In 1942 Henry B. Parkes launched an aggressive attack on the allegedly “mystical” features of Emerson’s thought. According to Parkes, Emerson’s epiphanies and visionary moments had no biographical basis. He was only a “pseudo-mystic” who had “no true mystical experience. His mysticism was founded on those moments of exhilaration, caused by a feeling of harmony between oneself and the external world, which everyone occasionally experiences.”

Emerson’s contemporary critics were ready to label Emerson a “mystic,” but to them “mysticism” was mostly a term of reproach and equivalent to “misty” or “occult.” In March 1850, the Knickerbocker characterized Emerson—in apparently “incongruous” words—as a “Yankee mystic.” In this context mysticism was somewhat rescued from the low and reproachful sense in which Emerson’s contemporary critics generally understood the term and came to stand for the possibility to attain union with God and experience ultimate reality directly. For the Knickerbocker, this type of mysticism became particularly obvious in the “transparent eye-ball” passage in Nature with its assertion that it was possible for the human soul to be united with the divine. This assertion resulted in what the Knickerbocker termed a radical “self-exaltation.” The soul is deified: “I am part or particle of God. I am God” (cf. CW, 1:110).

Commenting on Emerson’s writings for the Massachusetts Quarterly Review in 1850, Parker also noted the self-exaltation in Emerson’s high “estimate of ecstasy.” But while Brownson equated Emerson’s self-exaltation with an atheistic religion without God, Parker was ready to appreciate that Emerson longed for direct and convincing experience of the identity of self and God, of the divine ground of the ego. This expe-

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2 See Francis Bowen, “Transcendentalism,” in Myerson, Emerson and Thoreau, 5; Brownson, “Mr. Emerson’s Address,” 42.
rience was for Parker exemplified by the German lay theologian and mystic Jakob Böhme. Emerson seized eagerly upon Böhme, whose mysticism went beyond all book learning to seek an immediate knowledge of and union with the divine essence. Böhme thus supported Emerson’s own thought of God as dwelling within man and he also confirmed what Parker described as Emerson’s “sometimes extravagant” method, namely his procedure “by the way of intuition.”

Emerson was familiar with Durant Hotham’s biography of Böhme which he read in volume one of the “Law edition.” Hotham presented Böhme as a humble shoemaker who received spontaneous illumination from God himself. Böhme was born in 1575 of poor but pious Lutheran parents at Altseidenburg, near Görlitz, Saxony. In his youth he was a peasant boy who tended the cattle. The first awakening that occurred to him took place in a thicket in which he saw a cavern and a vessel of gold. Startled by the splendor of this sight, he was inwardly awakened from a dull stupor. Soon after he was apprenticed to a shoemaker. In 1599 he became a citizen of Görlitz, where he opened a shoemaking business and married. In 1600 he experienced a seminal religious epiphany, when his eye caught the reflexion of the sun’s rays in a bright pewter dish. This catapulted him into a mystical vision of the

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4 Theodore Parker, “The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,” in Myerson, Emerson and Thoreau, 238, 235. Parker spells Böhme’s name correctly. Böhme’s English translators in the seventeenth century variously spelled his name Behm, Behme, and Behmen. This latter spelling was adopted in the “Law edition” and thus came into common use in England and America.