is beneficial, and who change their prescriptions according to emergencies, circumstances, and acquired knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> The eclectics were the ablest and most learned men of their time who had sought a fusion of beliefs from pagans and Christians alike in Europe and Asia. Hardly a creed—religious or medical—failed to be enriched by these different and sometimes conflicting beliefs.<sup>30</sup>

In his exploration of eclectic medicine’s roots, Wilder turned to the Greeks whose temples thronged with the sick and who relied on regimens that combined roots, herbs, ceremonies, incantations, and other observances. He attributed to Agathinos of Sparta the earliest attributes of eclecticism when he denominated his *Episynthetic* school of medicine as a combination of the principles and methods of various sects so far as they could be made to harmonize. His student Arkhigenes of Syria, often described as the founder of the eclectic school of physicians, wrote treatises on the pulse, chronic diseases, and pharmacy, many of which were later cited by Galen. The clinician Aretaeos of Cappadocia wrote *Causes and Symptoms of Acute and Chronic Diseases* and *Therapeutics of Diseases* which were considered prime examples of eclectic philosophy.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of eclectic medicine was to hold fast that which was good;

refuse using the lancet, rejecting mercury, antimony, and similar articles; and insist there should be complete license to practice medicine provided all would be made accountable to the law “for gross ignorance, malpractice, and injury actually inflicted.”<sup>32</sup>

Central to the ancient knowledge of healing had been the school and library founded by Alexander the Great, whose collection had drawn Greek, Jewish and Egyptian scholars. The world owed much to these philosophers whose teachings were extracted from the principal systems of the ancient world. Drawn from multiple religions and philosophies, these scholars regarded knowledge as the noblest possession of the soul in that it exalted the interior life and intuitive faculties of man. The school’s influence extended over the entire Graeco-Roman world and resulted in a speculative philosophy known as Neo-Platonism and the religious philosophy of the Gnostics. From this latter school both Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines were taught through the Middle Ages.

Alexandria retained the torch of medical knowledge until Emperor Justinian closed the school, bringing to an end the liberal thought and learning of the Roman Empire and ushering in the beginnings of the Dark Ages. From that point onward, the Neo-Platonists disappeared from public view, replaced by “a verbose scholasticism and lifeless ethic.”<sup>33</sup> With the fall of Alexandria, ancient learning lost its last fortress. “Apollo and Aesculapius were dethroned; the Asklepiad, Dogmatist, Empiricist and other sectaries passed into oblivion,” wrote Wilder. “Only Galen remained as the chief luminary of the long night that now hung its black curtain over the medical world.”<sup>34</sup> To his credit, Galen professed to be eclectic in his methods and doctrines. Instructed in the best teachings including the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies, he remained a follower of Aristotle.

After Galen's death, medical learning continued to decline over the Roman world, relegating healing to a lesser class of diviners and fortune-tellers. This left the Persian dominion the last refuge for men of learning. There the disciples of Nestorius, outlawed and persecuted by the dominant Catholic authorities in Constantinople, found protection. With the exception of the school of "Eclectic Conciliators" in Germany, particularly Daniel Sennert, professor at the University of Wittenburg, Europe was overrun by conflicting doctrines that all but extinguished the greatness that once shown forth.<sup>35</sup>

### **Syracuse Medical College**

During the 1840s, Western New York had become a hotbed of Reform medical practices as Botanic, Thomsonian, and Eclectic medical societies organized in Chautauqua, Niagara, Genesee, Onondago, Oswego, Jefferson, Oneida, and Chenango counties. Given their numbers, several attempts were undertaken to establish medical colleges, hoping to emulate the newly incorporated Eclectic Medical Institute under the charge of Dr. Dwight Morrow and his associates in Cincinnati, Ohio. Since four teachers were considered ample for a medical school, it did not take long for doctors in the region to plan medical colleges even though they had no authority from the legislature to confer degrees. The New York legislature's Standing Committee on Medical Colleges, constituted of physician/politicians, remained in the iron grip of allopathic medicine, thus dampening any attempt to charter an 'irregular' college.

This policy changed in 1848 when the legislature enacted a statute providing for the incorporation of religious, charitable, scientific and benevolent societies. Under this act, five persons could file for a certificate to become a corporate body. The legislation offered Reformed

physicians the opportunity to establish their own degree-granting colleges. Accordingly, a convention of Reformed physicians assembled in Syracuse in 1849 and organized the New York State Eclectic Medical Society with Dr. Stephen H. Potter as its president. With the approval of the courts, a certificate of incorporation was then filed to create the Central Medical College of New York, with Dr. Potter as dean and professor of surgery. Dissatisfaction and distrust of Potter, however, caused the faculty to move the college to Rochester where they reestablished it. In response, Potter filed for a new certificate and formed the Syracuse Medical College to compete with the college in Rochester.

In the meantime, while working on his parent's farm in 1848, Wilder helped organize a county Botanic Medical Society.<sup>36</sup> Three years later, he moved to Syracuse where he received a medical diploma from Syracuse Medical College and joined as a member of Potter's newly organized faculty. For the next three sessions, he lectured on physiology, chemistry, and anatomy.<sup>37</sup>

Wilder's time at the college was not without its disappointments. He observed that it was not easy to keep the peace between and among the school's highly outspoken professors. Dissatisfaction seemed an ever-present condition and whenever a problem arose, some found it easier to set up a competing school than find a harmonious compromise with their colleagues. Too often, faculty disagreements became exaggerated beyond proportion due to the personalities involved. Brief eras of good feeling fell apart quickly, becoming painful reminders of the delicate nature of their differences. During these occasions, platforms of principles were written and professors were charged to teach in conformity to its terms or face expulsion. Insults, recriminations, quarrels and schisms were rampant among the faculty. "The early Thomsonians and Reform physicians, observed Wilder, "entertained an unappeasable dislike for one another,

and in subsequent years there were analogous spites and mean jealousies.”<sup>38</sup> One of Wilder’s colleagues at Syracuse “seemed to delight in making his associates discontented, and then pushing them forward as principals in some controversy which they . . . would gladly have avoided.” Equally destructive was another who procured copies of the school’s diplomas and sold them to interested buyers irrespective of any coursework.<sup>39</sup>

As the school’s future remained in doubt, Wilder formed a partnership with Potter and several other men to open the American College of Pharmacy to teach general and pharmaceutical chemistry, theoretical and practical pharmacy, as well as to prepare and dispense a materia medica based on Reform principles. Essentially, they wished to supply the profession with pure and reliable drugs, thereby avoiding the dangers of imported medicines. Wilder later withdrew from the college to join B. Keith and Company which successfully manufactured concentrated remedies for Reform physicians.<sup>40</sup>

Given the poor management and internecine battles among the Reform groups in the western counties, the eclectic medical education moved to the East Coast. There the American Medical Association (eclectic) organized in New York City while the Eclectic Medical Society of Brooklyn incorporated a year later. The two societies eventually united under the banner of the New York Medical and Pathological Society in 1856.<sup>41</sup>

## **Educational and Political Reform**

During his involvement in the fractious faculty discontent at Syracuse Medical College, Wilder befriended Lyman Stevens (1812-1866), a prominent Swedenborgian who obtained for Wilder a job type-setting at the *Syracuse Daily Star* where he was quickly promoted to assistant

editor. A year later, he joined the staff of the *Syracuse Journal* and in the following year, received an appointment as clerk in New York's newly created Department of Public Instruction. There he became editor of the magazine *New York Teacher* in 1856, published by the state association of teachers, followed by the *College Review*. As part of his duties, he organized two institutes to further teacher training and spent January and February of 1856 aiding Illinois procure an act of incorporation for a normal school.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, he recommended the name "Normal University" so that the school could secure unappropriated funds allocated in anticipation of land-grant legislation for a public university. After drafting the bill, Wilder enlisted the Hon. John A. Logan in the Illinois House of Representatives and Norman B. Judge in the Senate to advocate for its approval. On February 18, 1857, the governor of Illinois, William H. Bissell, signed the act that established Normal University (Illinois State University), the state's first public university.<sup>43</sup>

As editor of the *New York Teacher*, Wilder frequently used the magazine's pages to write about ancient fables and symbol worship, the mysteries of lost cities beneath the oceans, and the far-reaching encounters of the ancient Norsemen whose "sea-kings dismembered France, invaded Spain, attacked Ireland, conquered Africa, penetrated to the Dead Sea, overran Sicily, Italy and the Morea, passed under the walls of Constantinople, and endangered the existence of Rome."<sup>44</sup> Wilder also wrote reviews on subjects ranging from chemistry, to moral lessons for schools and families, to the opinions of primitive Christians, to the Hindu theory of immersion in rivers; sacred Gothic mysteries; and on the Platonic perceptions of infinity. What he learned as editor were skills at networking that never left him. Each issue contained association newsletters and information gleaned from school systems across New York and New Jersey; analyses of legislation which involved senators and assemblymen; rules and regulations governing the

superintendents of public instruction; the role and responsibilities of the trustees of school districts; and the allocation of public school monies.

In 1857, Wilder taught for a year in the School of the Society of Mechanics and Tradesman before joining the *Evening Post* managed by the John Bigelow. While working as a reporter for the paper and attending sessions of the Legislature, Wilder acquainted himself with most of the public leadership in the state including the Hon. William A. Wheeler, Lucius Robinson, and Roscoe Conkling; and Governors Horatio Seymour, Reuben E. Fenton, John T. Hoffman, and Myron H. Clark and C. T. Hurlburt. Others included Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson, John A. Andrew, Schuyler Colfax, and Marcus A. Ward. Given his access to these men and their insight and management over the inner workings of government, Wilder was tempted on numerous occasions to step into the world of politics.<sup>45</sup>

Wilder remained with the *Evening Post* for thirteen years before ending his affiliation in 1871. Building on his experiences at the Department of Public Instruction, editorship of the *New York Teacher*, and the contacts he acquired as a reporter, he gave increasing attention to state politics and used his numerous contacts to obtain an appointment as clerk for the Committee on Ways and Means of the New York Assembly where he served for several sessions. He also ran as a candidate for Alderman in New York, joining the movement against the Tweed Ring and winning by several thousand votes. His victory, however, did little to enamor him to political life and, after completing his term, he broke with politics altogether and moved to Roseville and then to Newark, New Jersey, where he returned to his earlier educational, literary, and medical pursuits.<sup>46</sup>



## **Risorgimento**

While Wilder was learning his way through the maze of New York politics in the years following the Civil War, New York eclectics were busy opening new colleges and, not surprisingly, relied on his political skills and networking to carry their message. The first effort took place at the annual meeting of the Eclectic Medical Society of the State of New York when its members adopted resolutions instructing the society's board of directors to secure a charter for a proposed new college. When ex-mayor William F. Havemeyer, Horace Greeley, William Moller, and others expressed their support, Wilder worked behind the scenes preparing the bill of incorporation to secure the charter. With deals cut and votes procured, the Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York opened its doors in October 1865 with ex-mayor Havemeyer as its first president.<sup>47</sup>

The college failed to prosper, in part because Dr. Robert Stafford Newton, who managed the day-to-day aspects of the college, refused to delegate any of his authority to others who might have improved the school's reputation. Havemeyer, Greeley, and William Moller, a wealthy sugar refiner who would have endowed the school had Newton been more amenable, withdrew their support. Seeing no recourse, the school's most supportive trustees resigned. As a face-saving decision, Wilder assumed the presidency in 1868 but gave little of his time to the job, choosing instead to direct his energies to his growing interest in the arcane. Without a substantive change in management, the school languished and Wilder stepped down as president to accept the chair of physiology which he held until 1877. The school eventually closed in 1913.<sup>48</sup>

## National Scene

Awakened to the possibilities and impediments of eclectic medicine, Wilder campaigned to win irregulars legal equality with conventional medicine. In 1869, after much wrangling, matters came to a head and the National Eclectic Medical Association (NEMA), which had become extinct in 1858, formed once again, holding its first meeting in January 1870 with representatives from every state and Canada. With the adoption of a constitution, by-laws, and code of ethics, the association became a reality when it elected Dr. John W. Johnson, a Botanist from Connecticut as president, and Wilder as secretary, a position he held until 1895 during which time he edited nineteen volumes of its *Transactions*.<sup>49</sup>

These were halcyon years for the eclectics and for Wilder, who seemed to be involved in all aspects of alternative medicine. Not only was he president of the Eclectic Medical Society of the State of New York (1869-70), its secretary (1871), and co-editor of its *Medical Eclectic*, but he also served on the Board of Trustees of the New York Homeopathic Medical College. He remained a reporter for the *Evening Post* (1857-71), faculty member of the Eclectic Medical College of New York (1868-77), and clerk and then alderman in the New York Assembly (1871-72). In those capacities, he directed investigations into the sale of medical diplomas which had become a public relations nightmare resulting in the revocation of several colleges that had engaged in the traffic.<sup>50</sup>

In January 1878, a meeting of interested parties was called with the view of organizing a replacement for the Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York. Once again, drawing on Wilder's personal friendship with Governor Lucius Robinson and Dr. S. B. Woolworth, Secretary of the State Board of Regents, the United States Medical College was organized May

28, 1878. Thus began a war between the school and members of the regular profession as well as rivals within their own ranks. Wilder served as secretary of the college and professor of physiology and magnetic therapeutics (1878-85), holding both positions until the college was forced to close. Accused of being fraudulent, the school dampened Wilder's view of sectarian medical schools as either bastions of morality or as promoters of financial honesty. "The more there is professed," he admitted, "the less it seems to be believed."<sup>51</sup> During this time, Wilder's lectures were well attended and he earned the name "Walking Encyclopedia" for the breadth of his knowledge.<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the mid-1880s and 90s, numerous conflicts arose between and among the eclectic medical colleges and their faculties, forcing the NEMA to intervene again and again. Yet despite friends and sympathizers in state legislatures, the scientific character of instruction in the eclectic schools lagged markedly behind conventional medicine. Changes in faculty were numerous as few teachers could afford to teach with such poor salaries. Besides, the ever present practice of selling diplomas continued to plague the reputation of the eclectics. At the insistence of Wilder, the NEMA reluctantly revised its Constitution and tightened the conditions of study and qualification.<sup>53</sup>

By 1902 there were thirty-two societies and associations representing eclectic physicians in the states of Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin. Seven medical colleges admitted to representation at the NEMA.<sup>54</sup> In his role as Secretary for NEMA, Wilder tried his best to account for the comparative strengths of the different schools of medicine.

The number of Eclectic physicians in the United States can hardly be estimated with more than proximate accuracy. Many who profess to belong to the Eclectic School make use of the medicines and procedures employed by practitioners of other Schools, ignoring more or less those which are set forth in Eclectic publications; and many who are identified with the rival Schools have adopted more or less the Eclectic procedures and medicines, often after classing these as having been originally introduced by their own associates. These facts make it less easy to distinguish. Many, besides, who have been instructed in Eclectic medical colleges are reckoned and recorded as belonging to other Schools of Practice; some from having changed their sentiments, and others for reasons of a different character, It has been quite common to enumerate Eclectic physicians at as high a rate as fourteen thousand; but a critical computation by Dr. John K. Scudder gives the following numbers of the respective Schools, namely: Old-School, 73,028; Eclectic, 9,703; Homoeopathic, 8,640; Physio-Medical, 1,553. Of course, as few comparatively have the . . . professional enthusiasm requisite for the purpose, only a limited number is enrolled in the various organizations, or taking interest in any form of associate action.<sup>55</sup>

Wilder opposed efforts to unify medical practice by bringing orthodox and irregular physicians into closer affiliation. Under the present conditions, he warned, “for eclectics to participate in such an endeavor would be suicidal, not to say an apostasy.” The result, he predicted, would be to re-adopt many of the old methods that had been repudiated.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Wilder came to regret that many who professed to be eclectics no longer subscribed to their once strongly held principles. Not only had many of their remedies been

forgotten but “most of the time materia medica was not taught as eclectics should know it.” Indeed, much of botany had been neglected as physicians turned to organic chemistry.<sup>57</sup>

As Wilder knew only too well, the history of Reform medicine was one of medical partisanship mixed with liberal convictions, conscientious sentiments, petty conflicts, bitter jealousies, magisterial aspirations, searching scrutiny, alleged misdoings, and gross misconduct. Professors were in constant battles with their institutions and with fellow colleagues. Not surprisingly, their quarrels and unrelenting hostilities marred their aspirations and defamed their efforts at winning popular acceptance. Medical intolerance carried the day, as men of liberal attainments showed the same aggressiveness as their illiberal opponents. Sadly, eclecticism promised much but failed ignobly.<sup>58</sup>

Wilder’s detailed accounting of the politics surrounding the founding of Reform medical schools, particularly those in New York, reflected the extent to which he had been personally involved in the political battles that accompanied their creation. Like many reformers in his day, he considered the stubbornly contested battles for the chartering of Reform schools the equivalent of the wars for religious liberty and freedom of conscience that had been so integral to the founding of the nation. He pointed to leading Reformers such as Nicholas Smith, Moses Griffith, and D. F. Nardain who learned from their mistakes how best to leverage their medical societies and friends in the legislatures to obtain much needed legislation in support of their objectives.<sup>59</sup>

Wilder’s leanings tended toward mesmerism, homeopathy, spiritualism, and healers like Phineas Parkhurst Quimby of Belfast, Maine, who were experts in employing hypnosis as an agency of treatment. Believing that the mind was the only active principle in the universe, he

sympathized with a number of new schools of healing, including Christian Science.<sup>60</sup> Wilder remained on good terms with the Homeopathic State Society and was welcomed to its sessions and even invited to address its members. “In private conversation members were ready at all times to tell me how their practice, and indeed the entire Homoeopathic Materia Medica, had benefitted from remedies adopted from the Eclectics.” There was a catholic spirit which he felt among his Homeopathic associates which produced a generous reciprocity of remedies and proving.<sup>61</sup>

Throughout his life, Wilder favored paranormal modes of healing, especially those that were sneeringly decried as superstitious, vulgar, or biased. A vitalist at heart, he admired Paracelsus as the first to make use of the term magnetism to explain certain non-material agencies and phenomena. And like Paracelsus, he taught that the archæus or primordial life-essence was distributed in all parts of the healthy human body and that it was of a magnetic nature, attracting or repelling other sympathetic or antipathetic forces belonging to the same plane.<sup>62</sup>

## Chapter 3

### Theosophy

The true philosopher, the student of the Esoteric Wisdom, entirely loses sight of personalities, dogmatic beliefs and special religions.  
(H.P. Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 1888)

Westerners had long been circumspect of Indian thought and its practices, which included belief in psychic intuition, occult racial theories, bursts of energy or chakras, and spiritual enlightenment. Although fascinated the romantic portrayal of the Indian subcontinent by Emerson and the transcendentalists, not until the Russian occultist and spirit medium Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) articulated the esoteric religion of Theosophy in 1874 did a syncretic system of Eastern and Western thought take hold in America. Claiming knowledge of a cosmos which developed through seven stages of evolution and whose humanity moved through an ascending arc of reincarnation to arrive at pure consciousness, Theosophy connected Western esotericism with an ancient group of monks Blavatsky described as the “Masters.” Her peculiar brand of occultism, explained in her two-volume *Isis Unveiled* (1877), came at a time when Christianity was struggling with the transition between faith and rationality by embracing an immanent rather than a transcendent God. Purported to be the esoteric wisdom of the world’s most revered religious prophets (Moses, Krishna, Lao-tzu, Confucius, Buddha, and Christ) handed down through an ancient brotherhood of gifted adepts, mahatmas, or masters, Theosophy became a worldwide movement which, by the time of Blavatsky’s death in 1891, had drawn into its fold such luminaries as George Bernard Shaw, Lyman Frank Baum, James Henry Cousins,

William Butler Yeats, Lewis Carroll, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Jack London, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Kurt Vonnegut, Lewis Carroll, Susan B. Anthony, Thomas Edison, and Alfred Russel Wallace.<sup>63</sup> Wilder, who was a believer in telepathy and an ardent student of eastern religions, would become a vice president of the Theosophical Society, and later a member of the society's General Counsel.<sup>64</sup>

### **Opportunity Knocks**

In 1876, when he was still a member of the Eclectic Medical College faculty, Wilder received a note from the English Spiritualist Mrs. Emma Hardinge-Britton urging that he acquaint himself with the Russian occultist and spirit medium Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), co-founder with Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and William Quan Judge of the Theosophical Society. Wilder chose not to respond to the note, believing that too many pretenders had established organizations of similar nature that falsely claimed paranormal powers. "I had barely heard of Madame Blavatsky," he admitted, "but in no connection with anything relating to Theosophy, or other subject that I knew anything about."<sup>65</sup> Probably he had received the note because of his writings on the arcane as well as his free-lance work with J. W. Bouton, a New York importer, publisher, and bookseller. Bouton had been among the earliest publishers of arcane works, including Charles Leland's *Fusang, or, the Discovery of America by Chinese Buddhist Priests in the Fifth Century* (1875), and *Medical Economy During the Middle Ages* (1874).

Several months after receiving the note, Colonel Olcott visited Wilder to inquire on behalf of Bouton if Wilder would examine Blavatsky's manuscript and edit it for publication.



Olcott's visit was also intended to introduce Wilder (who was now sixty years of age) to the author. Olcott, who "appeared to hold her in high regard closely approaching to veneration," invited Wilder to accompany him to her flat on Forty-Seventh Street. Olcott was not a man to be taken lightly, having fought in the Civil War and appointed to the investigating team organized after Lincoln's assassination. He later became Special Commissioner of the War Department of the Navy before practicing law. Like others of his generation, the war and the loss of so many friends had caused him to explore various forms of spirit communications as a way of healing the intellectual sores stemming from the war. It was his investigation on behalf of the *New York Sun* of the séances of William and Horatio Eddy at their farm in Vermont that Olcott met Madam Blavatsky and her friends.<sup>66</sup>

When Wilder was finally introduced to Blavatsky at the flat she and Olcott shared on Forty-Seventh Street, he discovered that the building had been "transmogrified" into a suite of apartments housing tenants who generally met at mealtimes but otherwise kept to their separate lifestyles. The rooms in Blavatsky's flat were arranged using partitions to separate her office with its shelves of books, from other areas where she handled her correspondence, received visitors, and slept.<sup>67</sup>

She did not resemble in manner or figure what I had been led to expect. She was tall, but not strapping; her countenance bore the marks and exhibited the characteristics of one who had seen much, thought much, traveled much, and experienced much. Her appearance was certainly impressive, but in no respect was she coarse, awkward, or ill bred. On the other hand she exhibited culture, familiarity with the manners of the most

courtly society and genuine courtesy itself. She expressed her opinions with boldness and decision, but not obtrusively. It was easy to perceive that she had not been kept within the circumscribed limitations of a common female education; she knew a vast variety of topics and could discourse freely upon them.<sup>68</sup>

During Wilder's subsequent visits to the apartment, Olcott was usually present and had time to get a sense of how the two worked together: "A tall, lanky man of the Lincoln type, with a noble, dome-like head, thin jaws, grey hair, and language filled with quaint Saxon-Americanisms. He used to come and talk by the hour with Blavatsky, often lying recumbent on the sofa, with – as she used to say – 'one long leg resting on the chandelier, the other on the mantel-piece.' And she, as stout as he was thin, as voluble as he was sententious and epigrammatic, smoking innumerable cigarettes and brilliantly sustaining her share of the conversation."<sup>69</sup>

Bouton, who owned the copyright of Blavatsky's manuscript, placed it in Wilder's hands with instructions to shorten it "as much as it would bear." Wilder judged it to be "the product of great research, and that so far as related to current thinking, there was a revolution in it, but . . . too long for remunerative publishing." Agreeing to undertake the task, he endeavored to "preserve the thought of the author in plain language, removing only such terms and matter as might be regarded as superfluous, and not necessary to the main purpose."<sup>70</sup> The manuscript, initially titled *A Skeleton Key to Mysterious Gates* had been changed by Bouton to *Isis Unveiled*, a title that referred to Egyptian mythology. Although the book was based on the hypothesis of a prehistoric Aryan people who once lived in India and could hardly be said to represent a religion

or wisdom coming out of Egypt, Bouton was a skillful marketer and chose the title because Egyptian lore was more highly marketable.

Though Blavatsky claimed telepathic power to carry on discourse with those whom she called “the Brothers” and from whom she had received her wisdom, Wilder never witnessed any such communications. Nevertheless, the two had long discussions on the abridgements which he made to her manuscript. She appreciated his changes claiming that he had removed what she described as “flapdoodle.” Still, she continued to add matter back into the manuscript, so much so that an additional volume was needed.<sup>71</sup> Blavatsky liked the results and the two made for an extraordinary partnership—Blavatsky with her myriad of facts and run-on sentences and Wilder with his short, pithy style. Still, the two worked long hours together. For Wilder, it was not so much her claim of psychical powers but the Eastern philosophy that drew him to her workplace.<sup>72</sup>

Blavatsky had no qualms about Wilder’s contributions to the final product, noting in 1891 that she and Olcott had submitted the manuscript to Wilder, a recognized Platonist, who recommended it for publication. “It is he [Wilder] who made the excellent *Index*, who corrected the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew words, suggested quotations and wrote the greater part of the introduction ‘Before the Veil.’ If this was not acknowledged in the work, the fault is not mine, but because it was Dr. Wilder’s express wish that his name should not appear except in footnotes.”<sup>73</sup> As for Wilder’s contribution to the work, much of what he contributed to her *Index* and Introduction are found in his *New Platonism and Alchemy* which he published in 1869.<sup>74</sup>

Wilder’s thirty-six page introduction took issue with the so-called progress made by humankind due to the “divine light of Christianity” and the “bright lamp of modern science.”

These assumptions, he argued, ignored the history of debauched clergy, warring religions, unproven dogmas, rancorous quarrels, ill-conceived scientific hypotheses, and the steady drift of materialism. The struggle between science and theology for infallibility had shown both with feet of clay. As a consequence of the warfare, Western society was “losing all belief in man’s personal immortality, in a deity of any kind, and rapidly descending to a level of mere animal existence.”<sup>75</sup>

Looking among the ruins left from their battles, Wilder suggested that Platonic philosophy offered the only true refuge of compromise between the two Titans. The greatest philosopher of the pre-Christian world, Plato faithfully mirrored the minds of the ancient world beginning with the Vedic philosophers who lived thousands of years before him and others who left their imprint in the intervening centuries. He absorbed the learning of the Greek philosopher/scientist Philolaus, to Socrates in Athens, to Pythagoras in Italy, and then whatever he could glean from Egypt and the East. Not only did Plato teach justice as the greatest good but that the most single object of attainment was *real* knowledge which existed permanently in contrast to modernity’s more transitory knowledge. Beyond all secondary causes, laws, ideas and principles was the lawgiver, the supreme Good. There existed a permanent principle of unity beneath the forms and changes in the universe. *Nous*, or the rational soul of man, possessed a love of wisdom and a nature similar to the supreme mind making man capable of understanding the eternal realities. However, like the captives in the cave described in *The Republic*, man perceived only the shadows of objects, thinking them to be real. Still, within man was a glimmer of a higher world and it was the province of philosophy to break man from the bondage of the senses and experience the eternal world of truth, goodness, and beauty.<sup>76</sup>

Wilder explained that the object of *Isis Unveiled* was not to force on the reader the personal theories of the author or to give her ideas the pretensions of a scientific work. Rather, the book offered a summary of the religions, philosophies, secret doctrines, and traditions that had reached Christendom in various ways over the centuries. Many had braved persecution and prejudice in their efforts to convey this knowledge. While much of humankind saw these conveyers as charlatans and treated them with contempt, it was to their credit that these brave individuals that the secret doctrines were preserved and remained to enlighten mankind.<sup>77</sup>

### **Authorship**

Despite the fact that Mary Somerville (*Physical Science*, 1834) and Harriet Martineau (*Political Economy*, 1832) had established themselves as authentic female intellectuals, rumors abounded questioning the veracity of Blavatsky's authorship. Wilder never publicly doubted her authorship, noting that "she was a superior conversationalist and at home on every matter about which we discoursed." He nevertheless unwittingly fed into some of the rumors of skeptics when he related a story he had heard from Mrs. Elizabeth Thomson.<sup>78</sup> A millionaire philanthropist from Boston, she became a sponsor of Dr. John Ballou Newbrough, a dentist and spiritualist who sought financial support to publish his new bible titled *Oahspe. A New Bible in the Words of Jehovah and his Angel Ambassadors* (1882) which he claimed to have been the product of automatic writing, meaning the ability to write words arising from a subconscious or supernatural source. According to Wilder, Mrs. Thompson claimed that Blavatsky's authorship was "perfect humbug." On enquiring her reasoning, she related the story of a German gentleman by the name of Baron de Palm who had either lived in the same building as Blavatsky, or had

been otherwise close to its inhabitants. The Baron had devoted his life to writing and studying arcane subjects. When he died, his effects were distributed among his friends in the flat on the condition they tend to his cremation. According to Mrs. Thompson, Blavatsky had drawn the material for her *Isis Unveiled* from the contents of the Baron's trunks.<sup>79</sup>

After the publication of *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky and Olcott left for India where Olcott converted to Buddhism and became a principal catalyst in the rebirth of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Wilder and Blavatsky continued to correspond. In one of her letters, she defended herself from critics who accused her of being against Christianity. "I do not go against Christianity, neither against Jesus of Nazareth," she insisted. "I simply go for the skulls of theologians. Theology is neither Christianity nor religion. It is human and blasphemous flapdoodle."<sup>80</sup> Moreover, she made no apology for her criticism of the Catholic clergy who she described as a "hypocritical, lying, dirty crew."<sup>81</sup> She even asked Wilder to draft for her a statement titled a "Profession of Faith" that she could insert in her third volume. "Just say briefly and eloquently that it is not against Christ or the *Christ*-religion that I battle. Neither do I battle against any *sincere, true* religion, but against theology and Pagan Catholicism."<sup>82</sup>

As for his own beliefs, Wilder tried his best not to speak poorly of the religion of his youth, but the more he studied Christianity in relation to other belief systems he found the genuine meaning of Jesus too often sacrificed for the wrong reasons. Specifically, he accused its defenders of "juggling" their texts. Over time his faith tended toward simplicity:

My creed is very brief, though, as usual, more than I understand. I believe in God, a divine personality, the First and the Only, and from whom are all things. By Him the

universe subsists. He is the Father of the spirits of men. The law is written everywhere, and His children, inspired and guided by Him, perceive and obey it. Such may, and sometimes do, have their powers and facilities enlarged, and their perceptions quickened, till they are able to do and declare things which are often esteemed supernatural. But such faculties are for the pure and the true. Man comes into God as the alone going to the Alone. On this, however, and indeed of most interior experiences, it is not well to speak much or often.<sup>83</sup>

## Chapter 4

### Platonism

The West is preparing to add its fables to those of the East. The valleys of the Ganges, the Nile, and the Shine having yielded their crop, it remains to be seen what the valleys of the Amazon, the Plate, the Orinoco, the St. Lawrence, and the Mississippi will produce. Perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past—as it is to some extent a fiction of the present—the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology.  
(Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” 1851)

To imagine there would be Neo-Platonists in the Midwest contemporaneous with Billy the Kid and Jesse James seems counterintuitive. Yet Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” which grew out of numerous entries in his journal, treated the West as symbolic of an ideal world, a concept similar to Bronson Alcott’s belief that the philosophical fountainhead of America’s future centered in the Mississippi Valley. Exemplary of these predictions, Plato Clubs organized in places like St. Louis and Osceola, Missouri, with the intended purpose of counter-acting the crass materialism of the age with the more idealistic philosophy of Plato and the Neo-Platonists. Club members were involved in education and self-improvement, séances, spiritualism, mesmerism and Oriental mysticism. A high percentage of women were dedicated to discovering the keys to religion and its mysteries.<sup>84</sup> The question to be answered is how and in what manner did Alexander Wilder join the Midwest movement of Neo-Platonism? What drew him to this topic? And what were his contributions?



## Marking the Past

For nearly sixty years, Wilder was engaged in editing, translating, and writing articles on such arcane subjects as alchemy and Neo-Platonism. He began this journey by first reading Swedenborg with the help of George Bush, a biblical scholar at New York University. Bush published the diary of Swedenborg in 1845, followed by *Mesmer and Swedenborg* (1847) where he argued that the doctrines of Swedenborg were corroborated by the findings of mesmerism. Wilder also read Le Boys Des Guays' *Letters on Swedenborg* (1849) and James John Garth Wilkinson's *Emanuel Swedenborg: A Biography* (1849). Over time, he cultivated a close friendship with all three men who he admired for their scholarship and allegiance to Swedenborg. Their influence proved to be significant. "To this day," Wilder wrote, "I esteem the philosophic doctrine of Swedenborg the most perfect that has been promulgated in modern times." Though unable to accept the Seer's revelatory interpretations of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and the *Apocalypse*, Wilder remained a student of the *Platonic Dialogues* which only increased his appreciation for Swedenborg who he regarded as "the philosopher of common sense."<sup>85</sup>

Over and over again in his various career choices, Wilder deferred to Socrates to explain the transcendent importance of education, the training for the service which each individual was best fitted, the need to describe God as good, that rulers should work for the welfare of the people, that dying should not be treated as a calamity, and that the qualities of human nature should be developed thoughtfully.<sup>86</sup> Those who violated or exceeded these boundaries became society's greatest enemies. This included Cardinal Ximenes who burned old Arabic manuscripts; the *Index Expurgatorius* of the Vatican; and the work of Torquemada at Salamanca.

Only by reading history through the forms, legends, and mysteries of past religions and languages could it be said that the learning tools of society were capable of teaching mankind of its past and present. Interpreting the stories and legends of Abraham and other patriarchs allowed man to assign not just historical meaning but a religious and esoteric meaning to life. “When the world was in its infancy, people spoke and acted with more of the simplicity and directness of little children than they do at present,” he wrote. “Let us not smile at their mode of tracing the Infinite and Incomprehensible Cause throughout all the mysteries of Nature, lest by so doing we cast the shadow of our own grossness on their patriarchal simplicity.”<sup>87</sup>

Religions were never cunningly devised by priests, or ambitious leaders, for the purpose of enabling them to hold the human mind in abject bondage. Nor did they come into existence, full-grown, like Athené, the Jove-born; nor were they constructed from the lessons of sages or even of prophets. They were born, like men, not mature but infantile; the body and life as a single entity, without a definite evolving of the interior, symbolized idea, yet containing all potentially; so that time and growth were required to enable the intelligent mind to distinguish rightly between the form and the substance which it envelops and shadows forth.<sup>88</sup>

Wilder respected men like Plato, Plotinus, and the followers of the Gnosis, as they all respected the “great Arcanum of life and of Man.”<sup>89</sup> Each enjoyed a prophetic faculty which provided communication of interior knowledge. This was also true of the Hebrew prophets, Pythagoras, and Iamblichos who mingled theurgy and oriental mysticism with their teachings.

“Truth is always present,” Emerson once remarked, “it only needs to lift the iron lids of the mind’s eye to read its oracles.” Dr. Channing had said something similar when he noted that “we have, each of us, the spiritual eye to see, the mind to know, the heart to love, the will to obey, God.”<sup>90</sup>

For Wilder, the ancient world of Greece and Rome remained a very real part of the domain of modern history with each person’s life repeated through the ages, and every human soul being a mirror of other souls. Despite the progress of time and shifting climates, conditions, and events, the laws which pertained to created beings were much the same. Indeed, the religions, philosophies, and symbolisms were all outgrowths of aspirational thinking intended to solve or otherwise express an opinion concerning some aspect of existence. Despite their differences, there was a profounder meaning behind them all. Regretfully, as nations developed, they tended to treat these transcendent principles as having of little value. Yet Wilder valued and respected them. Behind their veil was a sacredness that made each symbol valuable in understanding both past and present.

### **Ethan Allen Hitchcock**

During much of the time Wilder worked for the *Evening Post*, the *College Review* and the *New York Teacher* he was engaged in a study of the arcane. In 1858, he discovered the works of Ethan Allen Hitchcock (1798-1870), a career officer in the United States Army and a mystic known to his supporters as the “Hermetic Initiate.” The author of *Remarks on Alchemy and the Alchemists, Indicating a Method of Discovering the True Nature of Hermetic Philosophy* (1857) and *Swedenborg, a Hermetic Philosopher* (1858), Hitchcock suggested a whole new way of

understanding Hermetic philosophy, believing that alchemy belonged to a legitimate field of allegory setting forth the transformation of the human soul.<sup>91</sup>

As Hitchcock explained, the Alchemists, or Hermetic Philosophers, had not pursued gold but wisdom, a thesis that had him looking at the broader issue of intent. Having read numerous works on alchemy, he concluded that the Alchemists were universally misunderstood as pretended scientists seeking to transform base metals into gold and silver. Instead, they actually intended to explain the salvation of man and his transformation from evil to good, and his passage eventually into a state of grace—all of which were written in symbols. The works of the Alchemists were a product of symbolic writing, much like *Gulliver's Travelers* or the adventures of *Robinson Crusoe*. Teaching by means of similitude, parable, fable, allegory, and symbolism, they brought innovative ideas and opinions before the public using guarded language to avoid the consequences of potential civil or religious retribution. Thus, books dealing with the “elixir of life,” the “water of life,” and the “philosopher’s stone” were essentially religious in nature and written in such a manner to avoid punishment at a time when intellectuals found it was necessary to communicate with symbols. The Alchemists were Protestants when Protestantism could not be spoken openly. Neither pretenders nor imposters, they were searchers after truth. Believing that the knowledge of the One could not be directly taught, they resorted to numbers, figures, and allegories.<sup>92</sup>

For Hitchcock, man was the central figure in Hermetic philosophy with conscience the starting-point in pursuit of the Philosopher’s Stone. He learned that mercury stood for man’s *conscience*, the instrument of improvement, and the way to the end. “I intend to show . . . that the conscience . . . is the touchstone of all their writings, and that the way to the Philosopher’s Stone is through or by means of it,” he wrote. Similarly, the *fire* was meant to convey that “all

fluctuations in society and governments . . . live on in defiance of all sophistry, and remains forever undisturbed by philosophical and religious disputes.” In like manner, *gold* stood for the love of God and man; *lead* (Saturn) represented man in a state of humility; *antimony* (Basil Valentine’s “The Triumphal Chariot of Antimony”) stood for the earth; and *tar water* (Bishop Berkeley) recognized the Spirit of God in all things. In other words, the writings of Johann Isaac Hollandus, Artepheus, Van Suchten, Basil Valentine, and Jean D’Espagnet—all well-known Alchemists—were not in pursuit of an agent for transmuting common metals into gold, but in pursuit of the truth.<sup>93</sup>

Hitchcock found nothing in alchemist writings that intended mere mechanical theories. The authors of *The Marrow of Alchemy* (1476), *Compound of Alchemy* (1591), *Arcanum Hermeiae philosophiae* (1623), *Zoroaster’s Cave* (1659), *The Open Entrance to the Shut Palace of the King* (1676), and *Hermetical Triumph* (1723) all contained secrets that could not be shared in public. The Alchemists were not the fools their literal readers took them for; instead, they were the wise men of their day who couched their wisdom in “dark sayings” calculated to mystify and deceive those who needed the “hangman’s whip” to hold them in order. Hermetic philosophers did not differ from philosophers in general except to say that they did so by concealing their knowledge to a narrow group of readers. The Alchemists believed that true religion could not be taught in the ordinary meaning of the world since something always remained in the depths of the soul that could not be expressed using ordinary language. This explains why so many alchemical volumes referenced secret societies such as the Masons and Rosicrucians who utilized a secret language as a convenient mode of publishing, or when circulating material among the initiated. This applied to those doctrines of which they had taken an oath not to speak directly, or to make known to anyone except to another member.<sup>94</sup>

From Hitchcock's study of Swedenborg as a Hermetic philosopher, Wilder built a bridge that led from Neo-Platonism to the contemporary world. He learned that the negative judgment against the Alchemists had been wrong and any candid and critical examination of its writers suggested that they were disciples of Apollonius, Plotinus, Porphyry, or Iamblichus. As Wilder explained, the adepts of alchemy employed a species of figurative language to cover esoteric meanings of a far different type. Like Hitchcock, he insisted that alchemy was a spiritual philosophy and not a physical science. The transformation of the baser elements into gold and other precious metals were figurative expressions "of the transformation of man from his natural evils and infirmities into a regenerate condition, a partaker of the divine nature." In effect, it consisted of a discourse of body, soul and spirit where it was concealed and presumed safe from punishment.<sup>95</sup>

### **Western Idealists**

Midwest Platonism was never more popular than the Plato Club in Jacksonville, Illinois, known as the "Athens of the West" which claimed nearly four hundred members. Formed in 1866, it flourished for more than thirty years, attracting teachers and hosting a broad array of lecturers including Emerson, Bronson Alcott, William T. Harris, Denton J. Snider, Horace H. Morgan, and Thomas Davidson. Explanations are difficult to account for the town's attraction to Plato other than the presence of Hiram K. Jones (1818-1903), a physician who preached abolitionism and sheltered runaway slaves. Popularly known as "the modern Plato," he lectured on philosophy at Illinois College, the town's private liberal arts school affiliated with the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church and shared his passion for metaphysics with all

who would listen, drawing from a broad band of literature and religion to illuminate his lectures. Even Emerson referred to Jones as the nation's foremost expert on Plato.<sup>96</sup>

Another prominent idealist of the day was the attorney Thomas Moore Johnson (1851-1919) of Osceola, Missouri, president of the Council of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and editor of *The Platonist* (1884-88). Published monthly, the magazine stood at the forefront of a national revival in the Platonic thinking, elucidating the practical application of Platonic ethics. *The Platonist* included Oriental as well as Occidental philosophy, philological investigations, translations and interpretations, and utterances of gifted individuals—all intended to teach the harmony of pure Christianity with the esoteric doctrines of ancient faiths.<sup>97</sup> According to Johnson, one of the earliest members of the Theosophical Society, Platonism was a method of discipline more so than a system. “It embraced the higher nature of man by unfolding the mysteries of the interior being.” Though it had low esteem among those who favored scientific knowledge, its proponents felt that to the extent it gathered wisdom from the ancient schools and combined it with modern thinking, it extracted what was precious from all. It taught how to discriminate the permanent from the changing, the absolute from the relative, valuing the whole body of facts and not just the few. “The philosophic discipline,” Johnson wrote, “unfolds the interior nature of the soul, arouses the dormant truth there inhumed, brings into activity the spiritual faculty, and enables us to peruse the arcane of the higher life.”<sup>98</sup>

Wilder, who was now in his late fifties, contributed numerous articles for *The Platonist*, some being translations, others lectures and essays, and even a glossary of distinctive terms used by philosophers.<sup>99</sup> In “The Spectator of the Mysteries,” he took to task the prominent Irish physicist Professor John Tyndall at the Royal Institution of Great Britain who was both a vocal advocate of Darwin and a believer in the separation between science (rationality) and religion

(spirituality). As Wilder explained, Tyndall's "highest mental altitude . . . is still within the atmosphere of the life that now is; and to imagine that there is a continuing beyond this point, is to him an idea more or less dismal." There was a higher and more profound knowledge that rested not on the senses but with the union of the "interior mind" with the soul.

Essence or real being, without color, shape, or sensibility to the touch, is perceptible only to the interior mind, which is the guide of the soul. The sphere of true knowledge surrounds essence. The mind of each divinity is fed by intelligence and knowledge; so too, the interior mind of every soul that would do its proper work, loves to contemplate that which is, and is delighted accordingly and nourished, till the revolution of the sky has brought it once more to the place of setting out. In this circuit the divine one beholds justice, wisdom, and knowledge—the interior knowledge of real being.<sup>100</sup>

Wilder's *Iamblichos: A Treatise on the Mysteries* which Johnson serialized in the magazine, explored the efforts of mystics to communicate with the Divinity, believing it was just as important to explore mental vision by exalting and intensifying perception as it was to explore reductionist science. Given that Numa, Zoraster, Mohammed, and Swedenborg claimed communion with the higher spirits, Wilder thought it important to understand how man arrived at a state regarded as communion with the Deity. He called this *Entheasm*, or participation of the divine nature together with prophetic inspiration and illumination. While the materialist considered such states as "approaching mental disorder," such so-called mental disorders were often attended by extraordinary spiritual phenomena that proved far more perceptive than science



was willing to acknowledge. The *entheastic* condition indicated a life that was lived beyond the physical senses. It was a state of illumination, the participation of man in the divine nature, spirit and power of the Divine Purpose. Such events that occurred in the external world were expressive of experiences of the human soul. Thus were the connections between the ethics of Aristotle and the Law of Moses; the Pentateuch and the doctrines of Pythagoras and the Academy; and the Essenes of Carmel and the Therapeutea of Egypt.<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, Christianity as taught at Alexandria underwent a metamorphosis to the degree that it was comprehended in its essential unity with the philosophic systems of the East. Accordingly, he reconciled Christianity through allegory to the demons and celestial gods of ancient religions, making them appear as if they had all originated from the same source and for the same ends. Thus, the teachings of the sages of the remote East aligned with the divine utterances recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. “There was certainly a great resemblance between the philosophical doctrines and religious customs of the Egyptians and Eastern Buddhists; but whether the Hermetic books and the four Vedas were in any sense identical, is not now know,” he admitted.<sup>102</sup>

The wisdom drawn from the sages of India, the magicians of Persia and Babylon, the seers and prophets of Israel, and the philosophers of Greece contained moral truths in addition to their dialectic pursuits and superstitions. Most carried a two-fold meaning, suggesting that in their peculiar mystical fables and narratives existed a primitive integrity illustrative of the truth. Out of these many systems, Wilder identified three distinct features: a theory of the Godhead, the existence of the human soul, and *theurgy*, or role of rituals performed with the intention of invoking the presence of a divine agency.<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, *The Platonist* failed to maintain sufficient subscribers to sustain its function and purpose. Issued sporadically, it struggled to survive by extending its reading audience to those interested in the occult and eastern mysteries, including reviews of G. Wyld's *Theosophy and the Higher Life* (1880) and articles from *The Theosophist* published in India by Blavatsky and Olcott.<sup>104</sup> Other articles symptomatic of this broadening trend included reviews of Giles B. Stebbins' *After Dogmatic Theology, What? Materialism, or a Spiritual Philosophy and Natural Religion* (1880); William Oxley, *The Philosophy of Spirit* (1881) which sought to combine the Vaishnavas of the Bhagavad Gita with the Adepts of Tibet; and Alfred Percy Sinnett's, *The Occult World* (1881) which explained the Hindoo adepts who wielded the scepter of occultism in India.<sup>105</sup>

### **Concord School of Philosophy**

The origin of the Concord School of Philosophy dates from 1842 when Bronson Alcott met with a number of fellow philosophers to discuss organizing a summer program built around Platonic Idealism. Soon afterwards, he began collecting books and pamphlets which he housed at his Orchard House home. By 1860, a formidable number of individuals had expressed sufficient interest in establishing a Concord Club, followed a decade later by the Fortnightly Club, and then the Mystic Club, to discuss philosophy, and in particular, the far-reaching effects of Transcendentalism with the intent of reclaiming its influence in education and as a social movement.

With discussions on and off for several decades, it was not until 1878 and a conversation between Dr. Hiram K. Jones of Jacksonville and Alcott that the enterprise became a reality.

Incentivized by memories of the Transcendentalist movement, the Concord School opened in 1879 with financial support from William Torrey Harris and Louisa May Alcott. Based on the idea of Plato's Academy, it began by offering lectures and readings on the Transcendentalists, the Neo-Platonists, and Hegelians. Decidedly more high-brow and more rigorous in its topics than the Chautauqua Institution, founded in 1874 by Lewis Miller and John Heyl Vincent, the Concord School represented a marriage of convenience between New England and the Midwest which had become home to a circle of Platonists under the leadership of Harris.<sup>106</sup> Founder of the Philosophical Society in St. Louis, editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, and former superintendent of the St. Louis Public Schools, Harris had transformed St. Louis into a haven of Neo-Platonists. While Alcott assumed the honorary title of dean of the Concord School, the substantive work of organizing the annual program fell to Harris who, gifted with multitasking skills, became its unofficial manager and intellectual leader as well. Though some feared the school's radical heritage might bleed into its lectures, the actual outcome was far more sublime, dignified, and conservative. Nearly four-fifths of its attendees were women, of whom many were from the more conservative Midwest; some were teachers; others were wives of professional men. According to Louisa May Alcott, they "roost on our steps like hens waiting for corn."<sup>107</sup> For his part, Wilder described the school as an "old cloister where Socrates was represented as discoursing to the young men [and women] of Athens."<sup>108</sup>

With advice and help from Emerson, Harvard mathematician Benjamin Peirce, reformer and philanthropist Ednah D. Cheney, and educator and philosopher Harris of St. Louis, the first session of the school opened at Orchard House in the spring of 1879. It offered a term of five weeks with "professors" Bronson Alcott, W. T. Harris, Dr. H. K. Jones, David A. Wasson, and Ednah D. Cheney lecturing from Monday through Friday on Christian Theism, Speculative

Philosophy, Platonic Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and The History and Moral of Art.<sup>109</sup>

Saturdays were given over to guest lecturers Franklin B. Sanborn (*Philanthropy and Social Science*), Thomas W. Higginson (*Modern Literature*), Thomas Davidson (*Greek Life and Literature*), and George H. Howison (*Philosophy from Leibnitz to Hegel*) who spoke on their favorite topics. The school had no examinations and no limitation of age, sex, or residence for those who subscribed. The cost was \$15 for the entire program, with board obtained in the village at from \$6 to \$12 a week.<sup>110</sup>

As a proven author of numerous papers on metaphysical and mythological subjects, and professor of psychological science in the United States Medical College in New York, Wilder was a frequent guest at the Concord Summer School. In 1882, his lecture on “Emerson as a Philosopher” explained that while Emerson ceased to be a tenant of earth, his spirit “mingled with us” among the eternal stars. His admiration of Emerson was due to his representation of Plato “as having . . . included in himself all the former wisdom of the world.” Like Plato, Emerson embodied the “divinest inspirations” from the world’s most ancient cultures and then “rendered them into a language and form of speech which Europe could understand and receive as a wisdom and science of its own.”<sup>111</sup>

If I am to praise Emerson, I can do it no better than by comparisons which he has already suggested. In his inimitable description of Plato he has represented the great philosopher as having collected and included in himself all the former wisdom of the world — the lore of Eleatic and Italian, the cunning knowledge of the priests and hierophants of Egypt, and the Cyclopean Rephaites of Idumea and Palestine, the thaumaturgic skill of ancient

Babel and Shehel Minar, and the divinest inspirations of the Farthest East. Plato, he said, embodied all these in his own idea, and rendered them into a language and form of speech which Europe could understand and receive as a wisdom and science of its own. Since that day, all who think are more or less the followers of the Great Sage of the Akademe. This is a description which well fits Emerson himself. Of those who read Plato, few understand him. The true Platonist reads between the lines, and takes cognition of the arcane sense which is often purposely hidden from the sciolist and profane. Thus did Emerson. Then, again following the great Master, he moved away the rubbish which had been accumulated and gave us our Platonic Lessons in our own language and with the surroundings of the Nineteenth Century. Thus he made it practicable for neophytes to learn of the diviner Wisdom; aye, and for you to establish here in Concord — the place where hearts are at one — the School of Philosophy, a worthy reminder of the old cloister where Socrates was represented as discoursing to the young men of Athens.<sup>112</sup>

Bronson Alcott died March 4, 1888, and with others too infirm or too busy to carry on the work, the school closed its doors. Overall the school contributed three distinct currents of philosophy to its listeners: Transcendentalism, Hegelianism, and Platonism, the foremost being more honorific and nostalgic in kind, while the latter two embarked on a more independent course intended as constructive new approaches for stabilizing values and meeting the challenges of modern society.<sup>113</sup>

\* \* \*

In his later years, Wilder took up residence at No. 96 South Eleventh Street in Roseville, a suburb of Newark, New Jersey, where he lived at the home of Dr. Anna T. Nivison, her two brothers and a sister—all of whom were physicians. Two years before his death, Wilder experienced a failing of his physical strength, followed by a slight paralytic stroke. He remained at the Nivison home until his death on September 18, 1908, at the age of eighty-eight.<sup>114</sup>

## ENDNOTES

---

- <sup>1</sup> Alexander Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," *The Word*, 9 (1909), 162.
- <sup>2</sup> H.W. Percival, "Alexander Wilder," *The Word*, 9 (1909), 219.
- <sup>3</sup> "Editorial," *The Eclectic Medical Gleaner*, 4 (1908), 405-406.
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in M.R. Jaqua (ed.), *The Undying Soul and Other Writings of Alexander Wilder. Vol. II. Miscellaneous Writings of Alexander Wilder* (n.p.: Canine Endeavors, 2017), 378.
- <sup>5</sup> Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," 74, 76-77.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert A. Gunn, "Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work," *The Metaphysical Magazine*, 23 (1908), 277.
- <sup>7</sup> Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," 76.
- <sup>8</sup> Gunn, "Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work," 277.
- <sup>9</sup> Gunn, "Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work," 279.
- <sup>10</sup> Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," 79.
- <sup>11</sup> Alexander Wilder, "The Drama of Christendom," *The Metaphysical Magazine*, 23 (1908), 25-31, 33.
- <sup>12</sup> Read Edward Norris Kirk, *Sermons on Different Subjects* (NY: J.F. Trow, 1840); Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (2 vols; Oberlin: Fitch, 1847), II, 166; Charles G. Finney *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1876), 341; Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Co., 1835), 229-35.
- <sup>13</sup> Ira L. Mandelker, *Religion, Society, and Utopia in Nineteenth Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 98.
- <sup>14</sup> S. Baring Gould, *Freaks of Fanaticism and Other Strange Events* (London: Methuen and Co., 1891), 13.

---

<sup>15</sup> Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," 155.

<sup>16</sup> Read Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> Hubbard Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled: A History of the Sect Self-Styled Perfectionists; with a Summary View of their Leading Doctrines* (Battleboro: Published by the Author, 1849), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," 155; George Wallingford Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes; The Putney Community* (Oneida, NY: n.p., 1931), 80. 127. 259, Both Alexander and his brother David became involved in mesmerism.

<sup>19</sup> Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 161-62, 164; Benjamin B. Warfield, "J.H. Noyes and the Bible Communists," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 78 (1921), 37-72.

<sup>20</sup> Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 164-65. Wilder left the community before the charge of incest of Tirzah Miller, the niece of Noyes who had been seduced and made his favorite sexual partner.

<sup>21</sup> Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," 156,

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Gunn, "Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work," 280.

<sup>23</sup> Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," 79.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Wilder, "The City of Mind," *The Metaphysical Magazine*, 23 (1908), 130.-33

<sup>25</sup> Wilder, "The City of Mind," 133, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 405.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Wilder, *History of Medicine*. vii, 413.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Wilder, *History of Medicine. A Brief Outline of Medical History and Sects of Physicians, from the Earliest Historic Period; with an Extended Account of the New Schools of the Healing Art in the Nineteenth Century, and Especially a History of the American Eclectic*



---

*Practice of Medicine, Never Before Published* (New Sharon, Maine: New England Eclectic Publishing Co., 1901), 427-28.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 537.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Wilder, "The Later Platonists," *Bibliotheca Platonica*, 1 (1890), 162.

<sup>31</sup> Fielding H. Garrison, *An Introduction to the History of Medicine* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1929), 110-11.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Wilder, "Plea for the 'First Works,'" *The Eclectic Medical Journal*, 51 (1901), 245.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Wilder, "The Later Platonists," *Bibliotheca Platonica*, 1 (1890), 162.

<sup>34</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 106.

<sup>35</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 98-99, 213.

<sup>36</sup> It is also suspected that at this time Wilder had an intimate relationship with a local woman from which a child was born by the name Eudora or "Dora" Wilder who died at age eleven.

There is no indication that Wilder married the woman. See

<https://newtopiamagazine.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/the-eclectic-life-of-alexander-wilder-alchemical-generals-isis-unveiled-and-early-american-holistic-medicine/> (accessed March 31, 2017)

<sup>37</sup> Gunn, "Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work," 284.

<sup>38</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 598.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Wilder, "The Syracuse Medical College Eclectic," *The Eclectic Medical Journal*, 57 (1897), 430, 432.

<sup>40</sup> William Elmer, "American College of Medicine," *American Medical and Surgical Journal*, 1 (1851), 43.

<sup>41</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 585.

---

<sup>42</sup> Wilder, “Notes for His Life’s History,” 159; “Editorial,” *The Eclectic Medical Gleaner*, 4 (1908), 407.

<sup>43</sup> John Freed, “The Founding of Illinois State Normal University: Normal School or State University?” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 101 (1998), 125. Behind closed doors, however, Champaign County outmaneuvered the proponents of Normal University to establish the Industrial University, the state’s land-grant university, and as the University of Illinois was known until 1885. Still, Illinois State Normal University was considered “the people’s university.” See Jurgen Herbst, *And Sadly Teach: Teacher Education and Professionalization in American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 112.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Wilder, “Polynja, or the Open Polar Sea,” *New York Teacher*, 5 (1856), 345.

<sup>45</sup> Wilder, “Notes for His Life’s History,” 160.

<sup>46</sup> In 1868, at age forty-five, Wilder married his cousin Mary Wilder and purchased a home on West Thirty-Fourth Street in New York City. The marriage, however, failed to suit either party. Preferring the social graces of New York society to Wilder’s intellectual interests, she asked him to leave. He agreed to their separation, asking only that she send him his clothes and books; in return, he transferred the house and all its furnishings to her. See Gunn, “Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work,” 299-300.

<sup>47</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 678.

<sup>48</sup> Gunn, “Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work,” 291-92.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Wilder, “Address before the Eclectic Medical Society of the State of New-York, at its Seventh Semi-annual Meeting,” *North American Journal of Homeopathy* 18 (1870), 267; “New-York Homeopathic Medical College—Board of Trustees,” *North American Journal of Homeopathy*, 18 (1870), 278.

---

<sup>50</sup> Gunn, “Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work,” 288.

<sup>51</sup> Wilder, “Notes for His Life’s History,” 162.

<sup>52</sup> Robert A. Gunn, “Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work,” 293. The trustees named to draw up a charger and develop a plan of organization included Doctors J.B. Stow, D. E. Smith, and H. E. Firth of Brooklyn; Alexander Wilder and Mark Nivison of Newark, NY; and R. A. Gunn and Thomas A. Granger of New York City.

<sup>53</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 739.

<sup>54</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 726.

<sup>55</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 760-61.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Wilder, “Plea for the ‘First Works,’” *The Eclectic Medical Journal*, 51 (1901), 246.

<sup>57</sup> Wilder, “Plea for the ‘First Works,’” 245.

<sup>58</sup> See Alexander Wilder, “The Medical Colleges in Philadelphia,” *The Eclectic Medical Journal*, 59 (1899), 361-67; 417-22.

<sup>59</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 499.

<sup>60</sup> Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 378-80.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander Wilder, “Address before the Eclectic Medical Society of the State of New-York, at its Seventh Semi-annual Meeting,” *North American Journal of Homeopathy* 18 (1870), 268.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Wilder, *History of Medicine*, 176-77.

<sup>63</sup> Read H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (2 vols.: Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1994); Gary Lachman, *Madame Blavatsky: The Mother of Modern Spiritualism* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> “The Theosophical Society,” *The Theosophist*, 1 (1880), 214.

<sup>65</sup> Alexander Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* was Written,” *The Word*, 7 (1908), 77.

<sup>66</sup> <http://sueyounghistories.com/archives/2013/11/30/alexander-wilder-1823-1908/> (accessed March 31, 2017)

---

<sup>67</sup> Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* was Written,” 80.

<sup>68</sup> Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* was Written,” 81.

<sup>69</sup> <https://newtopiamagazine.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/the-eclectic-life-of-alexander-wilder-alechemical-generals-isis-unveiled-and-early-american-holistic-medicine/> (accessed March 31, 2017)

<sup>70</sup> Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* was Written,” 78-79.

<sup>71</sup> Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* was Written,” 82.

<sup>72</sup> <https://newtopiamagazine.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/the-eclectic-life-of-alexander-wilder-alechemical-generals-isis-unveiled-and-early-american-holistic-medicine/> (accessed March 31, 2017)

<sup>73</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, “My Book,” in *Theories About Reincarnation and Spirits and My Books* (Loma, CA; Theosophical Publishing Co., 1922), 33-34.

<sup>74</sup> See Alexander Wilder, *New Platonism and Alchemy* (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons and Co., 1869).

<sup>75</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (2 vols.; New York: J. W. Bouton, 1892), I, ix-x.

<sup>76</sup> Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, xiv.

<sup>77</sup> Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, xlv.

<sup>78</sup> Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* was Written,” 83.

<sup>79</sup> Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* was Written,” 84-86. According to Wilder, the body of Baron de Palm, who died in Roosevelt Hospital in NY City, was eventually cremated in the town of Washington in Western Pennsylvania, presumably the first cremation of a body in the United States.

- 
- <sup>80</sup> Alexander Wilder, "Letters from H.P. Blavatsky," *The Word*, 7 (1908), 153.
- <sup>81</sup> Wilder, "Letters from H.P. Blavatsky," 154.
- <sup>82</sup> Wilder, "Letters from H.P. Blavatsky," 154-55.
- <sup>83</sup> Gunn, "Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work," 302.
- <sup>84</sup> Thoreau, "Walking," in Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Excursions, Translations, and Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 217. Darrel Abel, *Democratic Voices and Vistas: American Literature from Emerson to Lanier* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2002), 80.
- <sup>85</sup> Alexander Wilder, "Notes for His Life's History," *The Word*, 9 (1909), 157;  
[https://newtopiamagazine.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/the-eclectic-life-of-alexander-wilder-  
alchemical-generals-isis-unveiled-and-early-american-holistic-medicine/](https://newtopiamagazine.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/the-eclectic-life-of-alexander-wilder-<br/>alchemical-generals-isis-unveiled-and-early-american-holistic-medicine/) (accessed March 31, 2017)
- <sup>86</sup> Wilder, "The City of Mind," 130-33.
- <sup>87</sup> Hodder M. Westropp and C. Staniland Wake, *Ancient Symbol Worship. Influence of the Phallic Idea in the Religions of Antiquity* (New York: J.W. Bouton, 1874), 18.
- <sup>88</sup> Westropp and Wake, *Ancient Symbol Worship. Influence of the Phallic Idea in the Religions of Antiquity*, 10.
- <sup>89</sup> Westropp and Wake, *Ancient Symbol Worship. Influence of the Phallic Idea in the Religions of Antiquity*, 21.
- <sup>90</sup> Quoted in Alexander Wilder, "Knowing and Foreknowing," *The Platonist*, 2 (1884), 460.
- <sup>91</sup> Read Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Remarks Upon Alchemy and the Alchemists* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 1857), Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Swedenborg, a Hermetic Philosopher* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1858). See also

---

<http://sueyounghistories.com/archives/2013/11/30/alexander-wilder-1823-1908/> (accessed March 30, 2017).

<sup>92</sup> Hitchcock, *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists*, iv-ix, 45, 146, 225.

<sup>93</sup> Hitchcock, *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists*, 60, 70, 116.

<sup>94</sup> Chronologically, Du Fresnoy identified ten Hermetic philosophers before Christ, twenty-one down to A.D. 1000; after which the number increases: five in eleventh century; three for the twelfth, eleven for the thirteenth century; fifteen for the fourteenth; seventeen for the fifteenth; thirty for the sixteenth; and sixty-seven for the seventeenth. See Hitchcock, *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists*, 151, 295, 203, 220.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/books/wil-plat/npa-hp.htm> (accessed April 1, 2017).

<sup>96</sup> <https://newtopiamagazine.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/the-platonist-on-sunset-blvd/> (accessed March 31, 2017).

<sup>97</sup> “The Platonist,” *The Platonist*, 2 (1884), front matter.

<sup>98</sup> “Salutatory,” *The Platonist*, 2 (1884), 1.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander Wilder, “Platonic Technology,” *The Platonist*, 1 (1881), 30-32; 100-102; 159-160; 188-94.

<sup>100</sup> Alexander Wilder, “The Spectator of the Mysteries,” *The Platonist*, 1 (1881), 3, 5.

<sup>101</sup> Alexander Wilder, “Entheasm,” *The Platonist*, 1 (1881), 83.

<sup>102</sup> <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/books/wil-plat/npa-hp.htm> (accessed April 1, 2017).

<sup>103</sup> <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/books/wil-plat/npa-hp.htm> (accessed April 1, 2017).

<sup>104</sup> “Books and Periodicals,” *The Platonist*, 1 (1881), 111. See also G. Wyld, *Theosophy and the Higher Life* (London: Trubner and Co., 1881).

---

<sup>105</sup> <https://newtopiamagazine.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/the-platonist-on-sunset-blvd/> (accessed April 1, 2017).

<sup>106</sup> As a teaching camp for Sunday-school teachers, it quickly expanded into concerts, theatre and lecturer series that attracted middle-class families and imparted an appreciation for education, religion, and the arts. Read Andrew C. Riser, *The Chautauqua Movement: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>107</sup> Bruce Ronda, "The Concord School of Philosophy and the Legacy of Transcendentalism," *New England Quarterly*, 82 (2009), 581, 588; Ednah Dow Cheney (ed.), *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters and Journals* (Boston: Roberts, 1889), 68.

<sup>108</sup> Alexander Wilder, "Emerson as a Philosopher," *Concord Lectures on Philosophy, Comprising Outlines of all the Lectures at the Concord Summer School of Philosophy in 1882* (Cambridge, MA: Moses King, Publisher, 1882), 71-72.

<sup>109</sup> Austin Warren, "The Concord School of Philosophy," *The New England Quarterly*, 2 (1929), 202.

<sup>110</sup> A. Bronson Alcott, H.K. Jones, W. T. Harris, S. H. Emery, Jr. and F. B. Sanborn, "The Concord Summer School of Philosophy," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 14 (1880), 138.

<sup>111</sup> Alexander Wilder, "Emerson as a Philosopher," *Concord Lectures on Philosophy, Comprising Outlines of all the Lectures at the Concord Summer School of Philosophy in 1882* (Cambridge, MA: Moses King, Publisher, 1882), 70.

<sup>112</sup> Raymond L. Bridgman, *Concord Lectures on Philosophy Comprising Outlines of all the Lectures at the Concord Summer School of Philosophy in 1882* (Cambridge, MA: Moses King, Publishers, 1883), 71.

---

<sup>113</sup> Ronda, “The Concord School of Philosophy and the Legacy of Transcendentalism,” 606.

<sup>114</sup> Gunn, “Alexander Wilder, M.D., F.A.S. His Life and Work,” 290.