

Document: The Shakers [A Visitor's Account of Hancock, Massachusetts, 1858]

Therese Albertine Luise von Jakob Robinson



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Therese Albertine Luise von Jakob Robinson (January 26, 1797–April 13, 1870) was a German-American author, linguist and translator, and second wife of biblical scholar Edward Robinson (Hamilton College, class of 1816). She was a prolific writer, publishing many works under the pseudonym TALVJ, an acronym derived from her birth name. Robinson lived in Ukraine, Russia, and Germany before marrying Edward Robinson (1828) and moving to the United States in 1830. Their Boston and New York homes were literary salons frequented by writers such as George Bancroft, William Cullen Bryant, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Washington Irving. Robinson visited the Hancock, Massachusetts, Shaker community in 1858. Her account of this visit was published in *Westermann's Jahrbuch der illustrierten deutschen Monatshefte* [Westermann's Yearbook of Illustrated German Monthly Journals] no. 48 (1860): 587-91. Robinson returned to Hamburg, Germany, following her husband's death in 1863. She died in 1870.

Robinson's account has been translated by Ariel Godwin with assistance from Joscelyn Godwin.

THE SHAKERS

Even if perhaps the origins of the greatest number of religious musings and philosophical aberrations can be traced to Germany, the land of thinkers, North America is surely the area where they first emerge in practical life. But for how long? While children there are repressed by the law, the establishment, and bureaucratic arbitrariness from their earliest stages of development, the free air they breathe here grants them a much longer and unsupervised life. And yet it appears that even this complete freedom, this *non-supervision* and *non-embattledness*, may also soon be deadly.

Communist organizations and social institutions of all kinds may spring from ideas of primitive Christianity, philanthropic enthusiasm, idolization of work, or egalitarian philosophy, and may grow and wither before they bloom. Harmony, economy, practical Saint-Simonianism, free-love communities, phalanxes of all kinds lie dead before they ever lived, or else survive in an altered state, far removed from their original principles.

This is even true of the most devout religious sects. Did not even the Moravians, who began their American life with true authenticity, gradually relinquish all their unique qualities? Neither Bethlehem nor Nazareth appear any different now from any other thriving German settlement in Pennsylvania. From the two schools founded in these towns by those pious brothers—in their time, the most famous in the land—everything that distinguished them as “Moravian” is long gone. Indeed, for the past ten years, dancing lessons have been taught in the Girls’ School in Bethlehem.

One might counter that there are still preserved here, after nearly two hundred years, the wonderful qualities of the Quakers, who in fact often still spend long silent hours in their meeting houses, awaiting a movement of the spirit, who still say “Friend” instead of “Sir” and “thou” instead of “you,” who still shun the tawdry fashions of the present day, even if the younger generations allow themselves a few quiet deviations. This is certainly a remarkable fact, only explicable by the great numbers of this sect. It is far more surprising, however, that a much smaller sect related to them, the Shakers, and with them one of the most wonderful anomalies of the human intellect, has survived here for nearly a hundred years.

This remarkable religious society originated in Lancashire, England, from a breakaway group of Quakers. They first become evident in 1746. However, they only became properly established in 1758, when Ann Lee—a bold, ambitious, fanatical woman of humble origins, barely twenty-two

years old—latched onto them. Accredited by a kind of mysterious holiness, all sorts of mortifications, and various senseless, fanatical speeches, this canny creature soon gained a strong influence over the still somewhat restricted society. She declared marriage, along with any union of the sexes, to be an abomination before God. The “resurrection” was only spiritual, representing conversion or new birth. But since the Redeemer explicitly said that at the Resurrection people would neither marry nor be given in marriage, it was concluded that reborn people desecrated themselves through marriage.

Otherwise, the religious system of these good people is indescribably murky and confused, except that one thing is expressed specifically: the Word—which created the world, spoke through the prophets, and dwelt in Christ but was spread by the apostles—was now manifested in a woman; for the grace of God now intended, through a woman, to give back to the sinful world what had been taken from it due to a woman’s transgression. Through her pain and struggles with a fallen human race, and through her union with Jesus, Ann Lee became the *firstborn of many sisters* and the *mother of everything spiritually alive*. Mother Ann was what she wanted to be called, and nothing else; and to this day that is what the Shakers call her. Should any worldling call her Miss Lee or Mrs. Lee, she would cut them off with a decisive “I am Mother Ann, the Word.”

As one can imagine, the authorities took notice of these crazy pretensions, and her followers—naturally consisting of the most simple-minded and meager people—suffered persecution and other ill-advised mistreatment, and therefore soon became martyrs and attracted more recruits. In 1774, they migrated to America, where initially things did not go much better for them, but where after some time the principle of universal tolerance upon which the republic was built ensured that they would have a place to practice all their follies. To be precise, they seem to have wanted to prove to the world that spiritual aberrance can be combined with diligence and skilled work. Their communities—of which they soon built more, with houses for brothers and for sisters, workshops, places of business, and prayer houses, all segregated—have formed, to this day, a restricted but remarkably lively and appealing industry. Various woodworking, basketry, and weaving with wool and linen take place in their workshops, all of the highest quality like the products of the Moravian Brethren, and also at twice the price. They also occupy themselves with the gathering and harvesting of medicinal herbs. Their

fields are the most flourishing in the area, their oxen the best maintained, and their buildings, although as tastelessly designed as everything else they produce, are redeemed by their solid construction and neat finish. They organize themselves into a family, or when their numbers are too great, multiple separate families. They live at peace with their neighbors, who are amused by them but leave them alone. A few poor souls, tossed around by the storms of the world, find refuge with them, as long as they are willing to work, from which in complete community of goods no one is exempted. The majority of these are women.

They educate themselves through an apprenticeship system, similar to what is used in other communities. A child, with the legal permission of his or her parents or guardians, can be “bound” to a certain individual or business for education and support, in exchange for work to the extent he or she is able, until the age of majority. In the country, this is often the only way households can get servants. After reaching age 21, the individual, although no longer “bound,” often stays with the family to work for wages, having established a certain loyalty to them. For decent employers, this is often the case, since the “bound” apprentice is treated as part of the family. The Shakers are surrounded by “bound” youths of this sort, mostly orphans or the children of the poorest of the poor. Upon reaching adulthood, the girls especially tend to stay, having a total lack of interest in the outside world, which has offered them nothing from their birth onwards. Well fed and clothed, and under the exclusive and *stupefying* influence of the Shakers, they often remain in the community of their own free will, even though there is never any question of a salary or owning personal property, since everything is held in common. The young men also are carefully sheltered from interaction with the outside world for as long as their adopted status lasts, but they soon become harder to retain, and to this end the Shakers put out constant propaganda.

It was with careful thought that I used the term “stupefying” for the Shakers’ influence. Although they—especially their elders and leaders—possess a certain cleverness in doings and dealings, and know how to make the most of their trades, their spiritual life is one of indescribable murkiness and constriction, something that has also left a distinct mark in their physiognomies. For some of their sly elders, admittedly, this may merely be mask, behind which the fox is surely hiding. But even these elders, who are also their preachers and spiritual leaders, are completely uneducated and uninformed people. During a visit to one of their communities, not

far from Schenectady, someone from our group asked one such elder why he used the words “yea” and “nay”, rather than “yes” and “no” like other Christians. The answer was: Because it says “yea” and “nay” in the Bible. The next question, whether he then believed that the Bible was originally written in English, resulted in the utmost astonishment, and it was easy to see that he had never had any doubt about this. Their sermons, or rather the fanatical speeches that they pass off as such, are put together from unclear and misunderstood phrases, in ungrammatical and incorrect English. But also, the development of their mechanical skills is entirely one-sided; each individual is only a part of the whole, a tool in the master’s hand. In some cases, housewives have considered it a windfall when they could get a maid-servant who was raised by the Shakers. The great purity of their institutions and the industriousness and neatness of the Shakers are legendary. One of my acquaintances in Pittsfield believed she had gotten a real catch when a girl who had lived for years with the Shakers in Hancock applied to be her cook. However, she soon found out that the girl had done nothing there but peel potatoes and apples, and had never learned to do anything else. Since table and household are communal, each girl has only one task to perform, and often it is the same task for years, as for each of the Cuckoo’s fourteen wives who each had their own specialty; all else is unknown to her. (*Translator’s note: this is a reference to a traditional German song about a man called the Cuckoo, who had fourteen wives; the song describes the task each wife performed.*) The men’s work is performed in the same way, but under an even more soul-stifling influence than that of the women, for despite their indescribably disfiguring garb of these latter, and the awkward quality that their lifestyle stamps upon them, they still appear much less mindless than the men.

We have, at least, an idea of the many aberrances of fanaticism in various spiritual orders, especially in the Middle Ages; the madness of the “praying children,” (*Translator’s note: a revival movement in Silesia, 1707.*) the senseless anger of the flagellants. But when we see how this silent, dumb, brainless sect has expanded into a dozen communities in five different states, their lives unfolding in machinelike activities, we can only say: “Stupidity, you win, intelligence must surrender!”

I do not mean to claim that among this sect’s six or seven thousand members not a single person has tried to make sense of its founding principles. And this is especially true for those men who, in the pursuit of their external business, cannot avoid coming in contact with the outside

world and with people who think differently. Sooner or later, someone will necessarily ask these men: "What will happen to the world if the Shakers have found the true way and all of humanity finds salvation in Shaker communities?"

The answer to this will be: that the world, with slow steps but nonetheless unavoidably, is moving toward its final downfall, and that the Shakers' communities are simply the anticipated shelters in which to wait for the rumblings of this destruction.

On our travels, we often had occasion to view their settlements. They gladly take in travelers, and each community has a guesthouse, which is actually intended only for their trading and business friends, but others can stay there in exchange for money and kind words (plenty of the former). We wondered at their flourishing fields, their cleanly housekeeping, and the one-sided competence of their barrel- and basket-making work, but we had never before been around them on a Sunday, and their service is a remarkable curiosity. One of the fundamental principles of Mother Ann Lee was that people should honor their creator "with all their members." The convulsive twitchings and tremblings at their devotional exercises, which earned them the names "shaking Quakers," and thence "Shakers," were not enough. Just as David danced before the Ark, so they also wanted to praise God, not only by dancing, but also by jumping around. And this manner of worship is still practiced today, with a vehemence that is almost violent. Each person seems to require their own greater or lesser degree of agitation. Perhaps Ann Lee was not amiss to declare that on this seventh day, the worshippers should do something to make up for the clockwork-like activities of their other six days.

In the summer of 1858, we visited a farm in Massachusetts near the border with New York State. Nearby, in the latter state, these fine folk have their wealthiest settlement in Mount Lebanon; and nearby, even closer to where we stayed, a smaller community in Hancock. We were glad to have the opportunity here to witness this strange performance.

Therefore, one Sunday, we drove to the nearest community to us, Hancock, warned by our host, "Don't laugh!" Observers, however, are gladly admitted, for their services are what these worshippers are most proud of, and every Sunday people come from all around to see the wonderful performance. We came a little late. As we arrived, we saw the sisters and brothers, in two long lines, walking to the chapel from the houses across the street, where it appeared they had gathered specifically

for this purpose. Each line entered by a different door. We followed right behind the sisters and sat down on one of the side benches, where we had already noticed several other visitors were sitting. The benches for the worshippers were in the middle of this long, narrow room, positioned facing one another; men sat on one side, women on the other, face to face, with a significant amount of space between them. The men, more of them old than young, were wearing smocks of summer wool, in various mostly dark colors, instead of their usual linen work coats. The large-buttoned waistcoats were so long that they covered the entire body. But their trousers all appeared to have been cut to the same measurements, and the way they sat made for a most humorous sight. Those that were too long had been tied up or else bunched up with regular seams, in the same way that children's clothes are adjusted as they grow. Very few of them had trousers that fit, and on some they hung down like empty sacks, which became most obvious when they took off their smocks to dance. Most of them appeared indescribably obtuse and doltish; a few became ecstatic from dancing. Five or six youths could not resist a bit of waggery; this jumping and shouting was probably the main fun they had to look forward to all week.

The women, old and young, were in their Sunday best, all white and light blue striped calico, very thin blue stripes on a snow white background, and a few of them were dressed all in white, so that the whole effect was one of the utmost purity and tenderness. The cut of the clothes, however, detracted from this effect. The waistlines were right under the arms; the close-fitting dresses were divided with gussets, and had only the exact amount of width at the bottom necessary for walking. In this age of hooped skirts, these costumes seemed about as absurd as they must have seemed when they first made their appearance, which indeed was also an era of hooped skirts. Obviously, they must have contrasted most strikingly with the fashions of the time. The thin women looked miserable and scrawny in these clothes, the fat ones entirely ridiculous. Their sleeves were close fitting, high on the shoulders, and ending at the wrist, with work-reddened hands sticking out, large and plump. On the other hand, their white muslin neckerchiefs, with the corners tucked away in the back, had a more tidy appearance, as did their unattractive plain white bonnets, tied tight against their cheeks. There were a few pretty young and halfway-young faces under them; all things considered, the women looked better than the men.

But our attention had mostly been directed to one of these women, stick-thin and at least five feet ten inches tall, who was obviously there to

supervise us, for which reason we called her the Constable. She maintained a steady, menacing, unwavering gaze upon us visitors. I had been warned not to use a lorgnette, and so, because I had to use some other means to help with my nearsightedness, I had concealed a pair of spectacles upon my person. When I went to pull them out of my pocket, I turned away from her so as not to be observed, and being unused to such a motion, it took me a rather long moment. My companions saw, with some anxiety, that the Constable had noticed this with suspicion, and was practically skewering me with her angry stare—until this Rhadamanthus was finally calmed by seeing the innocent expression on my bespectacled face.

The service opened with a prayer yelled out by one of the elders, full of reminiscences and religious clichés, none of which made any particular impression on us. After this the worshippers, still seated, joined in singing a song. Then there was an interval of prayer and sermon, full of dark and often ungrammatically expressed prophecies, Bible passages, and poisonous denunciations of salaried priests, a theme that was repeated in the subsequent speeches. This appeared to have awakened the right level of enthusiasm. Everyone stood up, the benches were shoved to the sides, the men took their smocks off, and the dance began. At first the rows of men and women only agitated gently, each of them moving alone, one behind the other, elbows held tight against their bodies, hands out with palms facing upward. In this manner they circled a few times around the room, facing each other but not touching, and singing loudly. Then, once again, a screaming prophet broke forth. Four sisters and four brothers placed themselves at the center. Their voices alone now formed the choir, for the jumping dance that the others began required all the breath they had. The sexes always remained separate. But the song grew louder and louder, and the leaping grew higher and higher. A few of the men appeared rapturous almost to the point of madness; a few simply looked stupid. Most of the women preserved their silent, dry demeanor. There was something infinitely repugnant and offensive about the whole scene. To me, it felt as if I had landed amidst a heap of idolaters living in total darkness, dancing around their idol. None of us were inclined to laugh; except, when three big fat men close in front of us began jumping wildly, with their backs turned to us, so that the sweat streamed off their foreheads and soaked through their clothes, and the sacks hanging off their trousers like tails flew from side to side, the sight was so buffoonish that I had to bite my lips.

It went on like this for about an hour and a half, the dancing interrupted by the wild shrieks of individual fanatic vocalists, one of whom almost fell down in paroxysms. An old woman also spoke. Her main topic—as was the case for most of the other speakers—was praise of the Shakers. In most of their songs, rhythm supplants melody; and when there is any of the latter, its uniformity makes it boring. They write most of their hymns themselves. To get an idea of their poetry, consider the following verse:

I love to sing, I love to pray,
I love to praise my maker;
I love the glorious sabbath day,
I love to be a Shaker.

The dancing that we saw was merely their usual dancing for praise and worship. But apparently they also have allegorical dances, in which, for example, they gather manna, bind sheaves, climb Jacob's ladder, and so on. These only take place on the great feast days, and on these occasions they are said to act as if truly possessed. But when one sees them in their workshops, their stores, or any of the business of everyday life, there are no people more levelheaded or more tenacious.