

## **The Transformation of Genius into Practical Power: A Reading of Emerson's "Experience"**

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### **Note**

This paper is a reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1844 essay "Experience," which is the second chapter of *Essays: Second Series*. The paper is long, almost 25 thousand words. I am distributing the whole thing in case someone wants to read it. I would very much appreciate comments on anything in it. **For the workshop discussion, I recommend reading sections 5-9 (stopping at the bottom of page 38).** That comes to about 18 single-spaced pages. The table of contents given below, which summarizes the argument of the first five sections of the paper, should provide sufficient orientation. Section 4 is also strongly relevant to political theory.

I wrote the paper in response to an invitation from the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, to deliver a lecture on a topic of interest to its readers. The lecture would then be published in the journal. I set out write about 10 single-spaced pages on "Experience," and quickly discovered that I could not explain the essay's intricacies without going on at much greater length. So I let myself go on, in the hope that doing so would prove worthwhile. I need to extract a lecture's worth of material out of this draft for presentation shortly before Thanksgiving. But I am also considering expanding the draft into a short book.

### **Table of Contents (with a summary of sections 1-5)**

#### **1. Is "Experience" Despondent?**

The nearly unanimous opinion of Emerson scholars is yes. In political theory the main defender of this view is Kateb. The essay is typically read through its mesmerizing third paragraph, about the death of Emerson's son Waldo. Other passages are considered insofar as they amplify Emerson's despondency. But 20 of the essay's 25 paragraphs state grounds for hope or say something uplifting. The last paragraph ends on one of the highest notes in all of Emerson. "Experience" has a three-part structure. It actually argues for its uplifting conclusion.

#### **2. "Experience" Read Backwards**

If one looks closely at the last paragraph, a number of puzzles emerge. Emerson wants readers to work at resolving those puzzles. The beginning of the paragraph appears to conflict with the ending. A lot hangs on what Emerson means by "manipular reform" and by "a paltry empiricism." There are biblical allusions that need unpacking.

### **3. Idealism, Coleridge, and Consolation**

At several points in the essay, Emerson is responding to Coleridge's idealism, which is indebted to Kant's critique of immediate experience and to Romanticism's emphasis on the imagination. Emerson had formerly embraced these themes enthusiastically, while distancing himself from Coleridge's Christian orthodoxy. Now Emerson suspects that idealism led him to lose touch with the world. After little Waldo's death, idealism fails him as a source of consolation.

### **4. Spectral Wrong: Ideals and Material Reality as Discrepant Worlds**

The essay's final paragraph begins by contrasting the world Emerson sees around him and the world he thinks. The discrepant worlds appear earlier in the essay as an opposition between idealism and materialism. Idealism locates authoritativeness solely on the subject side of the subject-object dichotomy. Materialism locates it solely on the object side. As an ethical stance, idealism is a mere "ought," which fails to embody its ideals in material practice. Materialism is a way of living that explains ideals away. Its central category is *temperament*, which is also the lynchpin of 19<sup>th</sup>-century race theory. Manipular reform and utopianism fail to get ideals embodied in material practice in an acceptable way. The transformation of genius into practical power is supposed to get that right.

### **5. Intuition and Its Discontents**

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## 1. Is “Experience” Despondent?

“Experience” is the most enigmatic of Emerson’s major essays and, for many readers, the most moving.<sup>1</sup> The title, which calls to mind Montaigne’s “On Experience,”<sup>2</sup> announces Emerson’s nominal topic in a single ambiguous term. He then places an ambiguous poem of his own in the position of an epigraph, where one might expect to find a quotation from an authorizing classical source. The poem begins by referring twice to “the lords of life,” by which Emerson appears to mean things or ideas that some people, at one time or another, have treated as ultimately authoritative. He names several lords of life – it is not even clear how many – and then concludes the poem by referring to “Little man,” whom nature has taken “by the hand,” whispering, “Darling, never mind!”<sup>3</sup>

The essay’s most stunning passage, which refers to the passing of Emerson’s son Waldo, comes only three paragraphs later:

In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, — no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me, — neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous.

The person he cares about most is dead. Yet Emerson experiences the loss as if it were nothing more than bark falling from a tree. The phrase “falls off from me” echoes Wordsworth’s talk, in the Immortality Ode, of “outward things, / Fallings from us, vanishings.”<sup>4</sup> But rather than partaking in the poet’s consolation, Emerson abruptly introduces a technical term from biology and law to label the experience with cold detachment.

Evidently, he is not making an exception of his own home in ¶2 when he writes: “Every roof is agreeable to the eye, until it is lifted; then we find tragedy and moaning women, and hard-eyed husbands, and deluges of lethe.”<sup>5</sup> Nor, perhaps, in ¶8 when he writes: “We house with the insane, and must humor them; then conversation dies out.” That is the sort of thing a hard-eyed husband would say. Those close to Emerson must have winced when reading such a sentence. The scholars certainly do, because they know that his second wife Lidian, little Waldo’s mother, was still moaning two years after the boy died.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, her husband sank in a bog of lethe.

Emerson is anything but happy with this feeling of having sloughed off a son or a son’s death. In a state of nearly comatose hyper-subjectivity, he grieves that grief can teach him nothing. His thoughts about his grief, which lie too deep for tears, do not bring him the solace that Wordsworth’s great elegy is meant to bring.<sup>7</sup> Instead, Emerson undergoes a vocational crisis. He is uncertain whether anything

worth sharing with readers can be gleaned from his experience.<sup>8</sup> “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition” (¶4).

The body of the essay is only twenty-five paragraphs long. Although “Experience” is written in the allusive, elliptical, densely aphoristic style we find in many of Emerson’s essays, its lows are so low and rendered at times in such personal terms that some commentators have wondered whether they are reading Emerson. “The dominant mood of the essay,” writes Joel Porte, expressing the nearly unanimous view of Emerson scholars, is “a pervasive sense of incapacity in the face of experience.”<sup>9</sup> George Kateb describes the essay as “philosophically despondent.”<sup>10</sup>

While there is no point in disputing how the essay makes its distinguished interpreters feel, I believe they have mistaken how it works. Nearly all of the published commentary on it focuses exclusively on its lower register. In fact, the essay’s tone, which is sometimes despondent and sometimes hard-eyed, is also sometimes rhapsodic. The speaker’s mood repeatedly swings upward, and occasionally soars. At least twenty of its paragraphs either assert grounds for hope or shift into a register meant to counter despondency. In some of these cases, the uplifting rhetoric is confined to a single sentence, but in many cases, Emerson goes on at some length, reflecting on the more heartening parts of our condition.

The essay’s final paragraph, which Kateb does not mention, ends with one of the most uplifting flourishes of Emerson’s devising. Porte, who devotes a page or so to ¶25, declares it a “weak attempt to recoup losses.” Its “affirmative sentences can only seem rather hollow reeds.” The “very language seems to wobble.” Porte concedes only that “at the beginning of the final sentence,” Emerson succeeds in summoning “the stern old Puritan spirit” that makes “a virtue out of uncertainty.”<sup>11</sup> The concluding uplift is too little and too late, as Porte sees it, to be persuasive. He does not consider whether grounds for Emerson’s affirmations have already been given elsewhere in the essay.

As I read it, there is an argument in “Experience” and it falls into discernible parts. The first of these responds to a tradition of epistemological reflection on *experience* that includes Hume, Kant, the German Romantics, and Coleridge. Emerson does not name the thinkers he has mind. This part of the essay ends with a three-sentence passage in ¶7 that is clearly intended to anticipate ¶25:

But it is impossible that the creative power should exclude itself. Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed, through which the creator passes. The intellect, seeker of absolute truth, or the heart, lover of absolute good, intervenes for our succor, and at one whisper of these high powers, we awake from ineffectual struggles with this nightmare. We hurl it into its own hell, and cannot again contract ourselves to so base a state.

This passage says that the *acedia* or lethargy Emerson has experienced in the wake of little Waldo's death is not a permanent condition. Either the speaker has already awakened, or he has faith that he will awaken. ¶25 makes evident that he has already awakened.

The next section, which is much longer, goes from ¶8 to ¶17, and ascends from despondent *acedia* to the "mid-world." It ends in a passage that starts off with another mention of angel-whispering (¶15) and concludes with the discussion of "*the universal impulse to believe*" that so inspired William James (¶17). Throughout this "mid-world" section, Emerson is, I believe, responding to Coleridge's conservative political philosophy and to essays in which Montaigne reflects on different types of melancholic temperament, denies the wisdom of pursuing ecstasy, and uses skeptical arguments to commend deference to the state and the Roman Catholic magisterium.<sup>12</sup> The question at the fore in the fourth essay of Coleridge's *The Friend* and in Montaigne's "On Experience" is what a prudent person, who is *experienced* in the sense of having lived long enough in society to be familiar with both joy and loss, can reasonably infer from his own experience and the testimony of other experienced people when deciding how to live. This is not a question about the epistemic status, for the individual subject, of particular experiential episodes.

Emerson's essay deliberately refrains from defining *experience*. Here, as in several of his most important essays, his procedure includes working through multiple senses that a highly charged term has taken on in the traditional conversations he is joining. He thinks that the desire to settle on a single definition expresses a prejudice in favor of the mind's analytical faculty against sense perception, memory, and especially the imagination. Hume and Kant go wrong, Emerson holds, in part because they philosophize from the vantage of the analytical faculty, which Kant calls the *understanding*. Coming to terms with *experience*, the concept, is a matter of ringing the changes on the term's various uses and situating oneself in relation to the struggles in which it has, at one time or another, been caught up. Emerson's procedure has something in common with what Hegel calls phenomenology and something in common with what Nietzsche, one of Emerson's most enthusiastic and insightful readers, calls genealogy.

In Montaigne's essays, as in Coleridge's mature political philosophy, *experience* is what a prudent and worldly person has and a novice or adolescent lacks.<sup>13</sup> For Coleridge, the wisdom of experience is what permitted Burke to see that the French Revolution was destined to become an innovative form of tyranny. For Montaigne, the wisdom of experience consists primarily in a realization that one knows a good deal less than one might of thought. A sort of philosophical modesty, combining suspicion of ecstatic states and deference to ecclesial and political authority, is the best policy, according to Montaigne. Emerson sees in Coleridge and Montaigne a major challenge to his own religious and political views. The lessons he wants to draw from life experience and history differ significantly from theirs. But he takes their arguments with great seriousness, and is careful to acknowledge their importance to him by quoting (without attribution) from Coleridge's *The*

*Statesman's Manual* (§7) and mentioning Montaigne's name (§8). He admires Montaigne enough to devote a chapter of *Representative Men* to him.

Emerson also regards Montaigne as the paradigmatic writer of essays, Emerson's favored genre.<sup>14</sup> Referring to Montaigne's writing, Emerson will later say: "Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive."<sup>15</sup> The style of "Experience" is less conversational, closer to poetry, than Montaigne's, but in this essay, Emerson wants his words to bleed, and he is conscious that Montaigne has experienced the deaths of children and his dearest friend, Étienne de La Boétie. Boétie is relevant to Emerson's concerns in a second respect, as the author of the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, which takes a stand on political authority that is closer to Thoreau's defense of civil disobedience than to Montaigne's defense of deference to rulers.<sup>16</sup> Emerson's view of political authority, which is indebted to Boétie's *Discourse*, is enunciated succinctly in "Politics" (the seventh chapter of *Essays: Second Series*): "Every actual State is corrupt. Good men must not obey the laws too well."<sup>17</sup> "Experience" is hard to parse or assess properly unless one first recognizes that it responds to Montaigne's skepticism about ecstatic states, his reflections on solitude and the melancholic temperament, his religious orthodoxy, and his political conservatism.

§18 returns to the subjectivism Emerson associates with post-Kantian Romanticism. The Kantian turn to the subject is the "Fall of Man," after which our innocence about the influence of subjectivity on our experiences is forever lost. But even this paragraph counters solipsistic despair with the assertion that "The subject is the receiver of Godhead, and at every comparison must feel his being enhanced by that cryptic might." §19, though mainly skeptical, includes a deliciously multivalent counter-claim: "Every day, every act betrays the ill-concealed deity," which implies that every finite human act not only shows some degree of disloyalty to the deity, but also reveals, to those with the eyes to see, the deity's creative, destructive, and gracious power.

§20 gives advice about how one can avoid being diminished by encounter with a great man, the implication being that great men exist and that their influence on us can be beneficially transformative if we adopt the right attitude toward them. After acknowledging "our constitutional necessity of seeing things under private aspects, or saturated with our humors," §21 first asserts that God is "the native of these bleak rocks" and then advises readers to find the deity by alternating between "sallies of action" and possessing "our axis more firmly" in moments of solitude. Alternating in this way is healthier than losing oneself entirely in action or withdrawing permanently into solitude. The essay's concluding section begins in §23 and ends with §25's movement from solitude to ideal-infused action.

The impression that the only *arguments* in "Experience" are cautionary and skeptical is partly caused by Emerson's decision to obscure the essay's structure. The essay begins in a mood of disorientation: "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake

and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs below us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight." The speaker withholds orienting clues until the final paragraph, which is itself remarkable for its disorienting swerves. As many commentators have noted, the lords of life of the prefatory poem bear different names from the lords of life discussed in the body of the essay. Most importantly, what the poem calls "spectral Wrong" is not overtly mentioned thereafter. Nothing of this sort is accidental in an Emerson essay. He wants the reader to be asking, "What is spectral Wrong and where has the essay treated it?" I shall address those questions in §4.

One of Emerson's rhetorical principles is: No true reorientation of the reader comes without disorientation of the reader. His democratic corollary of this principle is: Never do for readers what they can do for themselves. Rather than stepping back at some point to make the design of his essay evident, Emerson, while beginning to bring his reflections to a close, remarks that he dares not assume to give "the order" of the lords of life (§23). He names them as he finds them "in his way." The ambiguity is intentional and threefold. He names the lords of life as he comes across them in his own experience. He names them as they become obstacles to his forward movement. He names them, and sometimes renames them, in his manner, in accord with his theoretical, ethical, and rhetorical ends. Emerson then says, in a line that will one day call forth the poetry of Ammons, "I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture."<sup>18</sup> A reader may be forgiven for wondering, on reaching this point in "Experience," whether Emerson has presented any picture or argument at all.

## 2. "Experience" Read Backwards

I hope to show that the essay's final paragraph unveils the ethical and political significance of his essaying as he has come to think of it in 1844. That paragraph presents a vision in which two worlds, one ideal, the other actual, are ultimately reconciled. The former is at first alienated from and then transformed into, incarnated in, apocalyptically wedded to the latter. Here is §25, divided into three strophes for ease of reference (*italics in original*):

(1) I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*. I observe that difference and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy.

(2) But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought. Many eager persons successively make an experiment in this way, and make themselves ridiculous. They acquire democratic manners, they foam at the mouth, they hate and deny. Worse, I observe, that, in the history of mankind, there is never a solitary example of success, — taking their own tests of success. I say this polemically, or in reply to the inquiry, why not realize your world?

(3) But far be from me the despair which prejudices the law by a paltry empiricism, — since there never was a right endeavor, but it succeeded. Patience and patience, we shall win at the last. We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life. We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations, which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart! — it seems to say, — there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.

The first and last sentences are among the most familiar that Emerson left us. But what do they mean? The transformation heralded in the last sentence seems excluded by the first. But if it is, what are we supposed to do with the contradiction? And if it isn't, how might the two thoughts be reconciled? I take it that Emerson has crafted his essay so as to leave us with these questions and thus with the task of answering them for ourselves. The essay demands a self-reliant reader, alert to textual detail and willing to ponder the ambiguities and questions it discloses. Our essayist's wager is that if we identify with the sense of disorientation evoked in ¶1 and are inspired by the vision expressed in ¶25, we will be moved to *turn around* and retrace our steps through the considerations he has made available to us. By doing so, he hopes, we will make those considerations our own and determine for ourselves whether the essay has earned the uplift of its conclusion. Those considerations look different when approached, so to speak, from behind, in light of the question, "What reasons has the speaker given us, along the way, for *this* conclusion?"

The final paragraph changes direction at the two points where Emerson uses the word "But" to begin a sentence, and then again with the "but" that appears midway through the penultimate sentence. That sentence links the terms "solitude," "returning," "sanity," and "revelations," the last of which alludes to the Apocalypse of St. John. The second strophe initially appears to say why the world of thought, associated with genius in the third strophe, cannot be realized in practice. Yet one theme of the essay, one of its cautionary lessons of experience, is that appearances can deceive us. This lesson applies to Emerson's rhetoric in "Experience." Emerson has carefully left open a possibility, to which he does not draw attention, that the world contemplated in thought by someone gifted with genius can be realized in practice after all.

The second strophe rules out *manipular* attempts to realize the world of thought. ***The possibility silently left open is that realization of the world of thought will come, but not as the fruit of manipular reform.*** The suspicions of the second strophe are in tension with the hopefulness of the third ***only if*** a realization



of the world of thought *need be* manipular. If, however, realization of the world of thought can come in some other way, the apparent contradiction of the final paragraph dissolves. What instruction, then, does “Experience” offer on the nature of manipular reform? What does Emerson tell us about the difference between manipular reform and the sort of transformation he endorses? These are two of several crucial questions raised by the essay’s ending. I shall be returning to them in §§4 and 8.

To seek answers to the various questions that emerge in the concluding paragraph is to read the essay backwards. Emerson wants us to read it in this way, to undertake our own labor of reorientation in response to an experience of disorientation followed by an apocalyptic vision. That is how he expected his similarly disorienting first book *Nature* to be read.<sup>19</sup> And most of his New England contemporaries thought the Bible needed to be read in that way. He now has somewhat different revelations in mind, but they do bear on a “great city . . . descending out of heaven” (Revelation 21:10). Emerson’s new Jerusalem descends, in the final sentence of “Experience,” from the world he thinks to the world he sees around him. It is not enough to imagine an idealized world. One must also imagine the idealized world brought down to earth, made one with earthly practices. The imagined ideal must be transformed into practical power.

To read the essay in reverse, in light of how it ends, requires attending to the hope expressed at the end of the first strophe, the hope of coming to know the “value and law” of the discrepancy between the world a self-reliant thinker thinks and the world he sees in the cities and farms. This latter world is the world of conformity. “Be not conformed to this world,” says St. Paul, “but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” Ethically, the contrast between the two worlds is that between identifying with one’s established self, thus remaining mired in conformity, and identifying with a potentially beneficial process of transformation. “The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion,” Emerson had written in 1841. By alluding in this way to Romans 12:2, the essay “Self-Reliance” identifies conformity to the world and spiritual transformation as the principal topics examined in *Essays: First Series*.<sup>20</sup>

“Experience” is the parallel chapter in *Essays: Second Series*. Its final paragraph not only makes mention of revelations; it also begins and ends by alluding to Romans 12:2. The law of discrepancy between the two worlds, in the normative sense of *law*, is the commandment to be transformed. The first demand of that calling, for the readers of “Experience,” is to turn away from conformity. The law of discrepancy between the two worlds, in the explanatory sense of *law*, would explain how conformity blocks transformation and how the blockage can be overcome. The value of the discrepancy is the good that comes to self and society by way of such transformation. When Emerson speaks of power, as in the third strophe’s phrase “practical power,” he nearly always means the capacity to transform. The reason that Emerson expects to go on observing the discrepancy,

despite his hope for transformation, is that he regards the need for transformation as perpetual. We are always in the process of falling anew into conformity and being called out of it. We are constantly passing into new worlds. Those worlds are brought about by transformative power. Something, some power, call it *genius*, transforms the agent into someone with transformative capacity. When that capacity is realized, genius is transformed into life-transforming, perhaps society-transforming, action.

These are all things Emerson takes to be knowable on the basis of experience, despite the various doubts about experiential knowledge he considers elsewhere in the essay. The doubts center on post-Kantian idealism in ¶¶1-7 and on multiple forms of skepticism in 18-22. They center on the lessons of practical experience in ¶¶8-17. Throughout these sections of the essay, Emerson seeks to take the doubts with utmost seriousness while showing how and why to transcend the “paltry empiricism” that gives rise to them. Paltry empiricism takes an excessively restrictive or biased view of what can be known on the basis of experience. Experience edifies when we learn to think of it on the model of advancing in mastery of an art and realize that the imagination is among the powers that move history forward. Let me now suggest how the arguments pertaining to idealism look when viewed from the perspective of ¶25.

### 3. Idealism, Coleridge, and Consolation

As many scholars have pointed out, Emerson’s transcendentalism modifies Coleridge’s selective appropriation of Kant and of the German Romantics.<sup>21</sup> One of the senses of *experience* Emerson is grappling with in the essay “Experience” is determined by the use of that term in post-Kantian idealism. One of idealism’s benefits, Kant thought, is to overcome the essentially skeptical implications that Hume had derived from the assumptions a paltry empiricism makes about experience. For the empiricist, experience is the supposedly unmediated foundation of whatever knowledge we take ourselves to have of our bodies, other people, the laws of nature, nature’s God, and what we ought to do. Hume demonstrated, to the consternation of the young Emerson and other Unitarian ministers in his circle, that the proposed foundation could not support the associated knowledge claims. Coleridge, to Emerson’s relief, claimed to find in Kant’s idealism an antidote to Hume’s skepticism.

Idealism, as Kant conceived of it, takes experience as something we know we have and inquires reflectively into the conditions of its possibility. Kant’s transcendental method had advanced beyond Hume, according to Coleridge, by showing that sensory experience is mediated by the categories of the *understanding* and synthesized by the *imagination*. As Emerson restates the point in ¶18, “We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately.” The human subject brings its own spontaneity to bear on the deliverances of the sensibility, with the fortunate result, from Kant’s perspective, that we are actually able to know the phenomena we experience. Reason is a distinct faculty from the understanding and superior to it.

The interminable disputes of pre-critical (“transcendent”) metaphysics are, however, the result of applying reason to questions for which it is intrinsically unsuited, such as what physical objects or God are in themselves. Reason must therefore limit itself to the *transcendental* task of reflective self-inventory, which means eschewing the pseudo-science of *transcendent* metaphysics. Reason must no longer presume to claim knowledge of supersensible reality.

For Coleridge and his favorite post-Kantian German Romantics, this form of idealism had purchased its advance beyond Hume at too great a price. The next step forward was to accept Kant’s distinction between reason and the understanding while integrating his conceptions of reason and the imagination. By failing to identify reason more explicitly with the imagination, at least in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had been too restrictive in his claims about what reason can responsibly claim to know. In its speculative employments, according to Romantic idealists, reason *qua* imagination is indeed capable of intuiting religious and spiritual truths of great importance, truths evident to the inquiring spirit when it looks within, truths that, according to Coleridge, have the power to join seeming opposites and reconcile apparent contradictions. When Emerson employs the Romantic category of *genius*, he is expressing allegiance to the upgraded conception of reason’s capacities that he took over from Coleridge. The final strophe of ¶25 proclaims the very sort of transformative reconciliation that Coleridge attributes to the imagination’s powers.

However, Emerson resisted Coleridge’s use of these Romantic conceptions to defend Christian orthodoxy as essential to the formation of ethically and spiritually upright character. When Emerson says, in ¶7 of “Experience,” that “the definition of spiritual should be, that which is its own evidence,” he is endorsing Coleridge’s revision of Kant. But in ¶18, when Emerson, after declaring that “the eye makes the horizon,” infers that Jesus is a good example of a figure on whom “many people are agreed that these optical laws shall take effect,” he is distancing himself sharply from Coleridge’s orthodoxy and opening a path that leads to Nietzsche, Yeats, Dewey, Santayana, and Stan Brakhage.<sup>22</sup> Emerson continues: “By love on one part, and by forbearance to press objection on the other part, it is for a time settled, that we will look at [Jesus] in the centre of the horizon, and ascribe to him the properties that will attach to any man so seen. But the longest love or aversion has a speedy term.”

Emerson has no objection to admiration of Jesus, provided that it doesn’t deteriorate into what “The Divinity School Address” describes as “noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> The divinity, Emerson insists to the consternation of his Trinitarian and Unitarian contemporaries, is neither three persons nor one person, but no person at all. Jesus the person is someone so well attuned to the impersonal divine that his life and teachings quite rightly exercised transformative influence over his early followers. When he addresses God as a person, this is to be regarded as a trope. The disciples’ admiration for him became idolatrous insofar as it focused on his person rather than on the divine,

transformative power that had made his person what it was. The “forbearance to press objection” that helped to keep Jesus in the center of the horizon throughout Christendom involved a largely unconscious repression of whatever doubts arose in the minds of believers.<sup>24</sup> What Emerson is saying here amounts to a theory of religious idolatry – a nonreductive theory, because he holds that while the religious impulse *tends* toward idolatry, it is not *essentially* idolatrous. Early Christianity is Emerson’s primary example of an epochal spiritual transformation. But he emphasizes that there are many others, all of which involve representative figures who are loved, treated as examples of something ideal, imitated, and protected from criticism. All such representative figures at some point yield their central position to others.

Emerson treats the vocabularies, symbols, rituals, and doctrines associated with all religions and spiritually regenerative movements as products of poetic imagination or intuitive reason. They are likely to be beneficial, as a deepening of spiritual life, mainly at the moment of their creation, when their genius, their imaginative capacity, is initially being actualized in practical power. The longer they last, the more they tend to ossify. (When this idea reaches Weber, after having been filtered through Nietzsche, it becomes *the routinization of charisma*. The main difference is that Weber’s sociology of religion aims to be value-free, whereas Emerson’s is value-committed.) One thing that experience teaches, Emerson thinks, is that the process of spiritual regeneration and ossification will continue, which is why he regards Coleridge’s orthodoxy and Boston’s Unitarianism alike as hopeless and spiritually retarding holding actions.

From Emerson’s point of view, it is not accidental that *established* Christianity is retarding the transformation of genius into practical power. That is what all religious establishments do. They rigidify rites, close canons, create hierarchies, declare the age of prophecy past, venerate the saintly dead, idolize the personalities of founders, repress potentially unsettling thoughts, and disparage contemporary forms of ecstasy – all at the expense of the living, revivifying imagination. From Coleridge’s point of view, Emerson has succumbed to the same pantheistic and Montanist heresies from which Wordsworth had had to be dissuaded.<sup>25</sup> From Emerson’s point of view, Coleridge has succumbed to the temptations of religious conformity.

Emerson is also conversing with Coleridge on the topics of grief, despondency, and consolation. In ¶21, Emerson refers to his life as “so far mournful,” alluding to the deaths of his first wife and true love Ellen, his brothers Edward and Charles, and finally, two and a half years before the publication of “Experience,” his five-year-old son Waldo. One of Emerson’s Romantic means of coping with these losses was a sort of withdrawal into his imagination that led, in the first three instances, to effusions of authorial productivity. He took special solace from meditating on Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode.

In the case of little Waldo's death, however, Emerson came to think of this coping strategy as overly successful in its tranquilizing, solipsistic effects, which is why he complains that the "Genius" has mixed his cup of lethe "too strongly" (§1) and that his grief leaves him out of touch with "reality" (§3). His remark that "Grief too will make us idealists" implies that he now associates idealism with a lamentable failure to connect with the world. In §18, he associates the "Fall of Man" with the Kantian idealist's realization "that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses" of ours. After discovering that all experience is mediated, we forever "suspect our instruments." With respect to the topic of experience, Emerson now considers Kantian idealism no less skeptical in its implications than Hume's empiricism had been. These are the same conclusions Hegel reaches in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. By the time Emerson wrote "Experience," he was familiar with Hegel only through the writings of Victor Cousin. The uncanny similarities between Hegel's book and Emerson's essay must be explained, it seems, as the effects of two discerning students of post-Kantian philosophy pressing independently on the same weaknesses in the poetry, philosophy, and theology that was formative for them.

Why is Kant ultimately as skeptical as Hume with regard to experience? Because idealism's way of turning to the subject disconnects the world I think, the inner world of imagination, from the world I see around me. This is especially disconcerting for Emerson when his muse falls silent after little Waldo's death, as symbolized to Emerson by his inability to complete the elegy for Waldo that eventually becomes "Threnody." To write an elegy, one needs to supplement the mournful stanzas with consoling stanzas that actually carry conviction. For a good while, Emerson has the former stanzas drafted, but cannot write a satisfying version of the latter. What was once a paradise within, happier far, now appears to be mere estrangement from the world.

The discovery that experience is mediated by the understanding and the imagination turns all too easily into suspicion of one's instruments – and thus into a sense of "illusion" or "subjectiveness." What Kant scholars call the two-worlds problem is, for the speaker in "Experience," the spiritual problem of the mournful subject's alienation from everything that is coming into being and passing out of being, living and dying, in the world around him. "Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is reality that will not dodge us" (§3).

He is ready for the passing of the self who coped with loss in his old way. "I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West" (§16). There is a journal entry in which Emerson writes: "Self dies & dies perpetually."<sup>26</sup> In a lifetime, one passes through many deaths, many rebirths, many selves. But *into what* is Emerson ready to be reborn in §16 of "Experience"? What is this new America he has found in the West? In what sense is it unapproachable?

It is, first of all, a place, a new world into which he passes physically on his Western trips. It is not a purely inner world, but a place. St. Paul refers to God as dwelling in an “unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16). The prefatory poem in “Experience” refers to God as “the inventor of the game / Omnipresent without name.” The light in which God dwells is omnipresent. It is not reachable by an effort of will. Try as he might, and try he has, he cannot reach it by grasping for it, and must await, and then gratefully receive, its gracious presenting of itself to him in the very place where he is. Emerson has already stood in this light. He has caught glimpses of an American future that is already present in its intimations.

Emerson continues: “I should feel it pitiful to demand a result on this town and county, an overt effect on the instant month and year. The effect is deep and secular as the cause. It works on periods in which mortal lifetime is lost. All I know is reception; I am and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not” (§23). By “pitiful,” he may mean both pitiable and compassionate. “Secular” causes and effects are outside the regulatory authority of the church. In a less familiar sense of “secular,” these causes pertain to the world in this age, in which intimations of the next age are already present. Emerson’s contrast between *having* something one has received and *getting* it places initiation of the most important spiritual processes beyond the individual’s will.<sup>27</sup>

To put the point in more traditional language: the process of *sanctification* or *deification* is initiated by *divine grace*, a transformative power capable of reorienting the will, of causing it to turn away from worldly conformity and toward the (impersonal) source of grace. This is a matter of entering into the new world into which we are passing, which is in the very place where the cities and farms are, only seen in a new light. What falls to us, as individuals, is the task of coming to identify with and participate in our spiritual transformation, which turns out to be a private, but not merely private, fruit of accepting an undeserved gift. “The merit itself, so-called, I reckon part of the receiving” (§23). Three chapters later in *Essays: Second Series* comes a slim chapter called “Gifts,” one thesis of which is: “The best of hospitality and of generosity is . . . not in the will, but in fate.”<sup>28</sup>

#### **4. Spectral Wrong: Ideals and Material Reality as Discrepant Worlds**

Emerson is aware that his responses to loss, early and late, can be explained from a third-person perspective as effects of his temperament. He is naturally disposed to respond coolly to what transpires around him, to seek solitude, to retreat within when faced with pain or loss. He may even be constitutionally disposed, when confronted with the death of his first-born child, to experience the loss with a lethargic grieving over his inability to grieve. Idealists prefer to think of themselves as moved by the highest things, by pure ideas and ideals, but the happy and sad manifestations of their idealism can also be described as moods, as inner states caused by the interaction of temperament with external circumstances.

Take this sort of explanation far enough and you arrive at materialism, a lord of life that presents itself as idealism's debunking opposite. Idealism and materialism define themselves over against one another, and thus appear to be joined rather more closely than they might prefer. The one takes authoritativeness to be located solely on the subject side of the subject-object dichotomy, while the other takes it to be located solely on the object side of the same dichotomy. Here we have another uncanny parallel to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, for Emerson is, in effect, retracing the series of these one-sided forms of consciousness as they have appeared, while preparing the way for an ending in which *spirit* melds its subjective and objective moments by infusing material practice with ideals. The *true romance* thus realized is the errant path, the "forbidding way," of the wandering adventurer who must be lost, disoriented, before being saved.<sup>29</sup>

From the perspective of the essay's final paragraph, the inner world of the idealist and the outer world in which materialism holds sway *are*, respectively, the world Emerson thinks and the world he sees in the cities and farms. He has himself personified the alienated idealist's conscience or beautiful soul. His ideals have been a mere ought, related to the world he sees around him in a way that falls radically short of *being realized* in that world. When, in the second strophe, he is challenged with the query, "why not realize your world," he can at first only answer "polemically," which is to say, in a way that reinforces the separation of the two worlds. Now, however, the world he sees around him is revealed as the joint product of *the opposed commitments embodied there*: the materialist's commitment to explaining all idealized motivations away and the idealist's commitment to essentially subjective ideals that could never, on the idealist's own terms, be actualized.

Dissatisfaction with this result is Emerson's reason for transmuting idealism's problem of subjective and objective worlds into St. Paul's problem of conformity and transformation. To remain in the alienated stance of mere idealism is itself, in Emerson's current view, *to be caught up in conformity to the untransformed world*. It is to reinforce that world by playing the part of the materialist's perfectly innocuous, perfectly ineffectual opposite number. The transformation of genius into practical power is the overcoming, on the part of the erstwhile withdrawn idealist, of mere idealism.<sup>30</sup>

If I am right about all this, the final paragraph of "Experience" has everything to do with Emerson's public embrace of abolitionism shortly before the essay's publication, and I hope to explain in a few moments what he is saying about the dangers and possibilities of that movement. The prior step is to call attention to a few rhetorical details in his treatment of materialism, details meant, I believe, to associate materialism with slavery and thus with spectral wrong.

Emerson takes two opportunities in ¶7 to slip a subtle reference to slavery into his discussion of temperament, as if he meant to tag the concept's political significance. First, again like Hegel, Emerson presents phrenology (the

pseudoscience purporting to correlate skull shapes with psychology) as a damning example of materialist reductionism. He refers to phrenologists as “theoretic kidnappers and slave-drivers,” thus drawing attention to their role in the debate over slavery. A few sentences later, after granting that temperament plays some causal role in human life, he associates the received forms of temperament theory with chains: “On its own level, or in view of nature, temperament is final. I see not, if one be once caught in this trap of so-called sciences, any escape for the man from the links of the chain of physical necessity.” A materialist who treats temperament as a lord of life (and appeals to the temperament of a race in justifying the enslavement of that race) has actually placed his own spirit in chains.

Earlier, I had suggested that the prefatory poem’s reference to spectral wrong as one of the lords of life raises the question of where Emerson’s discussion of this lord of life is to be found. The poem says, “spectral Wrong, / Temperament without a tongue,” thus leaving open the possibility that “Temperament” and “spectral Wrong” are two names for the same lord of life. The category of temperament is the theoretical lynchpin of reductive materialism, as Emerson describes and excoriates it in ¶¶5-7. It is also, of course, the theoretical lynchpin of race theory, as Enlightenment and Romantic intellectuals had developed it. Emerson has chosen his synecdoche for materialism carefully. He is not himself temperamentally disposed to endorse materialism, but is temperamentally disposed to hold his tongue in public on the need to take concerted action to abolish the great wrong of slavery. His temperament, in its unregenerate condition as a publicly mute, beautiful soul, rationalizes his complicity in the material actualities of slavery. Perhaps he now wonders whether he has been confusing his temperament with his calling.

In ¶23, Emerson has an imaginary objector ask, “where is the fruit?” The question would be especially poignant if taken, metaphorically, to mean: Where is Waldo?<sup>31</sup> For then Emerson’s response, that he finds “a private fruit sufficient,” becomes a confession that he would be happy simply to have Waldo back, or at least to find a more satisfying way of mourning him. If the question were taken to be about the fruit of Emerson’s work as a maker of poems, his answer in 1844 would surely be that knowing how to complete “Threnody” would suffice to make him happy.

But Emerson is mainly responding to the public’s doubts about his vocation. Many abolitionists, some of them in his own family, want him to account for how he spends his time as a writer of essays that avoid taking stands on the great issues of the day. The objector is asking what he imagines coming of an essay like “Experience.” The transformation of Emerson’s genius into the practical power of writing could be called a private fruit when viewed as a resolution of his personal crisis. Another private fruit, perhaps a sufficient one, would be that of a single reader beginning the process of spiritual transformation for which Emerson hopes to serve as midwife. An essay might reach many readers, but it addresses them in their solitude, one-to-one, whispering in their ears, most often in the privacy of their



homes, where they do their reading. This is the task Emerson attends to, the task he wants to get right, the task away from which he will not be lured. His counsel to himself is always: *Complete this task, the task for which your talents suit you, and let the chips fall where they may. You cannot know where all this will lead.*

If more comes of his essays than that, something more publicly beneficial in significance, the fruit would be *more than* sufficient, as well as more than welcome. But whatever that additional benefit might be, it must not be sought directly, as the crow flies or as the propagandist speaks, in a manner that bypasses or dishonors the sort of personal address an essayist takes on as a vocational duty. In the second strophe of ¶25, Emerson is still responding to the imaginary objector polemically, in effect by saying – a tad too defensively, he realizes – that he prefers not to make himself ridiculous.

A ranting *essayist* would indeed be ridiculous. Foaming at the mouth is not what essayists do. The ranter's most salient vice is either hypocrisy or cant.<sup>32</sup> An excellent essay resists the temptations associated with these vices. Hypocrisy is Emerson's worry about himself when he examines the tensions between his own daily complicities in domination – he uses sugar, employs servants – and what he says as a lecturer or writes as an essayist and poet.<sup>33</sup> The hypocrite's rant is ridiculous because it exposes the incongruity between the speech and life of the ranter. The result is ethically deficient but also rhetorically so. Anyone not already in the choir can observe the incongruity and will be disposed to laugh at it, rather than feeling the force of the speaker's reasons. In Aristotelian terms, the *ethos* of the speaker undermines the persuasive power of the speech.

Cant takes some worthy moral sentiment one actually feels, such as disgust at slavery, and then expresses it in a manner that implicitly puffs up the speaker as the very good person who feels this passion so strongly. In Hazlitt's apt formulation, "Cant is the voluntary overcharging or prolongation of a real sentiment."<sup>34</sup> Cant, Emerson thinks, is a song-like speech act that serves to unite the already-persuaded members of the audience ritually in a feeling of self-satisfaction. The implicit message is: *We are the decent ones, you and I. Isn't it good of us to condemn this evil in which we have no part?* The unconsciously desired effect is that of taking pleasure and pride in one's outrage. Again, this is something that the not-yet-persuaded members of the audience not only see but also find ridiculous. The canter, like the hypocrite, has a rhetorical as well as an ethical deficiency.

Emerson's essays offer fraternal correction to such people, in the hope that they can acquire the virtues of their callings as speakers, writers, and reformers participating in a great transformation. Canters need to learn how to adjust their speech to the true purposes of reform. Hypocrites need to work harder at getting their lives in order, so that justified hatred of one wrong is not their only salient virtue. Otherwise, their speech will be laughed at and deserve to be laughed at. They will be giving the unconverted an excuse to stay out of the movement or to oppose it. Yet Emerson is in other contexts prepared to see hypocrisy as a step on

the stairway toward virtue, which is why his fraternal correction of the ranting reformers is hopeful.<sup>35</sup> I shall return to the question of what good can come from an essay. What matters at the moment is that an essay's fruit, if the fruit is to be any good at all, needs to be the fruit of *an essay*, which is more like a reflective letter to a friend, or an epistle, than it is like a campaign speech or a position paper.

In the end, immediately after speaking of returning to himself in solitude and hinting at revelations whispered to him there, Emerson reports that his muse seems to have advised him to ignore all ridicule and commit himself to the victory of "all justice." Such a victory would hardly be a merely private matter. Surely, a victory for *all* justice would entail abolition of slavery. Why doesn't Emerson just say so?

One reason is that he wants his readers to draw the conclusion for themselves. "A little guessing does [the reader] no harm, so I would assist him with no connections," Emerson once said.<sup>36</sup> In "The American Scholar," he tells us what burden he is placing on us, which he calls "creative reading": "When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant."<sup>37</sup> He doesn't care, or doesn't want to care, whether readers hold him in contempt for withholding an endorsement of abolitionism from an essay like "Experience."

The point of adopting an elliptically essayistic style is to seduce readers into participating in the construction of an argument or narrative, just as the point of an allusive style is to involve readers in the active reconstruction of their relationship to a received tradition of texts. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* advises orators to employ enthymemes, syllogisms with missing premises. When the auditor supplies the premise for himself, the oration becomes more powerful. Emerson's style in "Experience" carries this rhetorical stratagem to its limit. There is nothing in an argument or among its most important implications that he will not elide in the interest of persuasive power. The cost, of course, is to risk leaving all but the most alert, self-reliant readers utterly befuddled by, or even fundamentally mistaken about, what he is doing. This cost he pays willingly, even gladly.

The ranting reformers are manipular as well prone to cant and hypocrisy. They take a particular evil, such as slavery, as their occasion, adopt particular changes in practice or arrangements as their end, and treat the means to that end as mere instruments for achieving it. Manipular reformers are instrumentalists. The lord of life to which they bow down is what Emerson calls "Use" in the prefatory poem. Philosophers call it *utility*. (The moral philosophy that reduces rightness to Use is utilitarianism. A philosopher who extends this approach to epistemology and political theory may be called a *manipular pragmatist*.) Like all action, in Emerson's view, manipular reform expresses the character of the agent, betraying more of the doer than the doer typically knows. "Human character evermore publishes itself," Emerson writes in "Spiritual Laws." "The most fugitive deed and word, the mere air of doing a thing, the intimated purpose, expresses character. If you act, you show character; if you sit still, if you sleep, you show it."<sup>38</sup> The manipular reformer

manipulates, thereby revealing his manipulative character. That other people enter into his plans as mere means exposes a defect in his character, a defect opposed to respect for democratic individuality. Instrumentalism, according to Emerson, is largely what ails society. Its therapies make things worse.

When Emerson refers in ¶15 of “Experience” to “perfect calculation,” he is identifying an ideal of practical reason that acquires its authority from what he had, two paragraphs earlier, termed the “mid-world.” This is where “life appears so plain a business, that manly resolution and adherence to the multiplication-table through all weathers, will insure success.” Coleridge employs the image of the “multiplication table” pejoratively in his preliminary remarks to the “Aphorisms of Spiritual Religion” in *Aids to Reflection*.<sup>39</sup> As Emerson sees it, when instrumental reasoning is extended beyond the mid-world of planting, shopping, and investing to the realm of ethical and political transformation, its calculations prove faulty. This is why there are no examples of success for the enterprise of manipular reform, as judged by its own utilitarian tests.

The utopian experiment of Brook Farm, referred to in “Experience” as “Education-Farm”, was a manifest failure. This is surely one of the farms Emerson has in mind in the first strophe of ¶25. I doubt that he regards it as an instance of manipular reform. He describes it as a place where “the noblest theory of life sat on the noblest figures of young men and maidens, quite powerless and melancholy” (¶11). Presumably, the lives of those young people were meant to embody the theory of life that led to the founding of Brook Farm. Had the theory been embodied in those lives, perhaps genius would have been transformed into world-transforming power. Instead, that theory sat on the young people; it oppressed them. The farm’s way of life was supposed to exemplify *being the change* that the founders were calling for, rather than being a mere instrument for attaining a goal distinct from the way of life itself. Emerson commends *being the change* entailed by noble ideals, but he does not think that Brook Farm succeeded in this. The attempt to remove oneself from the world cannot succeed, first, because the old complicities remain, acknowledged or not, and, second, because one cannot transform the world by separating oneself from it.

“But ah!” Emerson adds in ¶15, “presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering, — which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years!” So *there are* great transformations. A historical example is the emergence of Christianity, which Emerson treats in ¶18. We know from this and many other examples not only that life *can* and *does* change dramatically, and on a scale much grander than that being attempted ineffectually at Brook Farm, but also that all big changes are “uncalculated and uncalculable,” as he puts it in ¶15. Individuals “design and execute many things.” What “comes of it all,” however, is “an unlooked for result,” which is “very unlike” what any of them “promised” themselves.

Emerson is putting a hopeful Romantic twist on a tendency most thinkers have viewed in a more tragic light. His claim is that the most valuable forms of

change, at the social-historical level as well as at the personal level, tend to be *unanticipated byproducts of intentional action* rather than something as simple as a *fulfilled plan*.<sup>40</sup> There is a strong sense in which the creators of Christendom, the Protestant Reformation, Renaissance literature, natural science, a post-feudal economy, and the American republic did not know what they were doing, let alone what the doing did. Whatever Columbus set out to discover, it wasn't the world Emerson sees in the cities and farms of the Atlantic coast. Shakespeare did not set out to be *Shakespeare*. He just heeded his muse and stuck to his calling.

## 5. Intuition and Its Discontents

The whispering angel is one of Emerson's poetic images for the beneficially transformative power that individuals can receive when opening themselves to thoughts arising from an inner, intuitive source deeper than will. His personifications of the source also include "muse," "genius," and "Creator." When speaking philosophically, he explicitly denies that the source should be conceived as a person and speaks instead of the soul or Over-soul, which he does not hesitate to describe as divine.<sup>41</sup> Two pressing questions for latter-day readers like me, who find his metaphysics unbelievable and his use of the term *divinity* a standing invitation to self-deception, are whether and how his theory of the imagination's role in personal and social transformation might be disentangled from its more dubious Romantic trappings. Emerson's modernist and pragmatist heirs – such as Nietzsche, James, Dewey, Santayana, Stein, Stevens, Rorty, Cavell, Ammons, Kateb, and Cameron – have placed these two questions in the center of the post-Romantic horizon.

Tuning in to the inner source of creative and spiritual intuition involves what the third strophe of ¶25 calls "solitude" and "returning." Returning is what the self does when coming back to the inner source, "after the sallies of action, [to] possess our axis more firmly" (¶21). Self-reliance, as the self-consciously cultivated habit of resisting conformity, clears the way for reception of the intuitive deliverances of the imagination. The imagination is one of several faculties that receive intuitions, the others being memory, sensory perception, and conscience. Unlike perception, which Emerson regards as essentially mediated, the imagination is taken to be essentially unmediated.

Because he believes that its genuine deliverances are "revelations" of a common mind or soul to which all human beings have access, Emerson is persuaded, at the time he writes *Nature* (eight years before "Experience"), that returning to his solitude in the right spirit is *the privileged way* of connecting at the deepest level with what *every other individual who executes a similar return in the same spirit will also intuit*. His reflections on temperament in "Experience" show that he is having doubts about his belief in intuitive spiritual commonality. While he rejects the reductive materialism of temperament theory, he suspects that differences in temperament, upbringing, and experience among individuals might go somewhat deeper than he had previously imagined. The reasons he gives for

qualifying or rejecting his doubts about intuitive spiritual commonality have struck his many of his modernist and pragmatist heirs as specious.

Richard Rorty will serve as an instructive example of such an heir.<sup>42</sup> He wants to reconstruct something like Emerson's imagination-centered account of cultural transformation while dropping Emerson's faculty psychology and, in particular, his claim that intuitive reason (one of Emerson's names for the imagination) provides privileged access to spiritual truths. Rorty follows Hegel in charging Romanticism in general, and thus Emerson by implication, with conflating two senses of immediacy or givenness: the plausible notion that imaginative intuitions are noninferential and the dubious notion that they are pre-conceptual and thus innocent of cultural conditioning. Dewey takes this charge over from Hegel, though he doesn't have a very firm grip on it. Rorty, having read Wilfrid Sellars,<sup>43</sup> draws the distinction more precisely (when he cares to be precise),<sup>44</sup> and puts it to work in an account of transformation.<sup>45</sup> Let me now try to state concisely how that account departs from and yet remains indebted to Emerson.

Everyone relies on imaginative intuitions when reflecting on how to live. Ethical or spiritual intuitions are determined in part by the temperament, linguistic training, and experiences of a culturally situated individual. These intuitions are not privileged or universal but contingent and socially constituted. Suppose Emerson was wrong to think that they put us in contact with the Over-soul. He could still be right to claim that they play a pivotal role in both personal and cultural transformation. Personal transformations arise for the sorts of reasons Freud dragged out of the dark. Cultural transformations arise whenever intuitions officially regarded as deviant and uncooperative begin to be widely recognized as sound. Orators, poets, novelists, visual artists, consciousness-raising groups (such as the Transcendentalists), and new media of communication (such as the public lecture or *The Dial*) can, with luck, change what counts as a sound intuition or legitimate reason.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, a new paradigm of the reasonable, socially cooperative person begins to take hold in society at large. In times of large-scale change, what a reasonable person looks like and how cooperative he or she needs to be are inevitably going to be contested questions.<sup>47</sup>

This account is interesting and instructive, as far as it goes. One thing that is obviously missing from it is a story about the roles of organizational and institutional power in large-scale social change, a topic I take up in *Blessed Are the Organized*.<sup>48</sup> Emerson has little to say about organizations and institutions, so I won't say more about them here. He does go much further than Rorty does, however, in trying to explain how transformation works and what the impediments to it are. His name for the main impediment is conformity, a topic that holds a position in his outlook analogous to the position of ideology in Marx's. (The only thing in Rorty's account of cultural transformation analogous to ideology critique is his ironic commentary on modern philosophy.) Emerson's critique of conformism shows that he is much less sanguine than Rorty is about the status of intuitions in normalized ethical and political discourse.

Rorty and Emerson agree that the established culture generates *most* of our intuitions, but Emerson appears to find this thought more worrisome than Rorty does. Emerson holds that the established culture is corrupted by the selfishness, narrowness, and other vices of the people who inhabit it. The vices of our elders and peers helped determine what we have come to see as intuitively true, right, or good. Many of our intuitions are therefore likely to be distorted. Self-reliance is the remedy Emerson prescribes for this deficiency. It is neither a sweeping anti-authoritarianism, nor a generalized rejection of tradition.

By the time we reach late adolescence, according to Emerson, we find ourselves more or less thoroughly acculturated. What brings us to this point is a long process of instinctively imitating our elders and peers and being repeatedly corrected by them. Our intuitions – including those about what is *obviously* the case and those about what reasons *any reasonable person* would *reasonably* accept – have taken shape.<sup>49</sup> We would not be better off without a language or an upbringing, of course, because then we would be ignorant and otherwise ill equipped for various activities we value. But to remain in the sleepy spiritual condition of conformity is to fail to take responsibility for one's own commitments and actions. In conformity, the established self simply follows the habits put in place by acculturation, while repressing thoughts and ignoring forms of excellence that challenge socially approved dispositions and identities.

Self-reliance is exercising responsibility for oneself, on behalf of oneself and others, beyond the confines of mere conformity. Emerson grants that his name for it is inadequate.<sup>50</sup> In practice, what he calls self-reliance does not involve relying on or realizing a given self. It does involve opening oneself to the possibility that unauthorized thoughts, till now repressed, might deserve to be regarded as true, liberating, creative, or otherwise excellent. The self on which Emerson wants his reader to rely is the “unattained but attainable self” that appears one step up on the ill-lit spiritual staircase or “mysterious ladder” where she finds herself.<sup>51</sup>

As a practice or discipline, self-reliance involves bringing one's repression of unauthorized thoughts to consciousness. Conformity maintains itself by generating authorized intuitions, but also by inculcating the habit of repressing unauthorized thoughts, whether they be arrived at noninferentially or not. I take this explanatory thesis to be one of Emerson's major contributions to social psychology. Self-reliance aims to illumine and destabilize the habit of conformist thought-repression. An example of a repressed thought in 1844 could be the inferential realization that slaves harvested the cotton in one's fishing net or the intuitive observation, while listening to a Frederick Douglass oration, that the speaker is intelligent. But reformers also form groups that maintain solidarity by fostering thought-repression among their members. Thus, another example of a repressed thought in 1844 could be the notion that there is hatred in what a particular abolitionist is saying about his foes. Professors form groups too. One of my repressed thoughts, until recently, was

the inkling that “Experience” is less despondent, more reasoned, and more favorably disposed toward action than the scholars say.

Kateb writes that, in Emerson’s view, “one should respect one’s involuntary perceptions and idle reveries.”<sup>52</sup> This is correct if we take it to mean that the perceptions and reveries must be respected as *potential* sources of insight. Emerson is clear that a particular unauthorized thought *might or might not* deserve to be regarded in a positive light. Intuitions at odds with the established social consensus are *not necessarily* worthy of endorsement. They might themselves, on examination, prove selfish, false, or mad.<sup>53</sup> This is why Emerson feels compelled to link the word “sanity” to the term “revelations” in the third strophe of ¶25. Some nonconformist intuitions are inherently insane or unsound. They are delusory fantasies, lacking in revelatory value. And some nonconformist intuitions, though sound in themselves, can, by dominating a person’s mind, cause him or her to become monomaniacal. These are two distinct forms of insanity or spiritual imbalance. Emerson wants to guard against both. I will come back to the second in §7 below.

The qualification made in the previous paragraph is important. It implies that Emerson’s attribution of privileged epistemic status to intuitive reason is less consequential than it initially seems. If I can be mistaken about which of my intuitions are sane, then I am not entitled to assign an intuition authoritative status simply on the basis of its phenomenal qualities. Only after taking other considerations into account am I able to determine with some certainty that a particular intuition can have intuitive reason as its source. If that is true, then the spiritual realm comprises “that which is its own evidence” in a holistic way, rather than by virtue of self-authenticating, incorrigible, revelatory episodes.

The contrast between sanity and insanity that Emerson has in mind belongs not to our regime of psychological diagnosis, but to a long tradition in which Pythagoras, the Socratic trance and *daimonion*, Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the *Io*, Aristotle’s *Problemata*, 1 Corinthians 2:9, Isaiah 64:4, Erasmus’ *In Praise of Folly*, Ficino’s baptized Plato, Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Montaigne’s *Essays* became standard points of reference. “Experience” quotes from Burton and, as we have seen, briefly mentions Montaigne. The reference to Montaigne comes immediately after a remark about insanity in ¶8.

Montaigne holds that there are ecstatic intuitive states, that they consist in the soul’s release from the body, that they are associated with the melancholic temperament, and that they lift the soul toward the divine, if sane, or reduce a human being to a mere beast, if insane. On the last of these points, Erasmus is attracted to the “scandalous” notion of *holy folly* that he finds in St. Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians. This notion implies that a kind of madness can indeed be revelatory or divine. Developing this notion is risky business for a Renaissance Catholic, because it brings Erasmus into the neighborhood of the Montanist heresy, as he realizes. One misstep and Erasmus will be officially charged with heresy and face censorship, perhaps even torture. If an ecstatic state can be both revelatory

and *incoherent*, so that the person in rapture does not know what he is saying, how is this to be distinguished from a condition in which a diabolic power plunges the soul into darkness? And who is to say what is actually going on?<sup>54</sup> The ecclesial hierarchy is worried about the first question and has a firm answer to the second.

Emerson shows awareness of these questions in "Self-Reliance," when he has an objector say: "But these impulses may be from below, not from above." Emerson, who faces the possibility ostracism but not the rack for his heterodox views, boldly replies that his impulses "do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live from the Devil."<sup>55</sup> Emerson's use of the terms "sanity" and "insanity" in "Experience" suggests a more cautious approach to the same issue. *Sane* revelations are neither holy folly, incoherent, nor diabolical. He now appears to agree with Montaigne in taking sanity to be an essential property of heightened revelatory states.

But there are several other questions addressed by Montaigne that Emerson is pondering: (a) whether revelatory ecstasy can be attained without divine assistance, (b) whether pagan ecstasy and secular poetic rapture can be revelatory, (c) whether ordinary people, as opposed to saintly ascetics, should welcome rapturous states, and (d) whether public appeals to ecstatic revelations not already authorized by the church can be beneficial to political life.<sup>56</sup> Montaigne answers no to all four questions, as does Coleridge.

Emerson agrees with Montaigne about (a), the necessity of grace, but rejects flatly negative answers to the other three questions. On (b), the issue of pagans and poets, he sides with Ficino and the early Wordsworth against Montaigne and Coleridge. On (c), Emerson argues that every sane human being, not merely a small class of melancholic geniuses, is capable of life-enhancing, revelatory ecstasies when reading poetry or communing with nature. And on (d), while recognizing the role that public appeals to ecstatic revelations had played in fomenting the religious wars, Emerson holds that such turmoil was an inevitable accompaniment to the collapse of ossified religious and political establishments. Appeals to ecstatic revelations are rife in transitional periods. There is no getting around the messy process of sorting through those appeals collectively so as to distinguish the sane from the insane.

Coleridge and Emerson are Romantics reasserting the revelatory value of some ecstatic states over against Enlightenment critiques of enthusiasm and miracle. When "Experience" turns to the lord of life called "surprise," Emerson is joining in the Renaissance debates over (a)-(d) that Romanticism had revived. For the most part, he employs the vocabulary of those debates. But because the context for the Romantic retrieval of that vocabulary is post-Kantian, the term *imagination* acquires a new prominence and a strongly positive connotation in his thinking that it did not have for Erasmus, Ficino, or Montaigne.<sup>57</sup> For English-speaking Romantics, Coleridge's distinction between the imagination and fancy replaces the



received distinction between *imaginatio* and *phantasia* (the latter being the more elevated faculty in the classical, medieval, and Renaissance sources).

With Coleridge's elevated conception of the imagination in mind, Emerson writes: "The distinction of fancy & imagination seems to me a distinction in kind. . . . The Imagination is Vision, regards the world as symbolical & pierces the emblem for the real sense, sees all external objects as types."<sup>58</sup> The source of imaginative vision is internal. Neither imaginative vision nor fancy results from inference, but only the former issues in revelations. When speaking of the privileged source of intuitive insight, Emerson generally adheres to Coleridge's distinction.

As I have already suggested, Emerson views Christian orthodoxy's way of administering the distinction between sound and unsound intuitions as an arbitrary and stultifying attempt to keep spirit from moving forward. The authority of a particular set of constraints on what counts as revelatory cannot, according to Emerson, be established simply by pointing to *the need* for a distinction between sound and unsound intuitions. When a particular group sets itself up as an arbiter of the distinction, it not only exerts power arbitrarily over others, but also threatens to dampen or extinguish the creativity of the human spirit. Christian orthodoxy, Emerson complains in "The Divinity School Address," behaves "as if God were dead."<sup>59</sup> It is therefore working against its own profound intuition of divinity.

Emerson grants the need to differentiate between revelatory and unsound intuitions, but doesn't trust any ecclesial hierarchy or intellectual elite – such as Coleridge's "clerisy" – to administer the distinction. New spiritual intuitions will inevitably seek expression. Some of them will be sound. The process of airing them compensates for the ossification of unreflective habit and for the tendency of elites to confuse institutional and cultural stasis with the common good. Clerics and the clerisy associated with them will seek to suppress change and meet with some success. But in every epoch, orthodoxy ultimately fails to silence the intuitions that exceed its bounds. If this were not the case, spiritual history would have come to a standstill a long time ago. There would have been no Isaiah, no Jesus, no Luther, no Winstanley, no Wollstonecraft, no Wordsworth, no Wilberforce, and no Swedenborg.

One thing that makes the present epoch distinctive – and distinctively democratic, according to Emerson – is the increasingly widespread intuition, especially in America, that *everyone* has the authority, as well as the responsibility, to express spiritual and ethical intuitions, to draw inferences from them, and to examine them critically. Emerson believes that this crucial meta-intuition withstands critical examination. It is a thought that appears evident to modern people who are sufficiently self-reliant to free themselves from conformity, and it is confirmed as such on reflection. The discipline of self-reliance, of liberating oneself from the self-censorship required by conformity, frees one to intuit one's authority and responsibility in such matters. To affirm the meta-intuition on reflection is to adopt an attitude of self-trust – as an officeholder, so to speak, in the priesthood of

all believers and in the citizens' republic. The same attitude "applied to another person is reverence," Emerson remarks in a journal entry.<sup>60</sup>

What if the discipline of self-reliance *generates* the intuition? This question is important for the critical appropriation of Emerson by the pragmatists, especially those like Dewey, who are influenced by Hegel's doctrine of the primacy of social practices. From the vantage of such pragmatists, the culture in which political deliberation goes forward, and in which concepts acquire the significance they have, is a collection of social practices that generate desires and intuitions (perceptions, memories, imaginary visions, etc.) as inputs, employ reasoning to govern change in commitments (beliefs and intentions), and have actions as outputs, with the actions doubling back to reproduce and sometimes the social practices (and thus the desires and intuitions). One reason for rereading Emerson today is his importance, especially but not only in an American context, as a practical innovator, as someone who strongly influenced the development of practices that helped make avant-garde art, nonconformist spirituality, and delight in nature important sources of intuition and vitality in democratic culture.

Emerson is content to allow a freewheeling process of expression and criticism to go forward, trusting that new thoughts meriting acceptance will eventually be differentiated from those that fall short. The process is not foolproof, however, and he grants that there are disturbingly many nonconformists who are foolish. Some of them are also bigoted and egotistical. Foolishness, bigotry, and egotism are among the vices that cloud one's vision of spiritual truths and interfere with the dialogical process of sorting through new spiritual claims. Conformists tend to be far more numerous than nonconformists and no less prone to vice. Conformist complicity in injustice gives rise to cowardice and sloth, which in turn create a bias against honoring novel intuitions in oneself and in others, according to Emerson's essay "The Conservative."

## 6. Conservative Arguments from Practical Experience

As a young man, Coleridge defended revolution and Wordsworth's great innovations in poetry, but quickly became disillusioned with radicalism and aligned himself publicly with the British imperial establishment. In *The Friend* (1809-10), Coleridge defends constitutional arrangements that make possession of property a prerequisite for the exercise of political power. He bases his argument explicitly on the platform of prudence or expediency, which he calls "practical Experience,"<sup>61</sup> employing that concept as Montaigne does in "On Experience." It is the understanding, not intuitive reason, that ought to carry authority in the political sphere, Coleridge argues. The moral sphere is something else again.

For Emerson to find his way toward open embrace of abolitionism, he must, in effect, work his way back to something roughly like the radicalism and democratic spirit of the young Coleridge. In doing so, Emerson wishes to learn something from Coleridge's prudential conservatism without extinguishing the

political relevance of intuitive reason. Emerson grants that experience (in the sense that distinguishes the practiced craftsman from the novice) is relevant to politics, but argues on the basis of experience (historical examples) that intuitive reason cannot be quarantined in an essentially nonpolitical moral sphere. Intuitive reason, in the form of the moral imagination, asserts its own authority against property and privilege whenever human beings decide not to repress their nonconformist thoughts. It is doing so now against the institution of slavery, which wrongly ranks "Use" or "expediency" over human dignity as a reason for action. Failure to acknowledge that intuitive reason sometimes asserts its priority over expediency is to leave oneself without an adequate explanation of modern political change as a phenomenon linked to spiritual or cultural change.

Coleridge's political imagination, Emerson thinks, is dominated by the example of the French Revolution. As a child of dissenting Protestantism, an American, and a tentative sympathizer with abolitionism, Emerson has other, more hopeful examples of modern democratic impulses in mind: the Protestant Reformation, the English Revolution, the American Revolution, and the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies. A fair-minded appraisal of all historically prominent examples of political self-reliance entails a more balanced conclusion than Coleridge's. The wisdom of experience lies in an attempt to combine: (a) the reformer's awareness of the political relevance of modernity's spiritual turn to human dignity with (b) the conservative's awareness of the dangers and excesses of reform. Coleridge had passed from (a) to (b), rather than having the wisdom to hold them together in his mind. Emerson would have seconded Hazlitt's comment on Coleridge's change of mind: "Such is the fate of genius in an age, when in the unequal contest with sovereign wrong, every man is ground to powder who is not either a born slave, or who does not willingly and at once offer up the yearnings of humanity and the dictates of reason as a welcome sacrifice to besotted prejudice and loathsome power."<sup>62</sup>

From Emerson's point of view, Montaigne is the most eloquent critic of ecstasy in the Renaissance and no less preoccupied than Coleridge with a single example of convulsive change. The Frenchman's conservatism is a reaction to the violence and cruelty of what he frankly calls the *religious wars*. The wise man defers to the church as the sole source of certainty and defers to the authority of an admittedly imperfect state as an alternative to chaos. After a life of public involvements, including military service, Montaigne retires to his study:

We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum. Within it our normal conversation should be of ourselves, with ourselves . . . there we should talk and laugh as though we had no wife, no children, no possessions, no followers, no menservants, so that when the occasion arises that we must lose them it should not be a new experience to do without them. We have a soul able to turn in on herself; she can keep herself company; she has the wherewithal to attack, to defend, to receive, and the give.<sup>63</sup>

This passage from “On Solitude,” an essay that repeatedly extolls self-trust, is the model for Emerson’s retreat to the tranquility of *his* study, described in such vividly personal terms in “Self-Reliance” – not to mention Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. But as a close reader of the *Essays*, Emerson must have been struck, at the time of his own despondency after little Waldo’s death, by Montaigne’s forthright account of his own struggle to overcome melancholic disturbance and burnout (what Burton calls “melancholy adust”). The private room to which one repairs while shunning family and withdrawing from public life to examine oneself can be an unhappy place.

The peace one sometimes finds there is indeed an important human good. Emerson feels this acutely. He also values the prevention and cessation of war. But he does not view the wars of Montaigne’s era as fruitless disturbances. He views them as inevitable consequences of a spiritual turning that would take centuries to work itself out. Montaigne and Coleridge were both trying to hold back democratizing tendencies that could not be contained over the long haul, and they underestimated the value that the new tendencies might bring. A longer perspective on the full range of relevant examples does not support conservatism: “Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by casualties” (§15). This is not to deny that we also die by casualties and must endure the losses they impose on us. Such, for Emerson, is the experience of his lifetime, and such is the wisdom of history.

Emerson is aware that when Montaigne isn’t using examples that lend support to conservative conclusions, he sometimes uses skeptical arguments to undermine taking instruction from examples altogether. “On Experience” sets out to determine what experience can teach, with “example showing the way.” Yet it eventually argues that examples cannot be used to settle anything, because “Precedent is an uncertain looking-glass, all-embracing, turning all ways.”<sup>64</sup> From Emerson’s perspective, such skepticism toward the value of examples undercuts the conservative conclusions Montaigne draws from the examples he favors. In the end, conservatism is no better off than any other view.

In §17, where Emerson refers to the universal impulse to believe, he argues: “skepticalisms are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement.” To avoid self-referential inconsistency, the skeptic has to limit the reach of doubt and in fact always does so if the project of doubting stops short of self-consumption. The task is to construct a “new picture of life” out of the “elements already exist[ing] in many minds around you.” The new picture must take the skepticalisms in “and make affirmations out-side of them, just as much as it must include the oldest beliefs.” Neither skepticalisms nor old beliefs are simply to be set aside. The picture Emerson proposes casts Montaigne’s skeptical conservatism as a limitation, a qualification, of the affirmative statement of the need for reform.

The public process of expressing and criticizing intuitions is often a dialogue of the deaf between flawed reformers and flawed conservatives. It does not much resemble an ideal speech situation, and sometimes leads to war. But it is not optional. It will go forward whether the clerics, the clerisy, the retired philosophers, and impatient reformers want it to or not. People living in the wake of Jacksonian democracy and the Second Great Awakening are awash in unsettling and conflicting intuitions.

The same is true of us, which is another reason Emerson is worth reading now. Not everyone has the intuitions associated with self-reliance, not everyone endorses them on reflection, and there is much disagreement about what acceptance of them implies ethically and politically. Someone who acquired her sense of propriety from the liturgical practices of an Anglican parish might have one set of intuitions. Someone who got his religion at an evangelical revival meeting might well have another. And someone who prefers reading Romantic poetry and attending lectures on self-reliance will probably have yet another. For that matter, any one person's intuitions are bound to be internally inconsistent. Conflicts among intuitions – whether they arise within an individual or between individuals – need to be worked through, not wished away.

Does anyone really leave their most deeply felt intuitions out of account when reflecting on important questions? If not, the choppy waters of democratic antagonism are not about to be calmed by a call for reason. Essaying is a way of working through the antagonisms, a way of staying afloat in those waters. As Emerson writes in his discussion of Montaigne in *Representative Men*:

The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility. . . . We want a ship in these billows we inhabit. An angular, dogmatic house would be rent to chips and splinters in this storm of many elements. No, it must be tight, and fit to the form of man, to live at all; as a shell must dictate the architecture of a house founded on the sea.<sup>65</sup>

## **7. Intuition, Virtue, and Practices**

We are now in a position to see the import of Emerson's claim, developed in "Character" and "Spiritual Laws," that character tends to display itself. A wise observer can determine the trustworthiness of an intuitive spiritual claim by viewing it as an expression of the character of the claimant. That character expresses itself in everything the person does and can be judged by its fruits. A virtuous person can use this evidence when assaying someone else's novel claim, say, that slavery is an insult to his soul. If the claimant's life smells of vice, the claim will carry less authority, which is why the bigoted abolitionist has rhetorical as well as ethical reasons to clean up his act. Emerson believes that virtuous character contributes to sound spiritual vision, which in turn contributes to virtuous character. He also believes that one virtuous character can, generally speaking, spot another.

Needless to say, disputes over who is to be counted as virtuous can be as contentious as disputes over intuitions. If you are virtuous and I am not, I am unlikely to be persuaded by your assessments of people and their intuitions. So the appeal to virtue does not end the dispute or insulate it from the effects of vice. Foolish people are likely to be unduly swayed by false prophets and demagogues, regardless of what their more discerning neighbors do or say. This, Emerson thinks, has to be acknowledged as a danger belonging to the democratic landscape.

“As I am, so I see,” Emerson writes in ¶21. It is a thought that initially appears in “Experience” as a threat to confidence in one’s “instruments.” If my subjective nature determines what I see, why trust my physical or spiritual vision? The same thought acquires a different inflection when it is taken to mean: “If and only if I am virtuous can I see virtuously when assaying the claims and characters of those around me.” This, I believe, is how Emerson finally wants his dictum to be taken. The appeal to virtue does not miraculously calm the waters, but it does rivet our attention on an important feature of all noninferential reports, namely that their appraisal turns on the authority, and thus on the character, of the reporter. Reports of spiritual intuitions are like perceptual reports in this respect.<sup>66</sup>

I said earlier that some intuitions which Emerson deems sound in themselves can nonetheless acquire monomaniacal significance in someone’s personality. He highlights this sort of insanity in ¶8, where he warns against fixation on a single intuition, a tendency that quickly becomes “odious” when discovered in one’s companions. This is where he says: “We house with the insane, and must humor them; then conversation dies out.” If he is referring to his wife Lidian, the point he is making appears to have less to do with her tears over little Waldo’s death than with her ardent commitment to abolitionism. Be that as it may, Emerson’s philosophical therapy for monomaniacal fixation is reflected in his style, which endeavors to take multiple intuitions, multiple candidates for truth, with maximal seriousness. His way of shifting from one to another is designed to break the reader of the tendency to become one-sided.

Emerson is relatively gentle in treating this variety of mania, because he thinks it can actually be socially beneficial in “representative men” such as Jesus, Shakespeare, and Napoleon. Their preoccupation with a single thought or project enables them to stand for it with greater clarity, thereby moving spiritual history forward if the circumstances are right. But we can defend ourselves against their lack of balance by shifting our attention to another figure and then another, in the hope of recognizing multiple virtues and possibilities. Emerson insists that there really are multiple virtues, but also that our conceptions of virtue change significantly over time.<sup>67</sup> The great figures of virtue are walking, talking synecdoches. We are lucky to have them all before us, so as not to be excessively influenced by one.

Emerson’s ethical therapy for the one-track mind is less necessary at the societal level, because any society already includes various conflicting tendencies,

each of which serves to mitigate another's dangers and biases to some extent. In Emerson's benign view, the single-minded reformer and the stodgy conservative help compensate for one another's vices. "Of course, it needs the whole society to give the symmetry we seek. . . . Like a bird which alights nowhere, but hops perpetually from bough to bough, is the Power which abides in no man and in no woman, but for a moment speaks from this one, and for another moment from that one" (§10).

In a passage from "Self-Reliance" that Cavell has done much to illumine, Emerson says that he "would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*." Emerson adds, "I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation."<sup>68</sup> *Whim* is an intuitive impulse or impression that arises within us from a source distinct from memory, intellect, or conscience. It is the writer's spiritual raw material. What proves better than mere whim is retrospectively said to have come from the imagination, the faculty that successfully taps into the common *Geist*. What proves to be no more than whim at last is retrospectively classified as something lacking in revelatory value. In essaying, Emerson assays his intuitions. In "Experience," as in many other cases, the assaying involves putting contrary intuitions up against one another, so as to provoke further thought.

Hegel's system seeks to account for reason's *inferential* work of moving from the promptings of its intuitions to reasoned judgments of what qualifies as more than whim at last. Emerson is too much the Romantic, too little the rationalist, to offer a systematic overview of Hegel's sort. Neither does Emerson's reconsideration of Locke, Hume, Kant, Coleridge, and Montaigne take the form of a dialectical argument-by-elimination, designed to leave only one absolute meta-theory standing at the end. But "Experience" is an exercise of the dialectical imagination and integration.<sup>69</sup> Contradictory intuitions are brought into open antagonism and the discrepant worlds mentioned in the first strophe of §25 are finally reconciled.<sup>70</sup>

Kateb characterizes Emerson as generally "eager to present the struggle," rather than seeking harmony between the opposing thoughts.<sup>71</sup> I think Kateb is half right about this. Presenting the struggle belongs to Emerson's standard procedure, as does a wholehearted attempt to "impersonate" first one outlook, then another (as Kateb nicely puts it). But Emerson is open to various outcomes. The sort of harmony arrived at in the conclusion of "Experience" is a perfectly happy outcome from his point of view, provided that it is reached honestly. If one could say in advance of the experiment whether the outcome would be harmony, *détente*, or the discarding of one antagonist as false, essaying wouldn't be assaying.

There may also be something to learn from the practices Emerson engages in while gathering intuitions. His daily activities – of walking in the woods, observing nature, paying attention to his dreams, reading poetry, studying history and philosophy, conversing with friends, and listening to precocious children like little Waldo – are meant to open up channels of imagination that might lead to fresh spiritual insight and growth.<sup>72</sup> (The loss of his son deprives Emerson of a cherished

source of inspiration, as well as a valued offspring and imagined heir.) He keeps his voluminous journal in order to record his perceptual and spiritual intuitions, as well as facts that come to his attention, and he later subjects the whole lot to scrutiny while reassembling them into lecture scripts and essays.

In ¶23 of “Experience,” he speaks of “hiving” truths for his readers. He puts these into public circulation in the confidence that the worthiest of his thoughts will resonate with other people who, belonging to the same age and subject to the same regimes of conformity, will also have been tempted to repress the same thoughts or something like them. “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (“Self-Reliance”).<sup>73</sup> The notion that a social critic or political philosopher needs to attend carefully to the thoughts that conformism requires us to repress can and should be disentangled from Emerson’s faith in a common mind or soul. What finally earns Emerson the authority to assay his intuitions is not his metaphysics but the honesty with which he interrogates himself, his willingness to change his mind, the courage with which he endures his naysayers, and the attention he gives to the problematical relationship between examples and generalities. The metaphysics serves an explanatory function for him. It is one way of making sense of thoughts about sacredness, dignity, beauty, the sublime, excellence, and evil that he is unable to deny. A reader can reject the metaphysics while retaining the thoughts, which is why Emerson continued to matter greatly to many readers who either stuck with personal conceptions of divinity or dropped the notion of divinity altogether.<sup>74</sup>

¶17 associates what Emerson calls genius with what the Chinese philosopher Mencius calls “vast-flowing vigor.” What this means is hard to explain, Mencius admits, but when it is nourished properly and done no injury, “it will fill up the vacancy between heaven and earth.” Here again we find genius overcoming the dualism between heavenly thought and earthly doing. Emerson adds: “In our more correct writing, we give to this generalization the name of Being, and thereby confess that we have arrived as far as we can go.”

Anyone, according to Emerson, can get in touch with his or her imagination and conscience. In that sense, everyone has a genius. This claim is central to Emerson’s democratic Romanticism. Nietzsche, unfortunately, dispenses with this commitment. His eclipse of Emerson in the imagination of the American academic left is an ironic confirmation of an old Emersonian theme – the American proclivity to seek authorization from European sources. Ignore Emerson and his American progeny and you might find yourself needing Rancière to rediscover “the equal power of intelligence”<sup>75</sup> and Habermas to sense that something is missing from a secularized society.<sup>76</sup> The discussion proceeds for the most part as if Emerson never existed, as if Nietzsche invented himself out of whole cloth. A better starting point for the conversation would be the question of why Nietzsche suppressed the democratic element in Emerson’s perfectionism.



Emerson's democratization of *genius*, though somewhat jarring to our ears, remains one of his most important efforts at resignification. Jacksonian democracy absorbs the individual into the herd, whose spirit is that of group egotism, another manifestation of conformity. A tyranny of the herd replaces a tyranny of propertied gentlemen. Emersonian democracy aspires to realize a distinctive form of sociality, in which individuals are empowered to work their way out of conformity and form friendships with others equally empowered. Everyone has repressed intuitions, and anyone can wrestle with them. Emerson is not saying that everyone has the vocation of a poet or the rhetorical gifts suited to that role. The poet turns the inner quest of genius – empowering thoughts, rescued from conformist repression – into something of public significance. The poet of democracy serves a representative and unsettling function in a process of social transformation in which everyone, regardless of class, race, and gender, has the capacity, right, and responsibility to participate.

That is where Emerson ultimately ends up, anyway. In reaching this conclusion, he has to struggle with his intuitions, deciding which to regard as truths, which as products of mean egotism or mere fantasy, and which as prejudicial products of conformity. The struggle can be painful for a latter-day reader to witness, as it must have been painful for Emerson to live through. He does not find it easy to set aside the prejudices of racism and patriarchy.<sup>77</sup> He does a better job of this than Nietzsche does, but for some reason Nietzsche is more apt to be forgiven. They may both be handicapped by their indebtedness to Stoicism.

Emerson is amply blessed with creative genius, honesty, and courage, but not with anything approaching Montaigne's sympathy and mercifulness. Emerson's empathetic imagination often stops short of feeling another's pain, as if either his temperament or cultivation of *apatheia* prohibited him from going further. The golden rule of compassion is of little help to a writer who stands at a remove from his own feelings. But there is little point in demanding of Emerson what one gets so abundantly from Montaigne, Stowe, Garrison, or Douglass. Emerson's were the words that brought Thoreau, Fuller, Whitman, and Parker to a boil, after all. And he ranks with Marx, Freud, and only a few other moderns as a theorist of great transformations.

## **8. Vocation, Transformation, and Democracy**

The workings of genius, according to Emerson, are not subject to will and they typically operate at a psychological level deeper than the individual's awareness. Genius cannot be beckoned at will. The imagination's intuitive deliverances are prior to, more basic than, will. The imaginative *breakthroughs* that accompany great transformations are, for this reason, not manipular, either for the individuals who first experience them or for others who come to resonate with them as genius is transformed into practical power. There is something mysterious and incalculable about both the causes and effects of the most important transformations. This thought gives Emerson heart when enduring the silence of his

muse after Waldo's death. It could well be, he assures himself, that this period of his life, which *feels* like oblivion, is in fact a time when a new possibility is taking shape in his imagination. ¶25 of "Experience" is that possibility made manifest.

In ¶16 Emerson claims that another great transformation is underway. Like other effects of deeper causes, "it knows not its own tendency." Participants in the transformation are "now skeptical, without unity," having been distracted by the "coetaneous growth of the parts." He probably means that abolitionism has been developing unevenly and has not yet coalesced with other potentially bountiful tendencies. The country has been suffering from the spiritual consequences of an economic depression. These are the social correlates of his personal crisis, the reasons that his audience is as disoriented as he has been. Emerson advises his readers to "bear with the distractions," which he has been examining in his essay. Then, in a striking allusion to 1 Corinthians 12:11-20, he declares that the seemingly independent parts "will one day be *members*, and obey one will." "New England Reformers," a lecture Emerson delivered in March 1844 and appended to the first edition of *Essays: Second Series*, describes what proper uniting is like. The "union must be inward, and not one of covenants, and it is to be reached by the reverse of the methods" commonly in use. Proper uniting leaves the members individuated. "The union must be ideal in actual individualism."<sup>78</sup>

Alex Zakaris elegantly distinguishes Emersonian individuality from both absorption into the mass and mere fragmentation. He argues that self-reliance seeks fulfillment in a kind of social action.<sup>79</sup> Zakaris and I are both offering compensatory correction to Kateb's claim that "Self-reliance cannot best show itself in worldly presence or activity." Zakaris does not say much about "Experience," an essay that is central to Kateb's case. Kateb argues that the "net effect" of the essay "is that Emersonian self-reliance at its best must finally be grasped as something mental, not active."<sup>80</sup> Kateb never comments on the essay's final paragraph, which declares that genius, something mental, will be transformed into practical power, something active, thereby embodying "the true romance which the world exists to realize." Neither does he take note of Emerson's implied distinction between manipular reform and commendable forms of social action.

These omissions help explain why Kateb's Emerson wavers unsteadily between celebration of democracy and an anti-political theory of politics. Antipathy for manipular reform is not antipathy for genuinely democratic politics. *Democracy*, when Emerson employs it as a term of commendation, refers to the excellences emerging in the present age. He also sometimes uses the term more neutrally, as when he speaks in ¶25 of the "democratic manners" of manipular reformers. Like all action, in Emerson's view, manipular reform expresses the character of the agent, betraying more of the doer than the doer typically knows. The manipular reformer manipulates, thereby revealing himself as manipulative. That other people enter into his plans as mere means exposes a defect in his character, a defect opposed to respect for democratic individuality. Manipular reform is one among many defects in a culture that is nonetheless laudable for its intimations of genuinely democratic

individuality and cooperation. Emerson is distinguishing the defects from the intimations. There is no wavering in his distaste for the former or in his desire to perfect the latter.<sup>81</sup>

The term “hate” in the second strophe of ¶25 echoes the example in “Self-Reliance” of the “bigoted abolitionist,” whose character is out of kilter with his cause. Emerson did not hesitate to declare that cause “bountiful,” even in 1841, when *Essays: First Series* appeared. He had publicly rejected slavery from the time of his very first sermon, but had long harbored doubts about abolitionism and some of its leaders. The bigot he has in mind in “Self-Reliance” is probably the vain and “inconvertible” George Thompson, whom Emerson’s aunt had thrust on him in 1835. By the early 1840s, while his disapprobation of Thompson remained strong, Emerson had become an admirer of such abolitionists as Harriett Martineau and William Lloyd Garrison. The movement now held more promise in Emerson’s eyes.<sup>82</sup>

“Experience” was published in October 1844, a few months after the “Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” his long-awaited public defense of abolitionism, on August 1.<sup>83</sup> He considered including the address in *Essays: Second Series*, but decided to publish it separately. He must have deemed the address inconsistent with the essayistic style of the collection. The essays, with “Experience” as the best example, aim to work a deep transformation in the reader. They do so by deliberately creating interpretive difficulties, through ellipses, allusions, and paradoxical juxtapositions that place a burden of thinking on the reader.

The August 1 address, like Emerson’s other prosaic writings and speeches on political issues, takes a simple dilemma for granted as its topic and aims to move the audience, as it were, from one side of the divided house to the other. Emerson never considered his gifts well suited to parliamentary or partisan rhetoric, and often experienced a sense of vocational self-betrayal when engaging in it. Most early readers of “Experience” would have been aware that Emerson had delivered a major defense of abolitionism the previous summer. Yet the essay collection published that autumn contains no forthright statement on the issue. Instead, it presents a theory, ethics, and rhetoric of transformation.

Assaying transformation is the vocation Emerson commits himself to shortly after leaving the pastorate and continues to carry out and revise until his mind fails him. This vocation is compatible with support of the abolitionist cause, as in the August 1 address, but not with support of abolitionism as manipular reform. Emerson maintains that to be worthy of the allegiance of its members and to be successful on the terms they *ought* to accept, abolitionism must be incorporated into a larger process of personal and societal change that *actually embodies* the highest ideals of the age. If abolitionism can get that much right, its unintended effects are likely to be good on the whole, however incalculable they remain in prospect.

This embodiment of the ideal in material practice is the transformation of genius into practical power imagined in the essay's last sentence. If Emerson were unable to see in abolitionism a sufficient actualization of the ideal world he *thinks*, he would not have been able in good conscience to deliver his August 1 address. There is a strong sense, therefore, in which the transformation of genius into practical power is already, by Emerson's lights, accomplished – and accomplished *in* abolitionism, considered as an imperfect (but good *enough* to endorse) ideal-infused material practice. In Hegelian terms, he is searching for an acceptable concrete universal.

Emerson is giving his abolitionist readers both more and less than most of them were hoping to get from him: more theoretical and ethical reflection on how great transformations happen and less overtly abolitionist rhetoric on the issue at hand. The theory of transformation is meant to inform people caught up in the midst of a great transformation, so that they might behave more wisely, justly, courageously, and patiently. The ethics of transformation holds up to rigorous criticism representative types of vocation or character (the reformer, the conservative, the poet) and characteristics (despondency, self-reliance). The rhetoric of transformation aims to draw the reader into a process of personal transformation whose first step is an aversion to conformity and whose subsequent steps include attentiveness to one's genius and cultivation of genuinely virtuous habits.

Many commentators remark that "Experience" follows "The Poet" in *Essays: Second Series*. I cannot recall a scholar mentioning that the essay after "Experience" is "Character," which develops the claim about character's relation to spiritual authority that I highlighted above. The prefatory poem at the head of "Character" begins: "The sun set; but set not his hope: / Stars rose; his faith earlier up." A few lines later, the poem reads: "He spoke, and words more soft than rain / Brought the Age of Gold again: / His action won such reverence sweet, / as hid all measure of the feat."<sup>84</sup> The poem ends by referring to grief. Emerson is helping us view his essays as a series, an ordered set. "Where do we find ourselves? In a series . . ." The disorientation impersonated by the speaker at the beginning of "Experience" has been transcended by the time we reach "Character." Glancing back, the speaker recognizes the importance of faith and hope, just as he had underlined the importance of patience a page earlier. And he explicitly counts his "words" as efficacious "action." In saying what he has said *about* the transformation of genius into practical power, he aims to *effect* the transformation of genius into practical power.

## 9. Emerson's Poor

More than a year before giving his August 1 address, Emerson had written in his journal: "It is greatest to believe & hope well of the world, because he who does so, quits the world of experience, & makes the world he lives in." Early in 1844, another journal entry reflects on the need, when addressing a large assembly, for

“painting in fire my thought, & being agitated to agitate. One must dedicate himself to it and think with his audience in mind, so as to . . . enter into all the easily forgotten secrets of a great nocturnal assembly & their relation to the speaker.”<sup>85</sup> *Agitation* is a keyword from the long tradition of reflection on ecstatic states that I mentioned earlier, and it appears a dozen times in Montaigne’s *Essays*.

The ending of “Experience” quits the despondency of the essay’s opening paragraphs and, if I am reading rightly, brings his self-image as a writer into coherence with his plunge into abolitionist politics. Emerson never delivered “Experience” to a nocturnal assembly, but in it he does get agitated to agitate, and does finally paint in fire his thought. The autobiographical references of the first paragraphs can distract us from what the essay aims to do for its readers. He begins in the first-person plural. He does not say, “Where do I find myself?” He says, “Where do *we* find ourselves?” He then proceeds to impersonate the disorientation of his readers, while owning up to his own experience of despondency. They have not lost little Waldo, but they have lived through a difficult period with its own characteristic temptations. The potential geniuses among them who share the melancholic temperament and a love of poetry are tempted to loll in *acedia*, as he has. Others in his audience are tempted by the mere idealism of the beautiful soul, the utopianism of Brook Farm, the hypocrisy and cant of manipular reform, the disenchantment of materialism – all of which fail to get ideals properly embodied in material practices, in character, in practical power.<sup>86</sup>

At some level, Emerson suspects, all such readers “wish to be saved from the mischiefs of their vices, but not from their vices. Charity would be wasted on this poor waiting on the symptoms. A wise and hardy physician will say, *Come out of that*, as the first condition of advice” (§21). Emerson is alluding to 2 Corinthians 6:17: “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.” In the 1840s, “coming out” referred to the act of excommunicating one’s church for complicity in slavery.<sup>87</sup> In “New England Reformers,” Emerson commends coming out as “excellent when it was done the first time,” but worries that it “loses all value when it is copied.” When coming out is not itself an expression of self-reliance, he regards it as a veneer of democratic manners rather than as an action that “flow[s] from the whole spirit and faith” of the reformer.<sup>88</sup> In “Experience,” coming out is a metaphor for a change in one’s identity.

Emerson’s use of the expression “this poor” in §21 of “Experience” echoes “Self-Reliance,” in which he had shocked his readers by asking, of the materially destitute, “Are they *my* poor?”<sup>89</sup> The question did not imply that he had no general obligations to the materially destitute. Emerson was asking about his vocational obligations, about his distinctive role in the work of transformation. In “Experience,” he is the spiritual physician calling *his poor* to come out of the mischiefs of their vices, to be sanctified, to join in a material practice infused with ideals of conduct, character, and community. To whom is he called to minister? Any reader in the process of coming out despair, orthodoxy, materialism, or manipular

reform, any reader with a role to play in the large-scale transformation that is underway.

Notice how the following passage from the ending of “The American Scholar” anticipates the themes of alienation, vocation, intuition, patience, and conversion of the world later developed in “Experience”:

Young men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these, — but are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust, — some of them suicides. What is the remedy? They did not yet see, and thousands of young men as hopeful now crowding to the barriers for the career, do not yet see, that, if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him. Patience, — patience; — with the shades of all the good and great for company; and for solace, the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work, the study and the communication of principles, the making those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world.<sup>90</sup>

Desperate, alienated young people of the fairest promise are the core of Emerson’s poor, the congregation he hopes to gather in the lyceum. They all have roles to play in the conversion of the world. Emerson’s calling is to awaken them, fortify their faith and hope, and reveal to them that the light they can use to illuminate where they find themselves belongs as fully to their bleak rocks as it belongs to any time and place.

The “huge world will come round” – it will become spherical and turn to – the one whose calling is to call, but only if he adheres strictly to the duties of his station. That station is the opposite of stationary, because it requires perpetual dying, rebirth into new worlds, and turning. Yet the one whose task it is to issue the cockcrow need not travel abroad to inhabit the new world. Because that world turns, the light comes to anyone who stations himself on the roost.

Emerson goes on to speak of “that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear,” which in his case is private or singular in its essayistic form of address and public in its substantive relevance to the huge world coming round. In the 1840 lecture “Reform,” Emerson says that he intends to persist in his private exertions, “this wise passiveness, until my hour comes when I can see how to act with truth as well as to refuse.” A journal entry speaks of letting “the republic alone until the republic comes to me.”<sup>91</sup> He is not so much refusing to make a public statement as he is waiting for what he regards as the opportune moment. While he never makes entirely clear what he is waiting for, and is still provoking the abolitionists long after having ascended the platform to join them, the republic seems to have come to him, by his reckoning, in 1844.

[FEEL FREE TO STOP HERE]

In closing, let us turn to Emerson's mysterious mention of John Flaxman's drawing of a scene from the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus (§22). In the play, Clytaemestra kills her husband King Agamemnon. The surviving children, Electra and Orestes, are horrified. Electra and the god Apollo urge Orestes to kill his mother as retribution. He does so. Now the Furies are tormenting Orestes. Their role is to avenge patricide and matricide. They are deities created when the semen of a god touches the earth, so they symbolize one way of embodying divine energy in earthly doings, namely vengeance. Orestes takes refuge in Apollo's temple. Apollo sends Orestes to Athens under Hermes' protection and puts the Furies to sleep in order to delay them.

When the Furies hunt Orestes down, Athena intervenes and conducts a trial, with eleven Athenians joining her as the jury, the Furies functioning as prosecutors, and Apollo as the defense attorney. Athena casts the final vote, leaving the totals at six to six, a tie entailing an acquittal. The Furies (or *Erinyes*, in Greek) are then renamed the *Eumenides* (the good name compensating them for the lost vote and protecting Athenians from their vengeance).

The drawing by Flaxman depicts Orestes' supplication of Apollo, with the Furies asleep on the threshold of the temple. Emerson writes:  
 The face of the god expresses a shade of regret and compassion, but calm with the conviction of the irreconcilableness of the two spheres. He is born into other politics, into the eternal and the beautiful. The man at his feet asks for his interest in turmoils of the earth, into which his nature cannot enter. And the Eumenides there lying express pictorially this disparity. The god is surcharged with his divine destiny.

What is Flaxman's drawing doing here?

It concludes the section on Subjectiveness, in which the divide between subject and object is surveyed by one who identifies wholly with the former, in a mood that ends in self-defeating skepticism: "perhaps there are no objects" (§18). Subjectiveness centered in the intellect is a mood in which "Murder in the murderer" does not seem ruinous (§19). For the intellect, divorced from the intersubjective call of conscience, "there is no crime" (488). "And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks," for we need "the capital virtue of self-trust" (§21). The cold Apollo is the god of these bleak rocks. He himself has inspired Orestes to kill for the sake of justice. He feels a measure of regret for this necessity, as well as compassion for the one before him, whose fate is to be hounded by Furies. Apollo has his own preoccupations with higher things, with beauty, but also with a justice that transcends the vengeance of an aggrieved son.

The essayist's persona is here split, dualistically, between the serenely divine Apollo and the supplicant Orestes, whose concerns pertain to the turmoils of the earth.<sup>92</sup> Apollo can give Orestes release from the Furies only for a time. Orestes must eventually stand trial. A warmer god, the female Athena, will convert the

Furies into something less vengeful. Apollo will have to come out of his serene withdrawal in order to defend Orestes.

Apollo, Emerson writes, "is surcharged" – that is, overburdened – "with his divine destiny." In the borderland between the divine and the earthly, his responsibilities appear too heavy, perhaps incompatible. Apollo has a higher concern, which involves serene contemplation, but he also realizes that his order to Orestes implicates him in earthly affairs. The blood now dripping from Orestes' feet and the rage of the Furies sleeping on the threshold of the temple are in some sense Apollo's doing. His serene subjectivity, his preoccupation with an aim that makes the wants of his supplicants seem trivial by comparison, nonetheless entails involvement in earthly affairs. He has already ordered Orestes to kill his father's killer. Soon he will be Orestes' defender before the tribunal of justice in Athens.

But in this moment, at the end of Emerson's discussion of Subjectiveness, Flaxman's Apollo symbolizes the radical yet temporary disjunction of the two spheres. From this dualistic perspective, those spheres cannot be reconciled. In but a few paragraphs, however, our essayist will transform his Apollonian genius into practical power, thereby calling his poor to do the same. Wherever that happens, material practices are spirit incarnate. Dualism is overcome.<sup>93</sup>



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," was originally published as the second essay in *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1844). I shall be quoting from *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), which is based on the first edition. To make my references to the text more precise and to provide a way of describing the essay's structure, I have numbered the essay's 25 paragraphs and shall refer to them by number. This practice will have the additional advantage of assisting readers who do not have a copy of the Library America volume handy. Emerson did not, needless to say, number the paragraphs himself.

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003) 1207-69.

<sup>3</sup> In comments on the first draft of this paper, Molly Farneth suggested that the prefatory poem's "Little man" is the supine human being who, lacking self-reliance, has been dwarfed by his own deference to the lords of life. "Dearest nature" is offering what Farneth calls "reassurance that the disorientation with which the essay begins need not be cause for despair." My interpretation of the body of the essay coheres nicely with Farneth's interpretation of the prefatory poem. Many commentators take "Little man" to be Emerson dead son, little Waldo.

<sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," in *The Works of William Wordsworth* (Norhaven, Denmark: Wordsworth Library, 1994), 589.

<sup>5</sup> Compare a line spoken by Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotton) in Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943): "Do you know if you ripped the fronts off houses, you'd find swine?" In ¶11 of "Experience," Emerson writes: "Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever the firmer in the creed, that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are." That's two Hitchcock titles in one sentence. Coincidence? Probably. But *Shadow of a Doubt* lifts the roof from the home of what the script calls "an average American family" and exposes a failure on the part of that family to do broad justice where they are. One of the scriptwriters was Thornton Wilder, who discusses Emerson and Thoreau as emblematic American writers in *American Characteristics and Other Essays*, ed. Donald Gallup (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), chapters 1 and 2. If Hitchcock did read Emerson, it might have been at Wilder's suggestion. In any event, Hitchcock and Emerson are both critics of American social conformity, and they both imagine themselves to be removing something, a roof or a façade, that ordinarily obstructs our view of what is happening inside American "homes."

<sup>6</sup> Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 359-60; Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of Our Day"* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), chapter 14; Julie Ellison, "Tears for Emerson: *Essays: Second Series*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 140-61.

<sup>7</sup> The Immortality Ode concludes: "The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality; /

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Another race hath been, and other palms are won. / Thanks to the human heart by which we live, / thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears / To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep to tears." *The Works of William Wordsworth*, 590.

<sup>8</sup> For an account of "Experience" as an expression of a vocational crisis, see Donald E. Pease, "'Experience,' Antislavery, and the Crisis of Emersonianism," in *The Other Emerson*, eds. Branka Arsic and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 131-66. I agree with Pease on two crucial points: first, in viewing "Experience" as effecting a "crisis of witnessing" that had been essential to the "protocols" defended in earlier lectures and essays; and second, in connecting Emerson's resolution of that crisis with his decision to endorse abolitionism, a theme I develop later in this paper. While Pease and I differ on various textual details, our approaches are complementary.

<sup>9</sup> Joel Porte, *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 197.

<sup>10</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Porte, *Representative Man*, 197-8.

<sup>12</sup> In his unpublished Princeton senior thesis, Benjamin Elga asserted the importance of reading "Experience" as a response to "On Experience." While my own account of that response differs from Elga's, I am grateful for his provocation.

<sup>13</sup> For a helpful commentary on the connections between experience and prudence in Montaigne, with special reference to "On Experience," see Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), chapter 5. Barbara L. Packer discusses Emerson's response to Montaigne in *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 199-211.

<sup>14</sup> It is actually an anachronism to refer to "On Experience" or "On Solitude" as essays. Montaigne thought of them as chapters in a book entitled *Essais*. *Essais*, in his vocabulary, are attempts, analogous to the efforts of an apprentice who does not yet have the experience needed to produce a masterwork. As attempts at thinking something through, they are experiments or trials in which the writer tests his commitment to this or that thought and to the project of honest self-examination. They assay Montaigne's character. But each chapter in Montaigne's book includes many *essais*. See M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 700.

<sup>16</sup> Étienne de La Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (New York: Black Rose Books, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 563.

<sup>18</sup> The ending of "Prodigal" could easily stand as a condensed commentary on "Experience": "after the visions of these losses, the spent / seer, delivered to wastage, risen / into ribs, consigns knowledge to / approximation, order to the vehicle / of change, and fumbles blind in blunt innocence / toward divine, terrible love." A.R. Ammons, *Collected Poems: 1951-1971* (New York: Norton, 1972), 76-7.

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At the end of "Corson's Inlet," Ammons revisits paragraph 23 of "Experience": "I will try / to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening / scope, but enjoying the freedom that / Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision / that I have perceived nothing completely, / that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk." *Collected Poems*, 147-51.

<sup>19</sup> Alan D. Hodder, *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation: Nature, the Reader, and the Apocalypse Within* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Jerry A. Herndon was on the right track in his brief note, "St. Paul and Emerson's 'Self-Reliance'." *American Transcendental Quarterly: A Journal of New England Writers* 1 (1969): 90. Branka Arsic draws attention to the importance of Herndon's note in *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 335-6n16.

<sup>21</sup> Notably: Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, chapters 2 and 4; Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989); and Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of Our Day"* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005). My overview of Coleridge's influence on Emerson is mainly indebted to Keane's careful textual scholarship.

<sup>22</sup> Brakhage (1933-2003) may be the greatest filmmaker in the American avant-garde. His 1974 film, *The Text of Light*, attends to the light refracted through an ashtray that Brakhage turns in his hand. In ¶9 of "Experience," Emerson writes: "A man is like a bit of Labrador spar, which has no lustre as you turn it in your hand, until you come to a particular angle; then it shows deep and beautiful colors." Another passage from "Experience" calls to mind Nathaniel Dorsky's film *The Visitation* (2002), another wondrous example of avant-garde art: "I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals . . ." (¶16). For a splendid account of Emerson's influence on American avant-garde film, see P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Sitney treats Brakhage at length in chapters 3, 11, and 15, and describes *The Text of Light* as "the paradigm of his inward turn" in the early 1970s (73). Sitney's account of Dorsky can be found in "Tone Poems: P. Adams Sitney on the Films of Nathaniel Dorsky," *Art Forum* (November 2007):1-8. I treated Brakhage and Dorsky in my Stone Lectures on religion and film, delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2007.

<sup>23</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Compare George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being an Outline of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955): "In idealization proper . . . what happens is the elimination of individual eccentricities" (111). "The materials of history and tradition have been melted and recast by the devout imagination into those figures in the presence of which our piety lives. . . . The Christ men have loved and adored is an ideal of their own hearts, the construction of an ever-present

personality, living and intimately understood, out of the fragments of story and doctrine connected with a name" (116). In reflecting on the figure of the Virgin Mary, Santayana declares it "a pity that a foolish iconoclasm should so long have deprived the Protestant mind of the contemplation of this ideal" (117).

<sup>25</sup> Montanism was a late 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christian movement originating in Phrygia. Although initially known as the "New Prophecy," the movement was later named after its founder, Montanus. Two features of Montanism matter for the purposes of this paper. The first is the movement's rejection of orthodox ecclesial authority's right to decide whether this or that prophecy allegedly inspired by the Holy Spirit is authentic. The second is the movement's approval of certain apparently incoherent forms of ecstatic prophecy as revelatory.

<sup>26</sup> The passage continues: "The circumstances, the persons, the body, the word, the memory are forever perishing as the bark peels off the expanding tree." Quoted in Arsic, *On Leaving*, 187.

<sup>27</sup> Molly Farneth, in her comments on the first draft of this paper, speculated that one sense of "getting" at issue in this passage could be the epistemic notion of understanding something. If the conjecture is right, then when Emerson says that he does not *get* what he receives from the divine source, at least part of what he means is that he doesn't *comprehend* what he has received. Given Emerson's characteristic way of layering meanings, Farneth's conjecture need not come at the expense of the acquisitive sense of *getting*.

<sup>28</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 538.

<sup>29</sup> "And there are, / I feel, good reasons why we should not leave / Wholly untraced a more forbidding way." William Wordsworth, Book VI of *The Excursion*, in *The Works of William Wordsworth*, 848. See David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 168.

<sup>30</sup> I am supporting Branka Arsic's claim that Emerson should "be interpreted – along the lines of the Greek *pragmata*, on which Marx's *praxis* is predicated – as transcending the divide separating us from the world we inhabit, since the transcending it proposes, for Emerson as well as for Marx, means that subject and object . . . fall in love" (*On Leaving*, 84). However, I disagree with Arsic's implication that Emerson's proximity to Marx on this theme puts distance between these two and pragmatism, for the same theme is of central importance to Dewey and to other pragmatists who were influenced, as Marx was, by Hegel. I trace these lines of influence in "The Spirit of Pragmatism: Bernstein's Variations on Hegelian Themes," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* (forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup> See Pamela J. Schirmeister, *Less Legible Meanings: Between Poetry and Philosophy in the Work of Emerson* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 142.

<sup>32</sup> In his journals, he uses the term "canters" to describe "odious" abolitionists. Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 63. In an 1846 poem, "Ode: Inscribed to W.H. Channing," Emerson refers to "the priest's cant" and the "statesman's rant" as incompatible with his "honied thought." *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: Norton, 2001), 443-6.

<sup>33</sup> Jack Turner discusses these worries and Emerson's eventual downgrading of them in "Self-Reliance and Complicity: Emerson's Ethics of Citizenship," in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 125-51. Turner's best sentence is: "The world we inherit is not innocent; we are born into complicity and remain complicit as we reach maturity" (142).

<sup>34</sup> "Though few people have the face to set up for the very thing they in their hearts despise, we almost all want to be thought better than we are, and affect a greater admiration or abhorrence for certain things than we really feel." William Hazlitt, "On Cant and Hypocrisy," *London Weekly Review*, December 6th, 1828.

<sup>35</sup> The ending of "The Over-Soul" looks forward to a day in which man "will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity" (*Essays and Lectures*, 400). To see how this line bears on the ethics of hypocrisy, one needs to unpack the allusion. In Act 3, Scene 4 of *Hamlet*, the protagonist speaks of "A king of shreds and patches." The tradition behind the phrase is that of dressing Vice as a mimic King in a clown's suit of patches. Hamlet is referring to his vicious uncle, the murderer of his father. Hamlet suspects his mother of complicity in the murder. She suspects him of madness. Hamlet, after urging her not to go to his uncle's bed, advises her that putting on a semblance of virtue, hypocritically, would be a step upward for her. In eleven lines, Shakespeare describes a process of ethical transformation that leads from outright vice through hypocrisy to virtue:

160 Assume a virtue, if you have it not.  
 161 That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,  
 162 Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,  
 163 That to the use of actions fair and good  
 164 He likewise gives a frock or livery,  
 165 That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,  
 166 And that shall lend a kind of easiness  
 167 To the next abstinence: the next more easy;  
 168 For use almost can change the stamp of nature,  
 169 And either master the devil, or throw him out  
 170 With wondrous potency.

The ghost advises Hamlet to "step between her and her fighting soul," which is what Emerson is doing with respect to his audience. Emerson is hinting that some members of his audience suspect him of being mad, but also that he regards them as complicit in evil. By alluding to Shakespeare, Emerson is also inviting his audience is to try on the appearance of virtue by conforming outwardly to justice, in the hope that doing so will change the stamp (the character) of nature. The invitation implies that hypocrisy can be good for the person who adopts it. For a superb account of the long modern tradition of reflection on the value of hypocrisy as a way station on the path to true virtue, see Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Herdt mentions *Hamlet* on p. 134, but only in passing. Her charitable discussion of my Emersonian perfectionism, on pp. 6-10, does not take up Emerson's place in the tradition she is recounting.

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Essay and Lectures*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 318.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character, on the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality, and Religion*, originally published in 1825. Emerson was familiar with the 1829 American edition, published by Rev. James Marsh, President of the University of Vermont, who included a highly influential "Preliminary Essay" of his own on Coleridge's ideas.

<sup>40</sup> See Jon Elster, "States That Are Essentially By-Products," *Social Science Information* 20.3 (June 1981): 431-473.

<sup>41</sup> For an excellent account of Emerson's conception of impersonality and the role of that conception in subsequent American literature, see Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), esp. chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 is Cameron's reading of "Experience" as an elegy for Waldo.

<sup>42</sup> Rorty is more apt to credit Dewey, Kuhn, and Nietzsche than Emerson as sources of his ideas, but Emerson is in the background, thanks to his influence on Dewey and Nietzsche. Cornel West illumines the lines of influence in *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>43</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, with study guide by Robert B. Brandom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Originally published in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume I: The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, (University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253-329.

<sup>44</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Intuition," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4., ed. Paul Edwards, (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), 204-12, for a concise diagnosis of the ambiguities harbored in this concept.

<sup>45</sup> A preliminary sketch of Rorty's understanding of cultural transformation appears in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). A statement of Rorty's mature position can be found in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Most of Rorty's subsequent books have some bearing on cultural transformation.

<sup>46</sup> This picture is developed most fruitfully in Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 11.

<sup>47</sup> This last claim puts Rorty in tension with John Rawls, another influential philosopher interested in teasing the notion of intuition away from the trappings of 19<sup>th</sup>-century intuitionism. Rawls proposed the fictive device of the original position as a means of avoiding what he regarded as an excessively pluralistic sort of intuitionism. According to his model, imaginary contractors pass behind a veil of ignorance in order to agree on the principles of a social contract. The veil leaves them without access to their more idiosyncratic intuitions and commitments, as well as to information about their race, gender, class, and religious identity in the real world. The principles approved on the basis of this thought experiment entail

that ordinary citizens, when deliberating in the public forum on constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice, are obliged to rely essentially only on *reasons that any reasonable deliberator could reasonably accept*. In this context, a *reasonable* deliberator is supposed to be *socially cooperative*. Rorty's account of cultural change appears to destabilize the italicized concepts in a way that would make them too indeterminate for Rawls' purposes. The original position is meant to issue in principles with determinate implications, not in a perpetual agonism. As far as I know, Rorty never pursued this issue, which can be summarized in the question: What happens to public reason's restrictions in times of cultural transition? A related Emersonian worry is whether Rawlsian political theory's appeal to the notion of social cooperation biases public reason in favor of conformity. Rawls responds to intuitionism in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 20, 34-39, 46-51; and *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 73, 92, 113. He explains the original position in Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, chapter 1; and *Political Liberalism*, lecture 1. His account of public reason and its restrictions appears in *Political Liberalism*, lectures 2, 4, and 6.

<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Andrea Sun-Mee Jones, *Ethics of the Obvious* (Princeton University doctoral dissertation, 2007) highlights the importance, for a critical theory of ideology, of what members of a society count as *obviously* true or good.

<sup>50</sup> The admission comes in "Self-Reliance," *Essays and Lectures*, 272.

<sup>51</sup> Emerson refers to the "unattained by attainable self" in "History," *Essays and Lectures*, 239, in the fifth paragraph of *Essays: First Series*. The expression "mysterious ladder," which appears in "Circles," *Essays and Lectures*, 405, alludes to Genesis 28:10-19. It is this ladder that becomes a disorienting staircase when viewed with a disconsolate eye in ¶1 of "Experience."

<sup>52</sup> George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 7. Also see Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 18-20.

<sup>53</sup> Emerson took an intense interest in a younger acquaintance of his named Jones Very (1813-80), a poet and mystic who was prone to ecstasies of questionable sanity. In 1838 Very had an intense experience of identification with Christ and soon thereafter required hospitalization. Upon release from the hospital, Very spent a week with Emerson, who then confided to his journal that he had told Very "that I saw clearly that if my wife, my child, my mother, should be taken from me, I should still remain whole with the same capacity of cheap enjoyment from all things."

Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 70-81.

<sup>54</sup> M.A. Screech, *Erasmus: Ecstasy and The Praise of Folly* (London: Penquin, 1980), 207.

<sup>55</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 262.

<sup>56</sup> For an account of the tradition of reflection on ecstatic states and of Montaigne's place in it, see Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*.

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<sup>57</sup> See the editors' introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), xcvi-civ.

<sup>58</sup> This journal entry is dated August 1, 1835. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Journals 1820-1842*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald (New York: Library of America, 2010), 426-7.

<sup>59</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 83.

<sup>60</sup> *Selected Journals 1820-1842*, 747.

<sup>61</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Writings on Politics and Society*, Vol. 1, ed. John Morrow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 79-96, esp. 86.

<sup>62</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), from the chapter entitled "Mr. Coleridge." Originally published in 1825.

<sup>63</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), 270.

<sup>64</sup> *The Complete Essays*, 1207, 1236.

<sup>65</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 696. Later in the same chapter, Emerson writes that "the world-spirit is a good swimmer, and storms and wave can not drown him" (709).

<sup>66</sup> See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 217-24; Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 215-21.

<sup>67</sup> "There is no virtue which is final; all are initial. The virtues of society are vices of the saint. The terror of reform is the discovery that we must cast away our virtues, or what we have always esteemed such, into the same pit that has consumed our grosser vices" ("Circles"). *Essays and Lectures*, 411.

<sup>68</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 262.

<sup>69</sup> As P. Adams Sitney has pointed out to me in correspondence, Emerson might also have in mind the dialectical structure of the Epistle to the Romans.

<sup>70</sup> Richard R. O'Keefe uses the expression "dialectical imagination" in *Mythic Archetypes in Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Blakean Reading* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1995), esp. chapter 1.

<sup>71</sup> Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 9, where Kateb mentions "Fate" as the exceptional case. I am saying that there is a good deal of evidence in "Experience" that Emerson wants to harmonize ideals and the material practices of reform. I shall return to Kateb momentarily.

<sup>72</sup> Arsic gives an informative account of these practices in *On Leaving*, parts 2 and 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 259.

<sup>74</sup> I am not claiming that Emerson is clear about the explanatory role I believe his metaphysics is playing for him. Take his belief in the Over-soul. My suggestion is that he reaches this belief *inferentially*, as the result of an attempt to infer the best available explanation of his evaluative intuitions. Coleridge would explain the same intuitions in an orthodox Christian way, and Dewey, Durkheim, Santayana, and Rorty would explain them in a naturalist way.

Thinking of metaphysical commitments as having an essentially explanatory role in relation to evaluative intuitions raises some interesting possibilities for a



theorist of democratic culture. Suppose that Tom, Dick, and Mary all intuitively respond to the Dreyfus case, the Anthony Burns trial, or the Abu Ghraib scandal with moral revulsion. When witnessing the relevant events, each says, “That’s *horrible*,” and the judgment thus expressed is noninferential. The italicized evaluative predicate is something they all employ. They apply it, let us assume, to the very same cases. They might still give three different accounts – Christian, Emersonian, and naturalist – of where the intuition comes from and what it gets at or is about. The different metaphysical positions can be thought of as representing competing attempts to rationalize intuitions that the three individuals have trouble rejecting, and the metaphysical debate among them can be modeled as aiming for a kind of reflective equilibrium. Thinking of the metaphysical dispute in this way sheds light on what the relevant forms of overlapping consensus might be, at the level of coalitions and at the level of the civic nation. Sometimes, shared intuitions and shared practices of reason-exchange matter more than shared explanations of intuitions.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 97.

<sup>76</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “An Awareness of What Is Missing,” in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 15-23.

<sup>77</sup> See West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. Eduardo Cadava revisits these themes productively in “The Guano of History,” in *The Other Emerson*, eds. Branka Arsic and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 101-29.

<sup>78</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 599.

<sup>79</sup> Alex Zakaris, *Individuality and Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, and the Burdens of Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. 94-7.

<sup>80</sup> Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, p. 47.

<sup>81</sup> My reading of “Experience” is therefore closer to Stanley Cavell’s perfectionist interpretation than to Kateb’s. Near the end of “Finding as Founding,” Cavell quotes the first nine sentences of ¶25. His brief commentary first takes up Emerson’s resistance to manipular reform and then highlights the dramatic call for patience in the third strophe. Cavell does not say how either of these sentences is to be related to essay’s final sentence. He does touch briefly on that sentence elsewhere in “Finding as Founding,” but without illuminating its centrality to Emerson’s overall project. Stanley Cavell, “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience’,” in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 77-121, esp. 111-13, 79. See also Cavell, “Afterword,” in *The Other Emerson*, 301-6.

<sup>82</sup> Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero*, 26, 66-7.

<sup>83</sup> In *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 7-33.

<sup>84</sup> *Essay and Lectures*, 493. Emerson’s way of linking hope to action might contain an echo of Book IX of *The Excursion*: “The food of hope / Is meditated action; robbed of this / Her sole support, she languishes and dies. We perish also; for we live by hope

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/ And by desire; we see by the glad light / And breathe the sweet air of futurity /  
And so we live, or else we have no life." *The Works of William Wordsworth*, 884.

<sup>85</sup> *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, 510, 511.

<sup>86</sup> In *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), John Dewey echoes Emerson (and Hegel) as follows: "The aims of philanthropists, of Florence Nightingale, of Howard, of Wilberforce, of Peabody, have not been idle dreams. They have modified institutions. Aims, ideals, do not exist simply in 'mind'; they exist in character, in personality and action" (48). "The aims and ideals that move us are generated through imagination. But they are not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience" (49).

<sup>87</sup> William Goodell's *Come-outism; The Duty of Secession from a Corrupt Church* appeared in 1845. Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 25.

<sup>88</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 592-3.

<sup>89</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 262.

<sup>90</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 70.

<sup>91</sup> These quotations are from Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason*, 287-8. Keane does well to highlight Emerson's allusion to Wordsworth in "Reform."

<sup>92</sup> My interpretation of Emerson's identification, and of the role the Flaxman passage plays in the essay as a whole, differs from that of Maurice S. Lee in *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 182-91. Recall that I am reading the essay from the vantage of its final paragraph. So my approach to the Flaxman passage is via the question: "What sense can we make of this passage given what Emerson says in ¶25?" If the last sentence of ¶25 embraces abolitionism as an ideal-infused material practice that participates in a broader cultural romance, then Apollo's eventual role as defender of Orestes becomes relevant.

<sup>93</sup> I am grateful to John Bowlin, Eduardo Cadava, Scott Davis, Molly Farneth, Ryan Harper, George Kateb, Lou Ruprecht, and P. Adams Sitney for comments on the first draft of this paper. I have learned a great deal about Emerson from Eddie Glaude and from the students who took the graduate seminar that he and I taught on "Religion and the Fragility of Democracy" in the spring of 2010.