Chapter - 3

R. W. Emerson’s Philosophy of Transcendentalism

Emerson is one of the best writers in the world. He was the greatest writer of the 19th century America. He was not only a writer, but also a social activist and thinker. He was a religious reformer. The best thing is to say that he was a Transcendentalist. People speak of him as a pragmatist, prose stylist, orphic poet, theorist, prudential Yankee, social commentator and intellectual. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris observe,

‘With its heightened recognition of Emerson’s importance, contemporary scholarship follows the lead of a long line of American thinkers and writers. Emerson is the founding figure in the American philosophical tradition. Henry Thoreau, William James, George Santayana, John Dewey, Arthur Lovejoy, Henry Aiken, William Gass, Cornel West, and Cavell himself have all struggled to win a blessing from Emerson, the Necessary Angel of Concord. Emerson has also provided a powerful impetus for American poets, whether by attraction or repulsion. Harold Bloom has focused on Emerson as ‘ghostly father,’ especially for such writers as Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and A. R. Ammons. A list of Emerson’s progeny would go on to include Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, Charles Olson, and others. Social thinkers also return again and again to Emerson, as the late Yale president A. Bartlett Giamatti’s condemnation of Emerson’s influence on American culture attests. Finally, American fiction writers have paid a different sort of attention to Emerson, both representing him directly and creating characters
who are recognizably disciples of the sage. Such figures, whether of veneration or derision, make their way variously into the work of Melville, Hawthorne, Alcott, Twain, Howells, James, Cather, Santayana, and Ellison.¹

Matthew Arnold declared that Emerson’s was the most important work done in prose in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche called him a 'brother soul.' He is said to have read Emerson often. One of Emerson’s disciples, Moncure Conway, likened him to Buddha, and twenty years later William James would pronounce him divine.

As a legendary figure Emerson had a place in novels also. William Dean Howells, Kate Chopin (in The Awakening) and Henry James (in The Bostonians) depicted in some capacity as if Emerson to be the last link with the heroic age of New England life – the age of plain living and high thinking. Bliss Perry’s The Heart of Emerson’s Journal was a best seller in 1936. Gradually, Emerson faded into school and college curriculum. He became a classical figure.

Emerson produced stirring lectures, addresses, essays, and poems. It is said,

Emerson sits at the crossroads in a crucial moment of American history and like his own Sphinx asks the unanswered questions of our collective life – questions about the relative claims of conservatism and radicalism, the establishment and the movement, private property and communism; questions about slavery and freedom, the rights of women, the viability of institutions, the possibility of reform, the efficacy of protest, the exercise of power; indeed he asks perpetually
about the meaning of America itself and its prospects among the nations.\textsuperscript{2}

Emerson was not only the transcendental mediator, but also an American thinker deeply concerned with public issues. Bliss Parry observes,

‘Emerson’s roots lay deep in the common soil. He represented a significant generation of American endeavor, and...was a factor in the social and political as well as the intellectual history of his era.’\textsuperscript{3}

Emerson loved history, and secular life. Unlike Hegel, Emerson believes in man’s individuality. We are part of history. We should also make history. ‘Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself,’ he thinks. He thinks an autobiography should be a book of answers from one individual to the main questions of the time.

Emerson’s other forebears had much to do with it. His father William noted with chagrin in his dutiful \textit{Historical Sketch of the First Church in Boston} that his own great-grandfathers were zealous supporters of the evangelist George Whitefield, of whom Boston’s First Church did not approve changes. It was therefore natural for Emerson to continue the struggle when his own time came. He characterized his father’s generation as belonging to an ‘early ignorant and transitional Month-of-March, in New England culture,’ thereby clearly implying that his own Transcendental springtime was the inevitable next step.

Like his father Emerson had graduated from Harvard College and become pastor of an important Boston church (the Second, not the First); and again like his father he was elected to the Boston School Committee and named chaplain to the state senate. It was all easy, fatally easy, but the identity thus procured was false.
Nothing was more crucial to Emerson’s development that his realization that his generation, his ‘culture-renewing moment,’ constituted a new and distinct age. If it in some ways bound him, time also had presented him with an opportunity. He became virtually obsessed with defining his age.

In 1827 Emerson had read William Hazlitt’s *The Spirit of the Age* and found out more about his destiny. He learned there, for example, that Wordsworth and Coleridge, though members of his father’s ‘age-group movement,’ were closer to him in their own impulses and aims. They – and especially Wordsworth – were for Hazlitt pure emanations of the ‘spirit of the age,’ the modern spirit, ushered in and exemplified by the French Revolution.

Waldo had been educated to prize his pedigree, though it was his own humor to despise it. And there, close by his side, was his father’s sister and surrogate, Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, who frequently spoke of the virtues of Waldo’s clergymen ancestors, renowned for their piety and eloquence. He acknowledged all that but chafed under the weighty inheritance, insisting, bravely: ‘The dead sleep in their moonless night; my business is with the living.’

The following year, in “The American Scholar,” Emerson whistled a brave tune as he walked past the old sepulchers, but the bones rattled again and his inner debate revived: ‘Our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion. We cannot enjoy anything for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists.’

One year later Emerson delivered his decisive blow against his father’s church and profession in the Divinity School ‘Address’ and then, indeed, the bones rattled more strongly than ever. Even friends of his own
age were troubled, complaining that the thought they approved intellectually of his doctrine, their feelings were still bound to the old ways.

Emerson's Hamlet side, so to speak, made him perennially concerned with questions of manliness and potency. Emerson wanted to sever the link between America and Europe. Joel Porte observes,

He was for the man who is strong, healthy, unfettered, the man who knows that nothing is got for nothing and who will stop at nothing to put himself in touch with events and their force...The 'thinkers' Emerson really admires are those with 'coarse energy,' - the 'bruisers,' who have run the gauntlet of caucus and tavern through the county or the state,' the politicians who despite their vices have 'the good-nature of strength and courage.'

Emerson understands that politics is a deleterious profession, that none come back quite clean from bathing in those murky waters. All high principles are finally compromised in the Washington miasma. The best we can hope for, says Emerson, is men of rough honesty who have no stomach for lying or truckling and will stand boldly for what they want, be it good or bad. They will use what power they can and not dissemble, and we are therefore enabled to meet them on their own grounds. Emerson simply had come to the realization that the exercise of power is the name of the game in politics.

Emerson rejected churchmen and men of refinement. Emerson had reason enough, by the time he published *The Conduct of Life* in 1860, to feel betrayed by the presumed men of principle of his own class and background. Following Daniel Webster's infamous speech of the seventh of March 1850
in favor of the Fugitive Slave Law, almost a thousand distinguished citizens
of Boston, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., published a letter in
support of Webster's position and Emerson was outraged. As the crisis over
the Fugitive Slave Law sharpened, Emerson filled his journal with angry
denunciations of men of refinement and churchmen who supported what he
called the 'filthy law.'

Emerson would have nothing to do with an American civilization, so-called, willing to cover its crimes with cries of manifest destiny and America first. 'We have much to learn, much to correct,' he writes, 'a great deal of lying vanity. 'I wish to see America,' he continues, 'not like the old powers of the earth, grasping, exclusive and narrow, but a benefactor such as no country ever was, hospitable to all nations, legislating for all nationalities.' He thinks nations were made to help each other as much as families were; and all advancement is by ideas, and not by brute force or mechanic force.' Emerson was a severe critic of an America capable of invading Mexico, oppressing blacks, and denying women equal rights.

America in the New World represented for Emerson at least potentially the noblest hopes of humankind. 'It is our part,' he notes, 'to carry out to the last the ends of liberty and justice.' As against the degraded New England voice that would finally proclaim that the business of America is business, Emerson argued for different definition. 'Trade and government will not alone be the favored aims of mankind, but every useful, every elegant art, every exercise of the imagination, the height of reason, the noblest affection, the purest religion will find their home in American institutions, and write American laws for the benefit of men.
Transcendentalism and its Times:

Emerson felt that the times were growing reflective and intellectual. Transcendentalism represented one of the recurrent periods in which the party of the past and the party of the future collide. At times the resistance is reanimated, the schism runs under the world and appears in literature, philosophy, church, state and social customs. Transcendentalism was thus a moment in history containing both expansive hope and a sense of strife and embattlement, and marked by the emergence of new intellectual categories, new relations among persons and classes, and new ethical and political imperatives.

Emerson dramatized the mood of the period in his lecture on “The Transcendentalist” (1842), portraying the ‘Transcendentalist’ as an aspiring and stubborn youth who is pressed to justify a younger generation’s hopes and actions before the skeptical inquiries of the world, a voice of conventional common sense with a recognizably parental attitude. This tells us much about the mood of resistance to established conventions and expectations, and the desire for rethinking and remaking, that characterized the movement.

The Transcendentalists’ struggle for growth stems from their New England’s history. This history was Puritans’ history based on Calvinism. Of course, Calvinism advocated the concepts of election, and grace which the Transcendentalists contested. In the 1850s, many Boston ministers spoke of individual piety and ethical practice. In the 1740 Charles Chauncey made a dissent note advocating a positive view of human nature. Harvard professor Henry Wares created further ripples in Puritanism, leading to the formation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. William Ellery Channing, minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston argued that Calvinist
doctrines stunted the moral development of the individual. 'It is plain,' Channing wrote, 'that a doctrine, which contradicts our best ideas of goodness and justice, cannot come from the just and good God, or be a true representation of his character.' He emphasized the divine potential within every individual, and made his religious teaching center on the necessity and the means of cultivating that divine potential. This was as good as rejection of Calvin. Self-culture as Channing propounded it stressed a continuing process of development rather than an instantaneous regeneration, as was being increasingly preached among evangelical revivalists. He still recognized the importance of religious experience in the soul's spiritual development. The young Emerson responded to Channing enthusiastically.

Emerson to begin with had little interest in ministry, because it was both dull and dry, and he had little faith in Puritanism based on Calvin. Still he joined it and resigned it a few years later at the Second Church in Boston in 1832. He launched a career as a lecturer essayist and poet, still incorporating spiritual properties.

Emerson’s first book, *Nature* (1836), was part philosophical treatise, part nature hymn, and part revivalist preaching of a Transcendental variety. Emerson’s religious and ethical vision fascinated younger readers engaged in their own project of character formation and identity building, like Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, both of whom were strongly molded by Emerson’s thinking and developed close friendships with him. Like Channing, Emerson became something of an exemplar of new possibilities in American intellectual life. His nondogmatic, spiritually engaged, ethically centered preaching and lecturing helped young Unitarian ministers such as James Freeman Clarke, George Ripley, and Theodore Parker see larger possibilities in their careers in the ministry. This revitalized Unitarianism.
Historians think that Transcendentalism went hand in hand with the moral outrages of the South as well as democratic outbursts in Europe in the 1830s and 1840s. When Emerson made an address at Harvard Divinity School, the clash between the Transcendentalists and Unitarians intensified in 1838.

Emerson urged the students not to be bound by the dead formality of the models of preaching available to them. “The soul is not preached,” he told them. ‘The Church seems to totter to its fall, almost all life extinct’” (CW I: 84).6 This spiritless preaching was linked to a lifeless theology, in which ‘historical Christianity’ rather than a living faith was preached, signified by the reliance on an inflated reverence for the person of Jesus rather than the principles that he stood for. Jesus ‘spoke of miracles,’ Emerson explained, ‘for he felt that man’s life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew this daily miracle shines, as the man is diviner.’ The present-day church, he felt, had lost this sense of immediacy and relevance. ‘But the very word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives of false impression. It is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain. The New Testament miracles were not the key to religious revelation, Emerson averred, but rather the moral sentiment which innately resided within every individual. The prominent Unitarian leader Andrews Norton, who was engaged in writing a detailed scholarly study explaining and defending the authenticity and historical accuracy of the biblical evidences of Christianity, responded to Emerson with an attack on the pantheistic tendencies and predilection for linguistic obscurity that he found in the new school in literature and philosophy.

By this Emerson became more visible. Goethe in Europe said that ‘Emerson was the soul of his century.’ Goethe cast a spell on America. The
Transcendentalists responded with similar enthusiasm to the English Romantics, especially William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle. Wordsworth's introspective concern with spiritual growth and his sensitivity to nature as the corresponding mirror to the soul were echoed and elaborated in Emerson's *Nature* and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Emerson read Carlyle's expositions of new thought and writing in Germany with intensity and eagerness in the early 1830s, seeking him out in Scotland in 1833 to form what would be a lifelong friendship. In discussing his age as one of revolutionary change in "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson explained the Romantics' concern with ordinary experience as a significant affirmation of the dignity and value of the individual. The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life became the topics of the time.

These influences of modern literature were also supplemented by a wide variety of religious and philosophical influences. The Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions were formative to Emerson's thinking; he included Plato as one of his *Representative Men* in the 1850 volume by that title.

Seeing himself as an expositor of the Idealist tradition in philosophy, of which Plato was the founder, Emerson defined Transcendentalism as Idealism as it appears in 1842. He also recognized the importance of Immanuel Kant and the German Idealist philosophical tradition to his own work and that of his contemporaries.

Further stimulus came from the newly translated texts of Eastern religion and philosophy, which both Emerson and Thoreau read with eagerness, finding important confirmation for the direction of their thinking. Emerson urged Thoreau to prepare a series of articles on ethnical scriptures for *The Dial*, and Thoreau was particularly inspired by Hindu philosophy,
weaving it through *Walden* as a scripture whose authority matched that of the New Testament.

The Transcendentalists studied Emanuel Swedenborg. In "The American Scholar" Emerson called Swedenborg a man of genius whose importance lay in his ability to show the connexion between nature and the affections of the soul. In 1840 the Transcendentalists launched their own periodical *The Dial*, with Margaret Fuller as the first editor, and Emerson, George Ripley, and Bronson Alcott involved in the planning process. They intended it as the vehicle for the expression of their own thought, and the retransmission of texts and ideas that had been important to them, and they felt that it would speak to a wider audience of young people who were also engaged in the process of cultural and social reform.

With *The Dial*, Emerson and his colleagues hoped to give expression to that spirit that lifts men to a higher platform, a change of thinking and perspective which would also mean a change in habits and actions. *The Dial* may be the most revealing window into both the excesses and accomplishments of Transcendentalism. It was eclectic in the extreme, containing a mixture of reviews, literary essays, theological discourses, political commentary and theory, and translations.

It also served Emerson as a means of encouraging the work of several aspiring young writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Jones Very, and Christopher Pearse Cranch. It seems increasingly evident that the most significant contribution of *The Dial* was the experience and confidence it gave to its first editor, Fuller, and the venue it provided her for her critical work on Goethe and her landmark treatise on the rights of women, which she expanded into the *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845).
The Transcendentalists were ministers, lecturers, and writers. They lived by several means and variously. They were resourceful. Frederic Henry Hedge and James Freeman Clarke were committed churchmen and committed reformers, engaged in both preserving the church and helping it adapt to the changes of the modern world. Hedge was a parish minister in Bangor, Maine, during the late 1830s, while Transcendentalism was in ferment in the Boston area, and his experience there combined with his commitment to the church as an institution to temper his theological radicalism. But he remained a committed intuitionist in his religious epistemology, one of the cardinal points of departure in the Transcendentalist movement away from Unitarianism. Clarke worked to establish Unitarianism in the Midwest, taking on a pastorate at a newly formed Unitarian church in Louisville, Kentucky.

The Transcendentalists were experimentalists in the commodity of life itself. They were educationists. They called for self-culture, which stressed introspective self-knowledge, spiritual aspiration and growth of inner resources. Emerson regarded his life a kind of grand educational experiment.

Bronson Alcott, Emerson’s close friend and intellectual ally, founded the Temple School in Boston, and worked with the belief that the teacher’s role was to bring out approach to education than was common in the early nineteenth century.

Margaret Fuller’s experience as a teacher at Alcott’s school and later at another progressive school, the Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island, was formative in the development of her intellectual career. Fuller followed her experience as a teacher by establishing an annual series of ‘Conversations’ for women in Boston from 1839 to 1844.
Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (natheniel Howthorne’s wife’s sister), another Transcendentalist deeply concerned with educational reform, worked as a teacher and a governess, later opening a school with her sister Mary, and then working with Bronson Alcott in his Temple School, where she transcribed his dialogues with his pupils in Record of a School (1835). She later became an advocate of the establishment of kindergarten education in America.

The efforts in publishing, ecclesiastical reform, and educational advancement show the Transcendentalists working in and through the settled institutions of the church and the school to effect progressive change.

Thoreau had agrarian experiment at Walden Pond, in which he tested the virtues of strict economy, the study of nature, and the contemplative life. Thoreau’s brilliant account of his life in the woods in Walden has become an essential American book, not only central to the canon of nineteenth-century American literature, but also a founding text for the modern environmental movement. Thoreau’s experiment, however, was a solitary one. Others attempted communal agrarian experiments, the most famous of which is Brook Farm, a commune established by George Ripley in 1840.

Emerson called Ripley’s Brook Farm a noble and humane plan. Emerson, Thoreau, Channing and Brownson – all advocated social reform. Brownson made the case for such efforts in an 1840 essay, “The Laboring Classes,” a critique of the political limitations of the doctrine of self-culture. Brownson saw the nature of labor in the newly industrializing economy as the key to the times, which were marked by the new struggle between the operative and his employer. William Henry Channing, nephew of the prominent Unitarian leader, formed the Christian Union of Associationists in 1842 in an attempt to establish an organized advocacy for politically
progressive views within a religious framework. In 1844 the Brook Farmers decided to endorse the vision of the French political theorist Charles Fourier, who called for the establishment of ‘phalanxes,’ communal organizations that were highly systematized in their organization and designation of duties and activities.

Between the individualism of Emerson and Thoreau, and the commitment to Associationism represented by Brook Farm, Margaret Fuller presents an interesting compromise, although as she matured intellectually, her thinking developed toward a form of associationism. Her book on women’s rights, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, is an extension of Emerson’s premises on self-culture to the situation of women, with Fuller arguing that a full range of opportunities should be accorded for women’s development and expression. She became a correspondent for the *New York Tribune* in 1844, where she wrote on both literature and issues of social reform, and she eventually traveled to Italy, where she became engaged in the Italian Revolution of 1848 led by Giuseppe Mazzini.

The Transcendentalism affected the American Civil War (1861-65). The various Transcendentalists spread out into various causes, affecting the Civil War.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson as an Individual:** Emerson was the seventh generation New England Pilgrim Fathers. But Emerson, like Howthorne, never brooded over the family past. In fact, he rarely remembered his father William who was a strict master and died when Ralph Waldo was eight years of age. Whether or not Ruth Haskins Emerson and Mary Moody Emerson often recalled their deceased kinsman William, these women raised Waldo and his brothers within a complex multigenerational New England
family, keeping sentences and sentiments from the longer family past very much alive. After William’s death in 1811, Ruth maintained a fierce loyalty to his wider family and its ministerial calling, far above the merchant careers of her own Boston relatives. Working incessantly as mistress of a boarding house, she succeeded in sending four sons to Harvard. Further, she sought to keep an Emersonian presence at her house in the person of William’s younger sister Mary, even though this independent, unmarried woman chafed at domestic responsibility and often bolted. And both women kept their boys in touch with the Emerson’s ancestral home in Concord, the ‘Old Manse,’ birthplace of William and Mary.

Emerson’s grandfather (from mother’s side) Ezra Ripley was a minister in Concord. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s family memory was highly selective, shaped by a two-generation experience of bereavement and a need to recreate the past as imaginative reality. In his “Historical Discourse” he remembered his ancestor Peter Bulkeley and Bliss in his “Concord Hymn.” Emerson yet lived in significant relationship with his great ancestors Daniel Bliss, William Emerson, Phebe, Samuel Moody and Joseph’s wife Mary.

A scholar named Perry Miller traces Emerson’s spiritual ancestor to the colonial days and later to Jonathan Edwards of the Great Awakening in the 1740s. Still Emerson’s father William as a Boston minister (Stepson of Ripley) grew different from his three minister-ancestors Emerson, Moody and Bliss.

Through his years as a student and young minister, Waldo responded to the full intensity of Mary’s idealizations with skepticism; and in 1826, as Aunt Mary celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of America’s Revolution, he
declared his exemption from all requirements to measure up to heroes of the past. He yet said, ‘my business is with living.’

That leading remained a vital theme in Waldo’s mind through his years of early, most individualistic authorship. In the 1837 journal passage on ancestral religion, after explicitly naming his forebears’ qualities as Mary had made them known, he returned to a vital series of related thoughts on the present moment; then inserted a passage from the book of proverbs, ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’

Waldo often recognized Mary Moody Emerson’s power in his life as a voice of the religious past, but his representations diminished her influence as well. Mary ‘instructed my youth,’ he wrote at 21 in 1825, distancing her from the present moment of new adulthood. In fact, her influence was far from over. Preparing to preach a year later, he implored her to suggest the secret oracles which such a commission needs by continuing her uniquely provocative letters. By 1837 he embraced rather than rejected Mary’s ancestral tradition, but still identified her chiefly as an influence over childhood through the transmission of stories about the past. It is said, "Mary was Waldo’s precursor in Harold Bloom’s sense, a predecessor against whom the young writer must struggle even amidst influence, though Bloom referred to the fathers of literary tradition rather than to letter-writing aunts."7

Mary’s was a representative life. Rereading her letters, Emerson discovered not only piety but genius, that key word of Romanticism. Still an enthusiast, seeking God in moments of joyful consciousness, she found revelation in the mind’s intuitions and nature’s phenomena as well as in the Bible.
William Emerson of Boston, Mary’s brother (and writer Emerson’s father), also observed the eclipse of 1806, but as a member of a Natural Philosophy Society in collective pursuit of empirical knowledge. Sister and brother were both children of the American Enlightenment, both allied to Boston Unitarianism, but with widely divergent sensibilities. William had found his calling in the creation of a new social order; from First Church Boston he promoted rational accomplishment and eschewed enthusiasm. He and Mary supported each other personally but agreed about nothing.

Mary also wrote for her brother William’s *Monthly Anthology* on topics like solitude, nature and imagination. Its living wit shaped both Waldo’s entry into the Unitarian ministry and his eventual body of thought after resigning from it. He requested her aid in the spring of 1824, just a month before dedicating his studies to the church in admiration of William Ellery Channing’s eloquence. If the Unitarian founder was quite genuinely Waldo’s model preacher, Mary was his active source. He once more invoked her secret oracles two years later after receiving letters epitomizing her proto-Transcendentalist views.

Mary’s partnership in Waldo’s thinking always coexisted with argument, but not, as generations of interpreters have assumed, argument between the polar opposites of Romantic intuitionism and Calvinist orthodoxy.

When Waldo returned to Concord two years later to initiate a career of writing from original perception, fragments of the Emerson family gathered as well. Ruth Haskins Emerson accompanied her son and kept house at the Manse for now-widowed Ezra Ripley. Charles visited constantly from Boston and anticipated settling with his Concord fiancée Elizabeth Hoar. And Mary Moody Emerson rejoined the group from her upcountry farm in
Maine, eager to have a say in the informal symposium of conversation that immediately began.

Waldo completed *Nature* in her absence — and incorporated into it a philosophical idealism, Romantic enthusiasm, and apocalypse of mind that were hers as well as his.

Mary continued, usually from a distance, to comment upon Waldo’s career in a complex language itself revealing their kindred spirit. Receiving a copy of *Nature*, she wrote back some of it as invaluable to the lover of nature.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s family history still, however, remains a powerful text scattered through his journals. Some of the late transcription of Mary’s Almanacks produced his most telling thoughts on her place in the profound changes of consciousness within that history.

**The Radical Emerson:** Emerson seems to have been radical. He was, of course, conservative. His views of the current life were not so provoking. His views of soul and god were timeless, and he clothed them newly. The radical Emerson was rather historical.

Some of Emerson’s most familiar writings, moreover, are only marginally pertinent to his radicalism. His book *Nature* predates his open ideological involvement with the times. So, to a surprising degree, does *Essays, First Series*, published in 1841 but quarried from lectures and journals of the 1830s, and nowhere more anachronistic than in its opening essay, “History,” whose basic a historicism sits oddly with the dynamic meliorism of the more contemporaneous “Circles.” Emerson’s radical period, if so it may be called, is a four-year sub-phases of his high
Transcendentalist career bounded on one side by the Panic of 1837 and on the other by his 1841-42 lectures on “The Times.”

Emerson’s framework for interpreting the age was his understanding of three centuries of post-Reformation history, and his sense of what practically needed to be done was shaped by his estimate of what lay in himself as a speaker and writer to do.

Emerson’s major production during the years of his radicalism was the course of lectures he delivered in Boston every winter with the exception of the 1840-41 season. Explicitly or not, his subject in each of these annual performances was the soul in relation to the tendencies of the present age, which he scanned with the attention of a latter-day millennialist looking for signs of the second coming.

The drama of engagement and proselytism is enacted more centrally in four of the occasional addresses of the period – the “Address on Education” (1837), “The American Scholar” (1837), “Man the Reformer” (1841), and “The Young American” (1844) – and in the 1841-42 lectures on “The Times,” which together trace Emerson’s journey from social revolutionary to liberal accommodationist. In considering these texts as potentially radical it is useful to recall Marx’s distinction between ‘philosophers,’ who ‘have only interpreted the world,’ and activists like Marx himself who wish fundamentally and swiftly ‘to change it.’ (Karl Marx. “Theses on Feuerbach” in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 145).

On the issues of gender, race, and class that have become indices of political definition, Emerson was a hesitant or tardy reformer at best. While acknowledging that true genius is androgynous, he was disabled by his own personal and vocational anxieties about manliness from doing justice to the
nascent feminist movement, though he could ambivalently admire at least one of its proponents, Margaret Fuller. The question of slavery vexed him further because his distaste for the character and methods of the early abolitionists was coupled with embarrassment before his antislavery friends and with moral guilt. Starting with his 1844 address “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” Emerson did become a concerned, sometimes frustrated, but always committed social activist, very much involved with, and interested in, the abolition of slavery. His engagement with abolition, however, coincided with his general disengagement from sweeping cultural reform. What Len Gougeon refers to as his ‘silent years’ on slavery (1838-44) were precisely the years of Emerson’s sharpest attacks on capitalism.

On class, Emerson had least to say beyond Romantic sentimentalizations of the poor and recurrent attempts to reconcile their sufferings with cosmic optimism. He himself had been a poor boy — his widowed mother took in boarders — and he came to terms with his early wants and humiliations through an adult belief in the moral compensations of genteel hardship. The deserving poor were strengthened by their schooling in necessity, while the indolent or vicious reaped as they sowed.

The chief reference point for Emerson’s radicalism is not gender, race, or class but his relationship to a phenomenon that manifested itself variously in economics, politics, philosophy, and literature, and that impressed contemporary observers for better as the leading characteristic of the age: the emergence of the individual. By 1848 a liberalism understood as universal participation in the opportunities held out by the United States had come to form the conceptual boundary of political discourse.

More recently, Bercovitch refined Emerson’s argument by distinguishing between individualism (laissez-faire acquisitiveness) and its
humanistic opposite, individuality, a belief in the absolute integrity, spiritual primacy, and inviolable sanctity of the self. Emerson himself tried to resist such a distinction, preferring to believe that material and spiritual development were complementary aspects of full selfhood. Where free-trade Democrats found their origins in Thomas Paine and Adam Smith, Emerson, who saw the present aspects of our social state as having their root in an invisible spiritual reality.

‘There is a historical progress of man,’ Emerson began the “Human Culture” lectures of 1837-38:

The modern mind teaches (in extremes) that the nation exists for the individual; for the guardianship and education of every man. The Reformation contained the new thought. The English Revolution is its expansion. The American Declaration of Independence is a formal announcement of it by a nation to nations, though a very limited expression...The Vote, - universal suffrage – is another; the downfall of war, the attack upon slavery, are others. The furious democracy which in this country from the beginning of its history, has shown a wish...to leave out men of mark and send illiterate and low persons as deputies,...is only a perverse or as yet obstructed operation of the same instinct, - a stammering and stuttering out of impatience to articulate the awful words I am.\(^8\)

With its boundless space, democratic polity, and absence of confining traditions and social structures, America took its place within Emersonian teleology less as a distinct nation than as a set of enabling conditions for the prototypical triumph of the self.
No one in America studied the signs of the times more closely than Emerson, whose journals of the 1830s and early 40s are a seismometer of the tendencies of the nation. Immersed in history, Emerson unavoidably misread history, yet his misreading is itself historical not merely as a function of his implication in Jacksonian ideology.

This is the end Emerson proposed for himself in a journal entry of April 1834, which might stand as an epigraph to his work of the next decade:

Men are convertible....They want awakening. Get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep, out into God's universe, to a perception of its beauty & hearing of its Call and...your prosy, selfish sensualist [originally, 'selfish Capitalist'] awakes a God & is conscious of force to shake the world.\(^9\)

It is telling that Emerson should have written 'selfish Capitalist,' then thought better of it. Throughout most of his career Emerson was ambivalent toward capitalism, regarding it on one side as the economic manifestation of contemporary individualism and on the other as the gravest threat to individualism. Using his annual lecture series as a secular pulpit, Emerson gave himself to preaching what he later described as the one doctrine that informed all his work namely, the infinitude of the private man.

Frustrated by the incongruence between microhistory - God's plan for the self and His plan for the community - Emerson could exalt the individual only by extricating him from society and denying any collective progress. 'There is in society an incontrovertible brute force and it is not for the society of any actual present moment that is now or ever shall be, that we can hope or augur well. Progress is not for society. Progress belongs to the Individual.'
Delivered in August of the Panic year, "The American Scholar" is Emerson's entrance into history as a radical seeking not simply to reinterpret the world or even, in outward Marxian fashion, to change it, but to change it by means of reinterpreting it. In its sections on nature, books, and action (the three influences on the scholar), the address is a locus classicus for Emersonian theories of the relation of the soul to the world.

Although politically a success, the America Emerson portrays is a cultural and moral failure given to a low materialism and content to take its thought and art from Europe. The scholar is neglected, even dishonored. So far as he is indolent or timid, moreover, the scholar dishonors himself and is heavily to blame for the nation's cultural barrenness as well as for his own disrepute.

The achievement of "The American Scholar" is to begin with the scholar's condition of effeminate and marginality and perform a Copernican revolution which makes him the center of a vital order that the newly awakened American materialist rallies to join. The scholar, in Emerson's mythology, dives deep into himself, discovers truth, and finds to his astonishment that his former detractors now 'drink his words because he fulfills for them their own nature....The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels. This is my music: this is myself" (CW 1: 63).

As an augury of this future, Emerson cites the Romantic exploration of the near, the low, the common that accompanied and poeticized the emergence of political democracy and attracted literary youths with its generous promise. The appeal, implicit at first but open and impassioned by Emerson's peroration, is for the young to align themselves with the spirit of the age and against the world of their fathers, which has demeaned the ideal
of human development to a smug materialism that now, with the Panic, has failed even in its own terms.

Beneath its account of ‘Man Thinking’ and its plea for cultural independence, “The American Scholar” does for its audience what all ideological manifestos undertake to do; it rearranges social facts so as to provide a map of what is in society; a report of how it is working, how it is failing, and also of how it could be changed; and thus an exhilarating call to action embedded in a world-referencing discourse that presumably justifies that call.10

From “The American Scholar” through “Man the Reformer” (1841), Emerson ranged himself with disempowered literary intellectuals seeking to capture America for the ideal of culture. The movement and the establishment, Emerson called the rival parties, whose struggle for prominence was the defining fact of history.

In nothing is Emerson seemingly less radical than in his conviction that the source and agency of social change is the human mind. The actional corollary of his position – the antithesis of Marxian cultural materialism, in which thought is the reflection, not the cause of social organization – is revolution-by-consciousness. Because history and the state of the world at any one time are directly dependent on the intellectual classification then existing in the minds of men, Emerson would argue in “Circles,” the condition for transforming the entire system of human minds.

Educating the educator was the core intention of Emerson’s “Sermons to Literary Men” of 1837-38 – the Address on Education, “The American Scholar,” and “Literary Ethics” – whose audience was not the American materialist so much as the class of intellectuals who would serve as missionaries to him.
Emerson’s Views on Capitalism: Partly through Emerson’s ideological patterning of the shared but inchoate feelings, of a literary generation, Transcendentalism evolved in the later 1830s from a spiritual ferment among young, well-educated New England Unitarians into a locus for potentially counterhegemonic activity. Converts found work in a variety of enterprises from utopian experiments (Brook Farm, Fruitland, Walden) to reformist causes of one kind or another to missionary labors in the benighted west. Emerson quarreled with capitalism, no doubt.

Contemporary enthusiasm for reform was broader and deeper than ever; the political signs of the times (the Whig victory in 1840, for example) were inauspicious, however, while the economic signs (symbolized by the emergence of the railroad) pointed to a more rampant capitalism rather than a tempered one.

Emerson’s movement toward an accommodation with the Actual order of things in the 1840s is as complex and problematic as his earlier radicalism had been, and it demonstrates once again the intimate connection between his social thought, his metaphysics, and his ongoing crisis of vocation.

Aware that his characteristic role was indeed to speak, Emerson devoted himself in the early 1840s to literary activities: to the Essays, First Series that he was writing as a sort of apology to the country for his apparent idleness and to the newly launched Transcendentalist quarterly, The Dial, which he envisioned not as a mere literary journal but as one with a more earnest aim such as the times demand. By addressing a variety of contemporary issues – ‘Government, Temperance, Abolition, Trade, &
Domestic Life’ – The Dial would lay the groundwork for the revolution of mind that would prompt a revolution in society.

Although communalism of any sort was anathema to Emerson, it troubled him to turn the Ripleys down – on grounds moreover, that involved a humiliating confession of his maladaptation to social life and his private self-uncertainties. At the opposite pole – radical individualism – stood Emerson’s young disciple, ‘my brave Henry’ Thoreau, whose Spartan life was an object lesson in self-reliance at once inspiring to Emerson in its manly integrity and tacitly reproachful of his own middleclass comfort. A sense of moral uneasiness bordering on shame haunts Emerson’s letters and journals of late 1840-41, a period that might be described as his ‘crisis of complicity.’

The most significant product of this is “Man the Reformer,” delivered in Boston in January 1841 and published in The Dial the following April. The premise of the address in the intrinsic immorality of capitalism – a system of selfishness actuated not by a law of reciprocity; much less by the sentiments of love and heroism, but by principles of distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving but of taking advantage – an immorality chargeable to those who quietly thrive under capitalism as well as to capitalists themselves. It is said,

‘Why needs any man be rich?’ Emerson asks: ‘It is better to go without the conveniences of life than to have them at too great a cost. Let us learn the meaning of economy….Can anything be so elegant as to have few wants and to serve one’s self…?’ (CW I: 154-55).

The example of young Thoreau, whom he cites in all but name, pervades “Man the Reformer” and serves Emerson in subtle and contradictory ways that reveal much about the layered purposes of the
address. As his own energies began to wane, Emerson drew strength from the cadre of idealistic youths that gathered around him, assigning them the work of practical renovation he found unsuited to himself. As the champion of the rising generation, Emerson could celebrate and vicariously share in its reformist enthusiasm and quiet his uncomfortable feeling. If the renunciations of Thoreau seemed to chide him for his compromises with capitalism, their challenge could be met by endorsing and rhetorically incorporating Thoreau.

Emerson also has praise for Ripley’s Brook Farm, which he uses to illustrate the idea ‘that every man ought to stand in primary relations with the work of the world. Having co-opted Thoreau’s and Ripley’s reproofs to him by assimilating the core of their positions, Emerson establishes his radical sympathies and can now, on the ground of declining to be absurd and pedantic in reform, disavow the reformers’ extravagant withdrawal from the advantages of civil society. His alternative is a new order to be realized not through visionary communalism (Ripley’s solution), prickly individualism (Thoreau’s), or class struggle (Brownson’s) “The Laboring Classes,” published in the summer and early fall of 1840, was also on Emerson’s mind but through the spiritual transformation he comprehends in the word ‘love.’

Now the question is is Emerson’s ‘love’ a radical prescription or a guilt-driven evasion? It would be truest to say it is both at once, just as ‘Man the Reformer’ is both wildly optimistic and soberly resigned. By portraying a universal complicity with capitalism from which only a Ripley, a Thoreau, or a Brownson is free, Emerson has made reformist action a matter of such eccentricity as to justify the thoughtful man’s detachment. Yet Emerson’s argument is more than an elaborate self-apology.
“The Times” resurveys the social landscape in an effort to discern the course of history. Emerson’s foil to ‘The Transcendentalist’ (a species of the Reformer) is ‘the Conservative,’ the former taking his stand on man’s indisputable infinitude, the latter on his incontestable limitations. Philosophically, the opposition is between Idealism and Materialism, or the power of consciousness and the negations of hard fact; politically, it is between ‘the two omnipresent parties of History, the party of the Past and the party of the Future. One might call the Emerson of “The Times” a dialectical thinker, save that a dialectic implies progress through contention.

It would be a mistake to regard Emerson’s social thought as a by-product of his metaphysics or, conversely, his metaphysics as a rarefication of his social thought. Both are homologous expressions of his effort to sustain his optimism in the fact of limitation, declining energies, and unmalleable fact.

Like “The American Scholar,” which it seems deliberately to invoke, “The Young American” begins with the problem of a national culture, still unrealized by 1844 but now to be created less through the work of poets and thinkers than through the promptings of the continent itself and the enterprises of its people.

Emerson can associate capitalism with amelioration in nature, which alone permits and authorizes amelioration in mankind. Trade was distasteful to the patrician in Emerson and repugnant to the moral idealist. Did it operate toward a lawful end? Rather than a benefactress of the private self, nature was a terrible communist, reserving all profits to the community, without dividends to individuals. That Emerson should borrow his trope for nature from the counting house shows how deeply he had come to imagine
Providence as a cosmic entrepreneur whose laissez-faire methods could be as harsh as any railroad builder's.

The conflict between capitalism and socialism receded, then, when Emerson came to regard them as sequential macrophases within a three-stage epochal history (feudalism, capitalism and socialism) that loosely parallels Marx's.

Edward Bellamy, Harbert Croly, and the early Van Wyck Brooks, all of whom saw America as evolving organically beyond capitalism and realizing its promise in a socialistic order that would universalize and complete the ideal of democratic selfhood. 'If Government in our present clumsy fashion must go on,' he wrote in March 1843, 'could it not assume the charge of providing each citizen, on his coming age, with a pair of acres, to enable him to get his bread honestly? Perhaps one day it will be done by the state's assuming to distribute the estates of the dead' (JMN 8: 344). Here Emerson seems closer to Orestes Brownson's disbursement of inherited property than to his own rejection of 'meddling, eleemosynary contrivances' in "The Young American." The virtue of socialism as a ruling order was that it refined the problems of wealth and class out of existence and allowed for an individualism purged of material selfishness.

By the time of "Wealth," delivered as a lecture in 1851 and published nine years later in The Conduct of Life, Emerson had become such an apparent celebrant of enterprise as to be widely sought by mercantile societies throughout the East and Midwest. 'Why needs any man be rich?' he had asked in "Man the Reformer." Man is by constitution expensive, and needs to be rich,' he replied a decade later in "Wealth." But Emerson's language and philosophical argument commonly mystified his auditors, who
took his words, as Mary Kupiec Cayton has shown, for an endorsement of the existing order rather than a subtle indictment of its shortcomings.\textsuperscript{11}

It would have been consistent for Emerson to regard economic struggle with the same tough-mindedness he adopted toward biological struggle, but to do so would have been to surrender his belief that experience was inherently moral. It was not enough for Emerson to say of society's cruelties, as he said of nature's in "Fate," that evil is good in the making. Emerson became a reformer, that is to say, when he ceased to be a re-former. Even so, his orientation in matters of social action was always fundamentally spiritual, and even his most ardently reformist pronouncements were rooted in and accountable to his apprehension of universal law. Thus when Emerson came forth after much prodding to deliver his first major antislavery address, "Emancipation in the British West Indies" (1844), he could argue for abolition only because he had become convinced that the negro race is, more than any other, susceptible of rapid civilization.

\textbf{Emerson's Lectures:} In 1833, Waldo Emerson (as he still called himself) gave a talk at the Unitarian chapel in Edinburgh, Scotland. At least one member of the audience remembered it ecstatically:

The originality of his thoughts, the consummate beauty of the language in which they were clothed, the calm dignity of his bearing, the absence of all oratorical effect, and the singular directness and simplicity of his manner...made a deep impression on me....His voice was the sweetest, the most winning and penetrating of any I ever heard.\textsuperscript{12}
The enthusiastic listener might have added that the 30-year-old visiting American speaker did not receive any sort of fee.

Almost four decades later, in the spring of 1872, Ralph Waldo Emerson (as he came to be known in his fame), was giving a lecture in Boston, part of an organized course of public talks. It was an old lecture, one he had used many times and had published years before. But that was all right. His audiences, he had learned, seemed to prefer the old lectures.

What happened this time was that Emerson read it simply. His daughter Ellen sat, watching him. A large sum of 1,300 dollars was earned from the tickets. The extraordinary life that lay between these two moments was one of immense intellectual achievements. Emerson became the best-known man of letters that America would produce in the nineteenth century. And he did it by dint of hard work as much as talent.

This is how, Emerson had become a ‘man-thinking,’ and a man-speaking. He was not yet spoken of an author, but a thinker. It was his lectures that gave Emerson his initial fame, and always provided him with his main source of income. He published volume after volume of essays, but almost all of them had been written first as lectures.

Emerson’s study and diaries supported him. His mind was on higher things, on the stock Victorian subjects: God, death, immortality, spirit, nature, and the rest. He had started out in the 1820s as a minister, with what he called the ‘terrifick’ obligation to write a sermon every week. But when he began in the 1830s to lecture for his living, the obligation to satisfy the demands of the Lyceum circuit was just as unrelenting. He was a disciplined man, and found that he could give only about 21 hours to writing a lecture, if he wanted to reserve enough time to keep up with the reading and rereading he needed to do for the next topic on the upcoming schedule.
Lecturing could be a draining career, and the more successful a man was at it, the more draining it could become. ‘The Lyceum,’ Emerson complained, ‘is a terrible tyrant, with long arms that reach from Chicago and Milwaukee to Concord.’ An invitation to go on a three-week tour to the Middle West, as he described it in the late 1850s, was like a bet proposed by the Lyceum agency: ‘I’ll bet you fifty dollars a day for three weeks, that you will not leave your library and wade and freeze and ride and run, and suffer all manner of indignities, and stand up for an hour each night reading in a hall,’ and I answer, ‘I’ll bet I will.’ I do it, and win the $900.13

Emerson did it, year after year, decade after decade. And in the most practical terms, the lecturing career worked. As his reputation approached its peak, in the 1850s, he was giving about 70 lectures a year in about 50 different towns and cities. In a typical winter season, he was earning around $2,000 from the talks – more than his income from any other source. This was about four times the annual income of a skilled worker in New England. And things kept improving. In 1866, he was invited to give a series of six lectures, all in Boston, and earned over $900 from them. Two years later, a winter series of talks, again in Boston, netted him $1,600. And this was only part of it. All the while, he continued to make extended tours to the Middle West and even as far as California, and also kept up his faithful trek into upstate New York, where the towns along the Erie Canal had created the concentration of local lyceums known among the lecturers of the circuit as ‘the Buffalo trail.’

The lecture platform provided Emerson money, respect, and a chance to speak of his mind to the larger audience. The public lecture was a luxury, once meant for kings and poets.
When Emerson left the ministry, he did not leave a career only. He left behind a conception of what it meant to be a man of letters. Much of what he would write in the years that followed his break with his own past and his attempt to forge a new future would be a justification of that decision, a justification that would also involve the creation of a new conception of the true nature of the figure he came to call ‘the Poet,’ the figure he hoped would share with kings the unique privilege of public sincerity.

Emerson assumed the role of public speaker. This was the second ordination for him. His wife’s estate he had was worth 23,000 dollars, and he got 1,300 dollar interest every year. He decided to do two things – one to become a public lecturer and two to marry again. So he wrote the book *Nature*. This would-be enchanter, this figuring of ‘Emerson’ that emerged from *Nature*, was a type of man very different from the Reverend Waldo Emerson of the Second Church. In fact, the career of this ‘Emerson’ began in a way that knowing readers around Boston would recognize as Emerson’s repudiation of the ministry. *Nature* opened with a famous complaint:

“Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers....The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes....Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe?’ Emerson’s own sepulchered ‘fathers’ had been ministers, of course, and he had for a time dressed himself out of their faded wardrobe.14

Emerson took his figure from his chamber and into increasingly perfect solitude. And to him this meant deeper and deeper into nature. And as he progresses, the poet learns that in solitude and in nature he can see
what others cannot see and know what others do not know. He climbs a hill and looks out over a stretch of neat New England countryside.

Emerson took him finally to the woods, away from city streets, cultivated landscapes, and village commons. He will discover then that the woods are farms of a sort — God’s farms. He discovers that the woods are not wild, but a place of decorum, and he a welcome guest. He recovers a kind of spiritual childhood, but also soars out of time, out of the confines of the age and into the perpetual, the perennial, and the millennial. In these plantations of God, the poet completes his extraordinary enterprise. He becomes mystically at one with Nature. And when, a few minutes further into ‘Self-Reliance,’ he would say of the true man that ‘Where he is there in Nature,’ the truest referent of ‘Nature’ would be his book about *Nature*.

The figure of ‘Emerson’ that emerged from *Nature* was a radical one. His poet was willing to ask fundamental questions about the three essential institutions of middle-class culture as Emerson knew it: family, church, and property. He subverts churches and ministries by becoming himself part and particle of God.

Emerson’s lecturing was interesting as well as significant. He could tell them things that might shock them. ‘As men’s prayers are a disease of the will,’ he could say, ‘so are their creeds a disease of the intellect.’ But he would not be in town the next week to meet preachers or faithful parishioners in the streets. ‘No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature,’ he could say on the platform, knowing full well that it would have been another thing altogether to make such a remark to a settled congregation that he would have to meet week after week. ‘I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me,’ he might tell an audience in Indiana. Next week he would be in Michigan, and would never
know whether any family quarrels had erupted. Unlike O. W. Holmes, Emerson believed in originality in order to do magic. He read his speeches usually. His voice was gentle and sweet. His second wife found him an angelic being. Emerson admired ‘father’ Ed Thompson Taylor who made brilliant extempore speeches. So Emerson worked deliberately to build a kind of tension into his lecturing. He would struggle mightily to find surprising and even shocking things to say to his audiences.

This characteristic of Emerson’s prose style can be seen quite plainly in the most enduring of his lectures – still the most common reader’s introduction to his writing – “The American Scholar.” It was written for a very special occasion. But the occasion only magnified and brought into sharper relief the kinds of stylistic tensions that would be present in all his public lectures. In 1837, he was invited by Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa Society to give the commencement address it sponsored every year. Over the years, a particular subject had become traditional: the scholar in America.

The occasion was of considerable moment for a man with Emerson’s background and personal history. Many alumni members of Phi Beta Kappa would be there. Most of the faculty would be joined by men of all ages, filling the aisles. The people expected a moral uplift. This year people had anticipated a different kind of lecture. Usually Harvard prepared graduates for ministers, but Emerson spoke against this tendency of profession. He began in perfect docility, identifying himself with the occasion, the audience, and its usages. ‘Mr. President and Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘I greet you on the re-commencement of our literary year.’ But, in the space of less than a minute, he was talking about casting usage to the winds, promising that the American scholar’s day of apprenticeship and dependence was coming to an end. But then, swiftly, he dropped back into a reassuring
conformity with tradition and its prescriptions: he tranquilly agreed to accept 
the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to 
prescribe to this day.

But then, as soon as he had given this innocent cast to the relationship 
between the scholar and nature, he swung again toward the misty and 
dreamlike. All science finally leads to the same conclusion, he said: nature 
and mind have the same root. So the true scholar sees that what he shares 
with nature is a common fundamental, which is nothing less than the ‘soul of 
his soul.’ And – just in case anyone did not see that this was a radical idea – 
he characterized it himself. Emerson followed this same strategy throughout 
the talk – as would do throughout his career. Again and again, he shifted into 
phrases that anyone in the audience might suspect ought to be shocking, then 
back out again, into formulas that were amply sanctioned by tradition and 
usage. He, a manifestly bookish man, told his equally bookish audience that 
books could be noxious, both for ordinary people and for scholars. The 
sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude takes its stand on some book. 
Men of intellect do worse, even. They found colleges, build libraries, form 
churches, and ordain ministers. Emerson passed his judgment on this 
tendency in what was probably the most flat-footed sentence he ever spoke: 
‘This is bad; this is worse than it seems.’ But he still assured them, implicitly 
that learning really was legitimate and important – invoking the name of one 
revered author after another as evidence that his own work was firmly 
grounded on years of devoted reading.

The scholars were no better than the rest of the people; they were 
‘decent, indolent, complaisant.’ As a remedy, he counseled softly, ‘Patience 
– patience.’ He counseled the scholar to take comfort in the fact that he was
not alone, for he had the company of the shades of all the good and great – presumably the ghosts of Plato, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Goethe, and the rest.

This careful technique served Emerson and his audiences very well, and for decades. It served his many adoring readers, too. It helps explain how the published lectures could find a place of honor in the libraries of the Victorian middle class, but could also become the highly treasured reading of so violent a critic of middle-class morality as Friedrich Nietzsche.

**Emerson and Nature:** Wordsworth believed that Nature is everything for man. Likewise Emerson believed that Nature is the divine book for man’s instruction. Explicit or implicit in nearly everything Emerson wrote is the conviction that nature bats last, that nature is the law, the final word, the Supreme Court. Others have believed – still believe – that the determining force in our lives is grace, or that it is the state – the polis, the community – or that it is the past. More recently it has been argued that the central force is economics or race or sex or genetics. Emerson’s basic teaching is that the fundamental context of our lives in nature.

Emerson’s definition of nature is a broad one. Nature is the way things are. Philosophically, Emerson says, the universe is made up of nature and the soul, or nature and consciousness. Everything that is ‘not me’ is nature; nature thus includes nature (the biological world), art, all other persons, and our own body.

Emerson’s interest in nature was more than theoretical. Like his friends Alcott and Thoreau, Emerson was passionately attached to the natural world. As a boy, Emerson rambled in the woods and fields outside Boston. As a young man, he thought for a while of becoming a naturalist. As a father, he took his children on nature walks and taught them all the
flowers, birds and trees. All his life his interest in nature was rooted in his
delight in and close observation of nature.

Certain events made him lose faith in religion and science. The early
death of his first wife made him lose faith in historical Christianity. He once
visited a museum in Paris and felt admiration for naturalism. He studied
science as if nature. He visited woodlots. He took his children to Walden
Pond often. He was a good gardener. His uncle George Emerson was a
botanist. Emerson’s friend Louis Agassiz was a scientist. Scientist Dirk
Struik thinks Emerson loved science as well as nature.

The most important result of Emerson’s long engagement with nature
was the publication in 1836 of the small book *Nature*. Its opening paragraph
represents a turning point, not only in American literature, but also in his
own life. It records the moment when Emerson turned explicitly and self­
consciously from biography, history, and criticism to nature for his starting
point. Reading the first paragraph of *Nature* has brought about a similar
shake-up in many a reader. ‘Our age is retrospective,’ he begins. ‘It builds
the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism.’
Emerson clears the agenda with a dismissive sweep, pointing out that ‘the
foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their
eyes.’ The question Emerson incites us to ask is ‘Why should not we also
enjoy an original relation to the universe?’ The emphasis is on the word
also. ‘Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of
tradition, and religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?’

Pursuing his own question, Emerson sets out the main benefits we
derive from nature. In the chapter called “Commodity,” he considers how
nature provides the raw material and the energy for everything we build,
grow, or eat. Who can fail to be impressed by the steady and prodigal
provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball. It was the practical usefulness of nature that Emerson had in mind as he admired a tide-mill, which, on the seashore, makes the tides drive the wheels and grind corn, and which thus engages the assistance of the moon like a hired hand, to grind, and wind, and pump, and saw, and split stone, and roll iron. He writes,

And it was a typical leap of imagination for Emerson to draw from this activity his much-repeated injunction to ‘hitch your wagon to a star,’ which gains its full force when we see that the emphasis is on the word your. But nature as commodity is only the most obvious and most tangible of benefits, and Emerson quickly moves on the less-material gifts of nature.  

In the chapter called “Beauty,” Emerson outlines a theory of aesthetics grounded in nature. Such is the constitution of things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight in and for themselves. Nature provides us our first and most reliable standards of beauty. Just as nature provides us with our standard of beauty so Nature provides us with language. ‘Nature is the vehicle of thought’ is his formulation. What Emerson understood, and what American writes since Emerson have been able to get from him, is the importance of the primary connection between the writer and nature. Emerson puts it with unusual vehemence. Hundreds of writers may be found in very long-civilized nation, who for a short time believe, and make others believe, that they see and utter truths, who do not of themselves clothe one thought in its natural garment, but who feed unconsciously on the language created by the primary writers of the country, those, namely, who hold primarily on nature.
Emerson is an idealist, a believer that process, purpose, or concept precedes and determines product. The most daring, and to a modern reader, the most challenging aspect of Emerson's nature, is his argument that nature teaches him to look beyond nature.

The distinction Emerson makes here between the inner, invisible laws of nature, and the external, visible forms of nature is not a new one. The English Romantic poets, especially Coleridge, recognized a similar distinction between nature as a collection of active forces and processes and the finished products of nature. Perhaps Emerson's greatest contribution was his account of how these two aspects of nature are interrelated. Beginning around 1848, he worked on and off for the rest of his life on a project he called 'Natural History of Intellect.'

Like all thorough Romantics, and like the new scientists from Goethe to Lyell and Darwin, Emerson understood that nature is in continuous change of flux. His essay "Circles" elaborates this. As much as Emerson was committed to the idea that all is flux — an idea he called 'the metamorphosis' — and as much as he was committed to the pluralistic, the diverse, and the particular, he also understood that there were laws governing appearances and that things in nature are unified. His essay "Compensation" elaborates this.

Emerson had read Kant and Schelling and was echoing Kant when he wrote in "The Oversoul" that 'the sources of nature are in man's own mind.' He knew Schelling's breathtaking all-inclusive proposal that 'nature is externalized mind; mind is internalized nature.' In "The American Scholar" Emerson said that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part.
Nature was Emerson’s starting point for a new theology. His rejection, in the Divinity School “Address,” of organized – or as he called it, historical Christianity was a protest not against, but on behalf of, religion. Following the Scottish Common Sense philosophers, Emerson argued that the moral sentiment, which is found in all human beings, is the essence of all religions. By religion, Emerson means concrete, personal, religious feelings or experience. The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight into the perfection of the laws of the soul. Intuition is, for Emerson, like religion, a matter of actual, present personal experience.

For this reason Emerson never refers to the Bible as an authority. He cares about what he calls the Gospel of the present moment. He rejects the standard Christian chronological concept of history, the idea that there was one creation, that there will be one day of judgment. Religious convictions and feelings exist for Emerson only in the present.

Emerson says ‘there is no profane history...all history is sacred.’ Creation is continuous. Every day is a day of creation. So, too, with the day of judgment. No man has learned anything until he has learned that every day is judgment day. Nothing that the Hebrew word for prophet is also the word for poet. Emerson insists that the modern poet can do for his people what the old Hebrew prophet-poets did for theirs.

Nature is also Emerson’s practical guide to an ethical life. In this he is a modern stoic. He believed, like Marcus Aurelius and Montaigne, that nature rather than tradition or authority or the state is our best teacher. To live in nature means above all to live in the present. Nature for Emerson was a theory of the nature of things – how things are; it was a guide to life, a foundation for philosophy, art, language, education, and everyday living.
Emerson's essay "The Method of Nature" appears like a discussion of evolution.

**Essay: The First Series (1841) and Essays the Second Series (1844):** Emerson's *Essays* proclaim the self-reliance of a man who believed himself representative of all men since he felt himself intuitively aware of God's universal truths. He spoke to a nineteenth century that was ready for an emphasis on individualism and responsive to a new optimism that linked God, nature, and man into a magnificent cosmos.

Emerson himself spoke as one who had found in Transcendentalism a positive answer to the static Unitarianism of his day. He had been a Unitarian minister for three years at the Old North Church in Boston, but he had resigned because in his view the observance of the Lord's Supper could not be justified in the Unitarian Church.

Transcendentalism combined Neoplatonism, a mystical faith in the universality and permanence of value in the universe, with a pervasive moral seriousness akin to the Calvinist conviction and with a romantic optimism that found evidence of God's love throughout all nature. Derivative from these influences was the faith in man's creative power, the belief that the individual, by utilizing God's influence, could continue to improve his understanding and his moral nature. Knowledge could come to man directly, without the need of argument, if only he had the courage to make himself receptive to God's truth manifest everywhere.

Though his essays and addresses Emerson became not only the leading Transcendentalist in America, but also one of the greatest if least formal of American philosophers. The latter accomplishment may be attributed more to the spirit of his philosophy than to its technical
excellence, for Emerson had little respect for logic, empiricism, and linguistic analysis – features common to the work of other great American philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Nor can Emerson be compared in his method to such a philosopher as Alfred North Whitehead, for Emerson disdained speculative adventures: he believed himself to be affirming what nature told him, and nature spoke directly of God and of God’s laws.

Emerson’s *Nature* (1836) was the first definitive statement of his philosophical perspective, and within this work may be found most of the characteristic elements of Emerson’s thought. The basic idea is that nature is God’s idea made apparent to men.

One secret of Emerson’s charm was his ability to translate metaphysical convictions into vivid images. Having argued the nature is the expression of God’s idea, and having concluded that ‘the moral law lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference,’ he illustrated the moral influence of nature by asking, ‘Who can guess how much firmness the sea-beaten rock has taught the fisherman?’ The danger in Emerson’s method, however, was that readers tended to forget that his idealism was philosophically, not merely poetically, intended; he believed literally that only spirit and its ideas are real. He admitted the possibility that nature outwardly exists, that is, that physical objects corresponding to his sensations exist, but he pointed out that since he was not able to test the authenticity of his senses, it made no difference whether such outlying objects existed. All that he could be sure of were his ideas, and that, whether directly or indirectly, the ideas came from God. For Emerson, then, idealism was not only a credible philosophy, but also the only morally significant one.
If nature is God’s idea made apparent to men, it follows that the way to God’s truth is not by reason or argument but by simple and reverent attention to the facts of nature, to what man perceives when his eye is innocent. Emerson criticized science not because it was useless, but because more important matters, those having a moral bearing, confronted man at every moment in the world of nature; the individual needed only to intuit nature, to see it as it was without twisting it to fit his philosophy or his science, in order to know God’s thoughts.

The essay “Self-Reliance,” included in the First Series emphasizes the importance of that self-truth to which Emerson referred in his Phi Beta Kappa address. It is understandable that this emphasis seemed necessary to Emerson. If nature reveals the moral truths which God intends for man’s use, then three elements are involved in the critical human situation: nature, man, and man’s attitude toward nature. It is possible to be blind to the truths about us; only the man who is courageous enough to be willing to be different in his search and convictions is likely to discover what is before every man’s eyes. Emerson emphasized self-reliance not because he regarded the self, considered as a separate entity, important, but because he believed that the self is part of the reality of God’s being and that in finding truth for oneself, provided one faces nature intuitively, one finds what is true for all men. ‘To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius,’ Emerson wrote in “Self-Reliance.” Believing that each man’s mind is capable of yielding important truth, Emerson distinguished between goodness and the name of goodness. He urged each man to work and act without being concerned about the mere opinions of others. ‘Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist,’ and whoever would advance in the truth should be willing
to contradict himself, to be inconsistent: 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.'

Emerson's philosophy was not an endorsement of selfish behavior is clear from his emphasis upon the use of the mind as an instrument for the intuitive understanding of universal truths and laws, but it is possible to misinterpret "Self-Reliance" as a joyous celebration of individuality. A sobering balance is achieved by the essay "The Over-Soul" in which Emerson subordinates the individual to the whole: 'Meantime within man is the soul of the whole, the eternal One.' Using language reminiscent of Platonism, Emerson wrote that the soul gives itself, alone, original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads and speaks through it.

Emerson valued the poet because the poet uses his imagination to discern the meanings of sensuous facts. The poet sees and expresses the beauty in nature because he recognizes the spiritual meaning of events; he takes old symbols and gives them new uses, thereby making nature the sign of God. In the essay "The Poet" Emerson wrote that the poet's insight is a very high sort of seeing, a way of transcending conventional modes of thought in order to attend directly to the forms of things.

It is a misunderstanding of Emerson to regard him as a sentimental mystic, as one who lay on his back and saw divinity in every cloud. Emerson's transcendental insight is more akin to the intelligence of the Platonic philosopher who, having recognized his own ignorance, suddenly finds himself able to see the universal in the jumble of particular facts. Emerson may be criticized for never satisfactorily relating the life of contemplation to the life of practical affairs, but he cannot be dismissed as
an iconoclastic mystic. For him the inquiring soul and the heroic soul were one, and the justification of self-reliance and meditation was in terms of the result, in the individual soul, of the effort to recognize the unity of all men. In “Experience,” Emerson chooses knowing in preference to doing, but it is clear that he was rejecting a thoughtless interest in action and results. In “Character” and again in ‘Politics’ he emphasized the importance of coming to have the character of transcending genius, of spirit which has found moral law in nature and has adapted it for use in the world of men. The transforming power of spirit properly educated and employed was something Emerson counted on, and he was concerned to argue that such power is not easily achieved.

Emerson defended democracy as the form of government best fitted for Americans whose religion and tradition reflect a desire to allow the judgments of citizens to be expressed in the laws of the state. But he cautioned that ‘Every actual state is corrupt,’ and added, ‘Good men must not obey the laws too well.’ Here the independent spirit, concerned with the laws of God, demands heroism and possibly, like Thoreau, civil disobedience.

Scholars have written innumerable articles and books attempting to account for Emerson’s influence – which continues to be profound – on American thought. If agreement is ever reached, it seems likely that it will involve acceptance of the claim that Emerson, whatever his value as a philosopher, gave stirring expression to the American faith in the creative capacity of the individual soul.

**Emerson’s Worldview:** Robert Weisbuch in his article “Post-Colonial Emerson and the Erasure of Europe” observes of Emerson’s
observation of Europe. He records Emerson and Henry James’ visit to a museum in France.

On a transitional November day, in the year 1827, a pair of American gentlemen could be seen roaming the rooms of the Museum of the Louvre. The elder of them was clearly in the scanning mode, moving his tall, spare frame briskly through the rooms. His younger, fleshier partner frequently would urge hesitation in the midst of one or another masterpiece, to which his companion would give friendly but only momentary assent before moving on once more, like a stag of the Western plains avoiding the rope. Again the younger man would linger with his all-absorbing gaze, then respectfully touch his friend’s elbow. He would softly exclaim and modestly explicate, progressively but pleasantly puzzled by his companion’s polite impatience and clear desire to gallop on, taking in everything at large yet nothing in particular with his strong, frank stare.¹⁸

This is Emerson at 69 and Henry James, Jr., at 29 on a wonderful and tense day in American cultural history. This drama of different generations and opposed attitudes is played out far from home, in French palace of power. In March 1927 they would renew their uneasy partnership to tour the Vatican with similar results. And 15 years later, James recalls the two occasions with astonishment: ‘Emerson’s perception of the objects contained in these collections was of the most general order’. Emerson traveled to Europe three times in 1832-33 1847-48 and 1872-73. He found life in Europe a more complicated one.

During his first visit to Europe, after his first wife’s death, Emerson loved Europe, and more so Rome. But it is British writers who matter most to Emerson. In fact, it is impossible to imagine Emerson without
Wordsworth’s relocation of Milton’s heaven of heavens within the human mind or Coleridge on imagination; and a sally from his friend Carlyle may have altered Emerson’s writing forever. For Emerson, Europe does not simply include England; Europe is largely an extension of England. Emerson liked France, and other European nations, the East and the Orient.

Emerson did not like the old world of Europe, for it represented the old and outdated. As Henry James feels he missed the chord there. Once Emerson said, ‘Can we never extract this tape-worm of Europe from the brain of our-countrymen?’ (CW II: 535). He said that Italy is only open and Catholicism, both overblown pomp. Nor did he not find the sublime in Paris. Ironically Emerson thinks that Europe is very great, without requiring only more growth, anymore present and future. Emerson’s very first sentence in Nature is ‘Our age is retrospective.’ He mourns that ‘The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we enjoy an original relation to the universe?’19 This fear of being secondary leads into the more immediately psychological component of Emerson’s need to erase Europe.

As in Venice, so in Paris, a month later, Emerson counsels himself, ‘Be cheerful,’ decrying his ‘insane habit’ of ‘groping always into the past months & keeping my nervous system ever on the rack.’ This he says, is the ‘disease’ of someone ‘too respectful to the opinions of others.’20 Years later in “Experience,” he will write in his shocking way, ‘It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist’ and he will define this discovery of self-consciousness as ‘the Fall of Man,’ noting that ‘Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments’ (CW 3: 75). Europe brings out the worst of this self-awareness in a provincial, this disease of being too respectful to the opinions of others on a national scale.

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The personal and philosophical thus become one in Emerson’s refusal to venerate Europe. But he is not wholly original in this attitude. Emerson grows up in an America where the political wars of 1776 and 1812 have become transformed into a cultural battle with England, and this conflict is so evident to Emerson at age 19 that he self-consciously, almost dutifully, announces at the opening of his seventh journal, ‘I dedicate my book to the Spirit of America.’

Emerson makes this dedication just two years after Sydney Smith’s famous, infuriatingly accurate query, ‘In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?’ which was only latest in a series of British taunts against the cultural vacancy of the former colony.

Poet Robert Southey wrote about this in 1809. An anonymous reviewer in The British Critic states bluntly in 1818, ‘The Americans have no national literature, and no learned men.’ And these discountings continue throughout Emerson’s lifetime. Colburn’s New Monthly Magazine, 1827 reads thus: ‘To talk of the literature of America is to talk of that which has no existence.’ The Athenæum, 1831 observes: ‘This want of originality in American literature is likely to continue.’ The Westminster Review, 1860 states: ‘For almost every work of note which has been produced there, the mother nation can show a better counterpart.’ All of this sour rhetoric is reminiscent of Macaulay’s famous Minute of 1835 on Indian education when he declares ‘a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.’

The wiser among them looked to the future and acknowledged the present post-colonial hangover of British cultural domination as painful and even threatening to significant nationhood.
Many American writers including Philip Freneau, Bryant, Longfellow, Fuller, and Whitman deplored this as Emerson did it. In opposition, full-fledged literary stories were plentiful, and writers like Irving and even Longfellow and Lowell took more moderate views. But Emerson enlisted in the nationalist cause—it helps to define him—and he engages its rhetoric with real energy.

Emerson said America is ripe, Europe is rotten. If the nations of Europe can find anything to idolize in their ruinous and enslaved institutions, we are content, though we are astonished at their satisfaction’ (EJ. 16). Internal corruptions may destroy rotten states like Spain, a contagion from which America is aloof by the width of an ocean. In fact, it is not only America against England or America against Europe but America against the entire aged world: ‘Asia, Africa, Europe, old, leprous & wicked, have run round the goal of centuries till we are tired and they are ready to drop. But now a strong man has entered the race & is outstripping them all. Strong Man! youth & glory are with thee’ (EJ 41). In all of these early statements, Europe rarely exists by itself but almost always as a negative counter to young America, with no past at its back but the future at its feet.

The youthful Emerson is an encyclopedia of the arguments made in defense of America, fighting its lack of storied history by posting instead a future, turning the tables on cultural rawness by celebrating youth and mocking the corruptions of European age, claiming a redemptive stature by which the colony is no longer a pathetically removed suburb of London but the metropolitan center for the reformation of the world.

In fact, Emerson’s comments on travel throughout his career illustrate his fidelity to these early ideas even while he progressively enlarges their meanings. Several years later, in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson expands the
travel anxiety to national scope to indict 'the superstition of Traveling, whose idols are Italy, England, Egypt,' as owing to 'want of self-culture' and that in turn is 'the symptom of a deeper unsoundness' whereby 'the intellect is vagabond.' Even at home, 'We imitate; and what is imitation but the traveling of the mind? Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments.' And finally 'As our Religion, our Education, our Art look abroad, so does our spirit of society' (CW 2: 80).

This consistency is especially striking in regard to a final characteristic of Emerson's relation to Europe, his tendency to seek representative men. At 19 he writes, 'From childhood the names of the great have ever resounded in my ear'; and in "Culture," after proclaiming that we go to Europe to be Americanized. His concluding observations in 1833 on his first trip and in 1848 at the conclusion of his second trip both sum up the experiences in terms of meetings with the great, and they could almost have been written on the same day.

Against James's notion of Emerson as Peter Pan, it is worth remembering that the sense of cultural inferiority persists through Emerson's lifetime, for while there is major achievement in literature and art, the full acknowledgements of this will take nearly another century. It is not as if Emerson is looking backward, incapable of change; he is looking around. But something does soften, for better or worse. During his second visit to London, Emerson confesses, 'In America we fancy that we live in a new & forming country but that England was finished long ago. But we find London & England in full growth, the British Museum not yet arranged, the boards only taken down the other day from the monument & fountains of Trafalgar Square' (EJ 384).
What is most striking about Europe in the early prose is, first, its nearly total absence, and second, its permeating presence. It is instructive to return to Emerson’s first sentence as an author, in *Nature*, ‘Our age is retrospective.’ Emerson is writing just a few years after John Stuart Mill in 1831 defined historical perspective as the ‘spirit of the age,’ with the idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come as for the first time now the dominant idea. Not only is Emerson’s assertion derivative of an English writer, but clearly what our age honors retrospectively is most of all Europe and its achievements. And yet, in *Nature*, Emerson never quite says that. Only two decades later, in *English Traits*, will he acknowledge that our retrospective tendency is itself an importation: the English genius is ‘wise and rich, but it lives on its capital. It is retrospective’; or again, of the British, ‘Every one of them is a thousand years old and lives by his memory’ (CW 5: 246).

The work’s cultural patriotism is similarly profound and similarly unremarked. At its moment *Nature* and the essays of the next several years constitute Emerson’s response to the British taunts that America, lacking sufficient history and the legends that go with it, cannot produce a literature. Americans possess ‘neither history, nor romance, nor poetry, nor legends, on which to exercise their genius, and kindle their imagination,’ wrote an anonymous reviewer in an 1818 issue of *The British Critic*; and Hazlitt told Northcote that Americans ‘had no natural imagination.’

Cooper and James would agree in part and even a rabid nationalist like Brownson would mourn that ‘we have a glorious nature, no doubt, but it is barren of legends, traditions, and human associations’ and, without such, as Byron well maintained, nature is not poetical and cannot sustain a literature.
Emerson, instead, follows Tocqueville, who replied to such views with ‘man remains, and the poet needs no more.’ Emerson argues that each individual can live all history in his own person, that all the facts of history preexist in the mind as laws, that there is properly no history, only biography because we are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience and verifying them here.

Upon such ideas all of Emerson’s thought rests, which is why he places his essay on “History” first in his book of *Essays: First Series*. Instead of following Irving, Cooper, or Hawthorne in inventing an American history to satisfy the European demand for one, Emerson refuses the rivalry and substitutes for history the vertical time of the present moment that, rightly seized, leads to overwhelming truth and a nature of transparent magnificence. ‘Whence then this worship of the past?’ Emerson asks in “Self-Reliance,” reasoning that the parent has cast his ripened being into the child. The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul. Consequently, ‘He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time’ (CW 2: 57). If the Englishman asks how there is to be literature without history and legend, Emerson wonders how Europeans can get at the great truths when they are so buried under history’s social clutter.

In all, the silencing of Europe in *Nature* is most simply explained by a passage 20 years later in *English Traits*. Emerson notes the difficulty of observing England with a necessarily independent mind because England has inoculated all nations with her civilization, intelligence and tastes to the extent that ‘Every book we read, every biography, play, romance, in whatever form, is still English history and manners’ (CW 5: 36). Given such cultural imperialism, then, the sole alternative is to write instead of what
America could supply in unequalled abundance and variety, nature, and make that natural resource the key to all truths, including the final one, which is the kingdom of man over nature, with man an American consciousness and Europe as historical fact now a colony of that mind.

While in *Representative Men* Emerson had for the first time directly engaged a contemporary English writer in (nonetheless implicit) debate, still his portraits of Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Napoleon remain shy of a full European accounting even while he briefly acknowledges each as nationally representative.

Certainly it is not as if by the 1850s the British and European cultural domination of the United States is ended. But by then Emerson himself is an acknowledged author in England – his second trip is occasioned at least a bit by an invitation to speak in Manchester, and significantly that speech becomes the concluding chapter of *English Traits* – and America too is having its effect. During his second trip, he had written that while the English continue their disdain toward the New World. Further, the literature of England is fully great but also greatly in recent decline. In all, it becomes safer for Emerson to write on England because he can believe that what he writes just may be an elegy.

Even so, at times it may seem that Emerson has gone British. He twice calls Britain the best of actual nations, argues that ‘if there be one successful country in the universe for the last millennium, that country is England,’ considers America at one point ‘only the continuation of the English genius into new conditions, more or less propitious and freely confesses that ‘they read better than we, and write better’ (W 5: 211). But his is a strategy of ostentatious fair-mindedness which goes finally toward a table turning in which England becomes what America is thought to be,
provincial, in contrast to an American author who is un-English precisely because he is a man of the world.

Later, Emerson terms Coleridge the best mind in England. It is the surest sign of national decay, when the Brahmins can no longer read or understand the Brahminical philosophy. Next Wordsworth appears, a plain, elderly, white-haired man, not prepossessing, and disfigured by green goggles, less the drooler, more the Ninja turtle. He utters a large number of remarkably unremarkable and prudish opinions, then unexpectedly stand in his garden and recites three new poems, ‘the old Wordsworth, standing apart, and reciting to me like a schoolboy declaiming’ so that ‘I at first was near to laugh.’ Emerson is one of those American children and thus it is fitting that he relived his 1833 visit enabling debunking of the greatness of Europe again in 1856. He makes himself relatively young to regain a rebellious youthfulness not for himself alone but for his national culture. As Julie Ellison thinks Emerson reverses his habitual tactics – and our expectations – by depicting the British as primitives and assuming the voice of a spokesman for cultivated society looking back indulgently on its brutal past. Larry J. Reynolds provides a good account of Emerson’s reactions to the spate of socialist uprisings in European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance.

The Conduct of Life: Emerson lived 79 years long life. He died in 1882. He outlived great contemporary writers like Thoreau and Hawthorne. He has also produced a great literary output. In a way, we need to study Emerson as early Emerson and later Emerson.

Stephen Whicher has early published two good books Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of R. W. Emerson (1953), and Selections from R. W. E:
Building on this assumption, Whicher postulated a fundamental division in Emerson's thought. Emerson's career as essayist and lecturer began, according to Whicher, with a decade-long burst of egocentric, anthropocentric, revolutionary Transcendentalism. This early period constituted, for Whicher, the essential and most important Emerson.

The Emerson of *Nature* is a 'naïve rhapsodist'; the Emerson of *The Conduct of Life* has learned that no picture of life can have any veracity that does not admit the odious facts. The late Emerson, it is alleged, has finally grown to respect the immovable forces of nature; he has even become fatalistic about man's helplessness before them. The rise-and-fall pattern to this interpretation, which gives Emerson's career the symmetry of classical tragedy, is as perfectly balanced as the two acts that make up Whicher's *Freedom and Fate*.

The Romantic poets, as T. S. Eliot famously put it, citing Matthew Arnold, did not know enough. A similar impatience with Romantic literature as inherently immature accounts, at least in part, for the widespread rejection of Emerson, in the first half of the twentieth century, by writers like Eliot, Yvor Winters, Allen Tate, and Ernest Hemingway. But the particular position that Eliot took toward Emerson — acknowledging that he had obtained a certain historical dignity, but insisting that he was not intrinsically very important and 'ought to be made to look very foolish' — is also typical of a secondary and subtler prejudice that any consideration of Emerson must sooner or later address. That anti-Emerson tradition, has been far less noticed, though it has become an ingrained, largely unconscious part of Emerson scholarship.
F. O. Matthiessen has fairly said that Emerson is the central figure of the 19th century American renaissance. But Whicher, like D. H. Lawrence, has spoken of Emerson as if a ‘museum item.’ From Henry James’s allegation that Emerson’s eyes were ‘thickly bandaged’ to all ‘sense of the dark, the foul, the base,’ to George Woodberry’s belief that he could ‘find no room for evil in the universe,’ to John Updike’s recent charge that ‘a world of suffering’ has been ‘scandalously excluded’ from his work gives the impression that Emerson was, morally and philosophically. Pollyanna has been repeated for so long now, by so many, that it has hardened into the axiomatic cornerstone of his Transcendentalist image, both within and without academy. There are, increasingly, dissenters from that opinion. As for that ‘ripe unconsciousness of evil’ that James found in Emerson, Harold Bloom writes, ‘I have not been able to find it myself, after reading Emerson almost daily for the last twenty years.’

In Emerson’s own time, reviewers complained of *The Conduct of Life*’s ‘want of heart,’ its appeal to the lowest depths of man’s nature, its rejection of Christian morality and the Christian law of love. More than one contemporary reader wondered if Emerson had not lost the power to sympathize with common human suffering. All Emerson readers think that Emerson is a great thinker. His thoughts exist as a more complex, philosophical whole.

Understanding of the post-Christian, proto-existential philosophy Emerson propounded in each of his essays, from *Nature* to the concluding essay on “Old Age” in *Society and Solitude*, must begin in the recognition of this central tenet of his thought: that he taught, like his admirer Nietzsche, not the avoidance of evil and pain, not an excision of ills from life, but the conquering of defects by their inclusion in a richer life. George J. Stack is
not the first to have called Emerson’s essays ‘post-Christian’ and ‘proto-existential,’ but his pioneering work, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), is one of the few studies in which an existentialist interpretation of Emerson has served as the basis for a sustained, philosophical analysis. That kind of Emerson’s thinking may be encapsulated in six key words ‘power,’ ‘antagonism,’ resistance,’ ‘overcoming,’ ‘use’ and ‘education.’ These words represent a way of thinking that Emerson returns to, with unflagging emphasis, restating and extending it on every page of the nine essays that comprise *The Conduct of Life*.

Each of these examples is, of course, also an instance of use, education, overcoming – even antagonism or resistance. This is one reason why writing about Emerson can be so difficult. This is not at all to suggest that Emerson’s thought itself has no underlying system. But it is characteristic of Emerson, both as a prose stylist and as a thinker, to practice the kind of compression and ellipsis that demands active or, as Emerson puts it, ‘creative reading.’ Emerson ‘does not,’ as Morse Peckham observes, ‘build us bridges; he makes us leap.’

All of the key words in fact, be subsumed, to some degree at least, in another large category that was always an Emersonian imperative: ‘action.’ And action is itself, in *The Conduct of Life*, at times replaced by the synonym performance, which is in turn used synonymously with work, as in Emerson’s command in ‘Worship.’ The only path of escape known in all the worlds of God is performance. You must do your work, before you shall be released.

Emerson, for example, begins *The Conduct of Life* by alluding to the momentous, contemporary debate over the theory of the age and the viability
of social reform. But by the third paragraph he has begun what will turn out to be a relentless reduction of those lofty issues to their sheer physical components. First, political reform is reduced to the necessity for individual reform then the possibility of even individual change is reduced to a question of temperament, sex ('vital power'), and genetic inheritance.

Directing our attention to life's lowest level is, however, one of The Conduct of Life's major goals. 'Let us learn to live coarsely, dress plainly, and lie hard,' Emerson declares in "Culture." It is one of his recurrent appeals to low reality, one of his many pledges to keep his discussion of a conventionally high topic like culture focused on the bedrock level of its coarse and hard origins.

'The whole economy of nature,' as he says in "Behavior," is bent on expression. Life expresses. Or, to rephrase Emerson's title slightly, and clarify a pun he undoubtedly intended, 'life conducts.' Life's primal power vents itself in a universe of forms, form the mundane to the extraterrestrial. The Conduct of Life is, finally, an anatomy of power — or, to use a description made current by Michel Foucault, an 'archaeology of power' — in all its protean forms.

The Conduct of Life is an attempt to excavate and catalogue all the ways in which the life force conducts itself unrestrained by man, usually with destructive results — as well as all the ways in which it can be conducted or, as Emerson says repeatedly, 'concentrated' into life-affirming results through the human acts of education, use, work, resistance, overcoming, and antagonism. All human activity is a manifestation of life's primal will to power; man has an instinctive drive to use and to become master. Man's instincts, Emerson writes, 'must be met, and he has
predisposing power that bends and fits what is near him to his use. As soon as there is life, there is self-direction, and absorbing and using of material.

Man's culture can spare nothing, wants all the material. He is to convert all impediments into instruments, all enemies into power. He will convert the Furies into Muses, and the hells into benefit. The world is man's tool-chest, and he is successful...to the degree in which he takes up things into himself.

'He is the rich man,' as Emerson puts it in 'Wealth,' who can avail himself of all men's faculties.' And it is not, despite The Conduct of Life's heavily androcentric imagery, only men who use and shape everything in our life and culture. There is, as Emerson makes clear, 'in both men and women, a deeper and more important sex of mind, namely the inventive or creative class of both men and women who are able to use the uninventive or accepting class. John McAleer calls this Emersonian principle of creative assimilation a form of 'psychic vampirism.'

It is no coincidence that every essay in The Conduct of Life, with the possible exception of "Illusions," quickly turns, whatever its ostensible topic, into Emerson's own search for power, as he gets down to his real subject: the investigation of the ways in which fate, wealth, culture, beauty, even worship, are further manifestations of the will to power omnipresent in nature and man.
References:


9. Emerson, Journals, 4, p. 278.


