

## The Dynamics of Desire in Emerson's Early Writings

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Emerson's early writing can be said to be an application of the identity theory, which met his psychic need for solitude and satisfied his ambition to be the absolute, while inconsistencies in the two series of *Essays* stem from the collapse of this theory.

Is it too much to say that there has been in Emersonian studies so far a mystification of his position, or a tendency to take him as a religious thinker, whose intuitive apprehension of truth places him beyond logical analysis? The following is an attempt to follow the dynamics of his desire for a heroic self-image in his early writings, within the context of the metaphysics and social conditions which Emerson encountered. What seems characteristically Emersonian in contrast with other activist contemporaries, is his attitude toward society, which oscillates between extremes of complete isolation or oratorical prophecy. He has to be either alone or great.

The first decisive step young Emerson took was his resignation from the Second Church of Boston, because "It is my desire, in the office of a Christian minister, to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart."<sup>1</sup> To continue as minister of the Old North appeared to him destructive of his inner integrity, thus depriving him for ever of the chance to be an eloquent orator through sincerity. The journal entry on January 10, 1832, and the one almost a year earlier beginning with "Smother no dictate of your soul,"<sup>2</sup> show that young Emerson had difficulty acting the role of minister, because he did not believe in what he was supposed to preach or even what he did preach, and because in that role he could not satisfy his aspiration for oratorical greatness. If besides the doctrinal differences he had difficulty carrying out his parish work, his resignation was a natural course to take.

But a question still remains of how his professional commitment, less than two years before, ever seemed compatible with his concern over the safe keeping of his inner integrity. A possible course of action would have been to remain in the church, preaching and trying to persuade the congregation of the preciousness of inner integrity, based on the shared apprehension of truth by minister and congregation. But young Emerson, quite unlike Theodore Parker, does not seem to have spent any extended period of time persuading the congregation to his convictions. His desire to separate himself and protect his integrity was much stronger than his commitment to the truth he held. William Ellery Channing had taught in 1826 at the dedication of Divinity Hall, that to be influential the minister should be imbued

with "a supreme and invincible love of truth" and "the spirit of martyrdom."<sup>3</sup> Clearly Emerson lacked the spirit of martyrdom. But did he have any sincere convictions that he felt he must preach?

## I

In 1836 Emerson published his seminal book, *Nature*. Placed beside another book published in the same year, *New Views of Christianity, Society and the Church*, by O. A. Brownson, *Nature's* tendency to solitude is unmistakable. Brownson believed that the "present mission" to be fulfilled by Christianity was to realize the union of "Spiritualism" and "Materialism," and the age, as he read it, craved "union." He emphatically wrote:

The heart of man is crying for the heart of man. One and the same spirit is abroad, uttering the same voice in all languages. From all parts of the world voice answers to voice, and man responds to man. There is a universal language already in use. Men are beginning to understand one another, and their mutual understanding will beget mutual sympathy, and mutual sympathy will bind them together and to God<sup>4</sup>.

While Brownson was crying for the union of God and man, and the association of men, Emerson retires from the madding crowd into the Concord forest to be absorbed in a religious experience:

Standing on the bare ground,— my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,— all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or village (*C*, 1, 10).

This isolated communion, rather than group rituals which confirm the consensus of believers and the sense of interdependent humanity, would receive repeated emphasis in his essays as the union of God and man, and it constitutes the foundation of an edifice called the Self-Reliant God-Man. Referring to the "wild delight which runs through the man" in such communion, he put down in the journal, "Almost I fear to think how glad I am." Three days before, he had written, "Alone is wisdom. Alone is happiness. Society nowadays makes us low-spirited, hopeless. Alone is heaven (*J*, V, 24-25)."

The experience described in the eyeball passage constitutes the crux of Emer-

son's religious experience and gives *Nature* the appearance of a book born of real experience and reflections based on it. What is problematic about it is not that he had such experience. If "There is one mind common to all," as he would later say at the opening of "History," one can easily imagine a contemplator whose attention is so completely absorbed in the object he is contemplating that "The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental," but how can one be sure that the "circulating currents" are "of the Universal Being" or that he is "part or parcel of God"? Another version of the experience is given in "Self-Reliance": "...the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed (C, 11, 64)." The problematic issue in the description is not that Emerson had such experience, but how one can know that "the sense of being" is actually "one with them and proceeds obviously from the same source."

Here we may well recall Ishmael in the Mast-Head Chapter of *Moby-Dick*. In his view, a sailor who has become a "transparent eyeball" on the mast of a gently swaying ship is on the verge of falling into the sea, which instantly brings back to his consciousness the unbridgeable duality of the Me and the Not-Me. Melville, discussing his own similar experience in a letter to Hawthorne, complained of those who "will insist upon the universal application of temporary feeling or opinion."<sup>5</sup>

Returning to Emerson and the eyeball passage, it might be assumed that the following five sentences connected by semi-colons merely amplify "all mean egotism vanishes," suggesting that Emerson means only that the experience is not common or vulgar, and that the whole passage is merely a poetic representation of that experience. But if we note the use of "transparent" in *Nature* and elsewhere, the passage takes on a different character.

What becomes "transparent" in *Nature* is not limited to his contemplating consciousness. The universe also becomes transparent, and Emerson describes the process of it thus:

When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added grace and expression. These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects. If the Reason can be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them (C, 1, 49-50).

Whichever becomes transparent, Emerson's consciousness or the universe, "the circulating currents of the Universal Being" means the same as "the light of higher laws" that shines through the universe, or "causes and spirits" that are seen through outlines and surfaces. And these constitute Emerson, the "part or parcel of God."

Between the two journal entries which supplied the eyeball passage comes a tell-tale comment:

I have no hatred to the round earth & its gray mountains. I see well enough the sand hill opposite my window. I see with as much pleasure as another a field of corn or a rich pasture, whilst I dispute their absolute being. Their phenomenal being, I no more dispute than I do my own. I do not dispute but point out the just way of viewing them (*J*, V, 123-124).

If "transparent" experiences are what happens when we adopt "the just way of viewing" things, that is, when our attention is not directed to their "phenomenal being," the eyeball passage is an attempt at presenting the aspect of his consciousness stripped of its "phenomenal" contents. To put it differently, he is merely relating in the passage that, alone in the Concord forest, he thinks of the creative spirit that causes the "phenomenal being," and that as his introspection becomes intense, his will to see things in their clear outline and surface slackens its hold, thus making the images blur. But how does his thinking of the creative spirit objectively constitute the fact that "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through" him, or the fact that "causes and spirits are seen through" outlines and surfaces?

If we look back from his later writing in "Circles," the question becomes much easier. He says, "Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts (*C*, 11, 302)." Then the eyeball experience in *Nature* belongs to God, not to man. But how could we explain the experiential ring of the passage? The most plausible explanation for it would be that Emerson described in terms of experience the logical products of a certain philosophical theory which enables him to become God. He becomes "part or parcel of God" because according to the theory God and man are identical in essence, and because God is "a circle whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere." The power of the early Emersonian voice comes partly from the stylistic audacity of presenting, as personal experience, as personally witnessed fact, what ought to occur by a certain wishful theory.

What makes *Nature* a difficult book to understand is that, in spite of the unveiling quality of the eyeball experience and his clear grasp of it as of the "part or parcel of God," the book progresses to a climax of the "Prospects" of the "apocalypse of the mind." The experience does not in itself constitute the "apocalypse" but only an introduction to it. But if we take the passage as describing what ought to occur, instead of what has occurred, or as a tentative use of adjectives to describe a certain experience, the passage is an anticipation of what should come at the end of "Prospects."

In the "Introduction" the reader is reminded of the state of knowledge: "All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. We have theories of races

and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approach to an idea of creation (C, 1, 4)." But soon God, or Spirit, and the necessity of creation are postulated: "There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms: and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, preexist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affection in the world of spirit (C, 1, 34)."

In *To The Finland Station*, Edmund Wilson cites Feuerbach's criticism of Hegel:

Hegel's absolute Idea, said Feuerbach, which was supposed to have incorporated itself in matter for the purpose of realizing reason, had been a gratuitous presupposition which Hegel was unable to prove. What the absolute Idea really was, was a substitute for the Word become Flesh, and Hegel was actually merely the last of the greatest apologists for Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Feuerbach's criticism would apply to Emerson also. He says, "there seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms," but is there any ground for the "seeming"? Is not the whole idea of God's creation as expressed in *Nature* an application to nature of man's idea of art? And the application "gratuitous"? Though Emerson would put such emphasis upon emancipation from the past, is not the idea of "a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms" also a "substitute" for the traditional incarnation? His sentence deserves further attention because of its problematic nature. It carries with it a tone of Emerson's independent thinking. Or, is he speaking as someone who is not sure himself, and so depends on others' speculation, because the idea seems to him "a gratuitous presupposition"?

It is doubtful whether Hegel was actually merely the last of the greatest apologists for Christianity" and also whether Emerson's motive was that of a Christian apologist, since the theory of identity they adopt takes them far beyond the apologist's position to the absolute consciousness. The identity of God's reason and man's reason, whatever the difference in quantity may be, young Emerson had heard preached by W. E. Channing, when the latter emphasized the intelligibility of God. And in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* he had encountered the theory stated in a different way: "That which we find within ourselves, which is more than ourselves, and yet the ground of whatever is good and permanent therein, is the substance and life of all other knowledge," together with an epistemological formula in Latin based on ontology: "Quantum sumus, scimus," whatever we are, that we know.<sup>7</sup> In early 1830, Emerson read in Joseph Marie de Gérando's *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie*:

Héraclite introduisit, sur le principe de la connaissance humaine, une maxime spécieuse, qui eut après lui un grand succès et exerça sur la philosophie une grande influence. *Le même ne peut être conçu que par le*

*même*; "la conception ne peut se fonder que sur la similitude entre l'objet et le sujet."<sup>8</sup>

Those readings resulted in two journal entries, which show how his later speculations are various developments of the identity theory he met with in these writers. He put down in the journal on December 10, 1830:

God is the substratum of all souls. Is not that the solution of the riddle of sympathy? It is one of the oldest principles of philosophy that like must beget like, & that only like can know like. It is worms & flesh in us that fear or sympathize with worms & flesh and God only within that worships God of the Universe (*J*, 111, 213).

Two months later on February 23, 1831, he would write of the "elementary fact in all—'like must know like.'" What is usually described as Emerson's mystical experience in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, becomes possible only in the identity theory. Added to the distinction between Reason and Understanding made by Coleridge, the identity theory gave young Emerson a key to "the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God (*C*, 1, 22)." Since Emerson's Reason and God's Reason are identical, and since whatever Emerson was, that he was to know, would he not be able to comprehend nature, God's work of art, as his own creation? The poet in "Prospects" says, "Know then the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see (*C*, 1, 76)," and predicts at the very end of *Nature*, "The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation, . . . —he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight (*C*, 1, 77)." He would become a transparent eyeball and see all. Thus the identity theory provided the main pillars of *Nature* and its "Prospects" are of totally comprehending the Ideas which must have "manifested themselves in material forms."

Emerson's start with *Nature* was not the perception that what ought not to exist is allowed to, and that the world ought therefore to be changed. It was a lone contemplator's desire to reach the absolute. The rhapsodic quality of *Nature* is his sense of, and excitement over, the possibility of success in reading the book of nature and becoming a God-man who can act on the "apocalypse of the mind." The "apocalypse" is not of the end of the world but of the creation of it.

Towards the end of *The American Scholar*, the latent wishes in the identity theory are made explicit: "The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all; it is for you to dare all (*C*, 1, 114)." The "influences"—nature, books, and action—are a call to "the whole of Reason" to wake from the slumber it is in. Once awake, the individual ought to

"know all and dare all," because he is no more possessed of merely human relative knowledge but of the absolute consciousness of the creative Spirit. Then it is only appropriate for this "scholar" to have "all confidence in himself" and to envision himself as a great leader whose office is "to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances (C, 1, 100)." Oliver Wendell Holmes called the address "our intellectual Declaration of Independence." No doubt it was so, but the image of the ego inflated to the absolute by the desire of a solitary man has not been well noted.

The *Divinity School Address* can also be interpreted as Emerson's autobiographic drama. Starting with his present self enamored of the identity theory, because it seems to enable him to "own the world," "to subdue the world," only by "obeying myself," he then introduces his old self in the person of Rev. Barzillai Frost, who seems to preach only what is "proper" to be heard, not manly enough to speak out his own truth.<sup>9</sup> And he concludes the drama with the expectation of his future self: "I look for the new Teacher that... shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul... (C, 1, 151)."

What is obvious here is that the self-reliant seer of identity envisioned in *Nature*, as well as the all-knowing, all-daring scholar, still remains a hope to be realized. Emerson has not gone a step further than where he stood two years before, in 1836. What cannot be overlooked in *Nature* and the two addresses is that he took seriously his desire to reach the absolute. Hence Emerson the Tantalos, tormented by the vision of the vital water called the all-knowing, all-daring Reason. In 1841 he had to conclude about the readability of nature that "Known it will not be (C, 1, 200)."

To see him evasive about his position and backing off from any polemics, despite the challenging ring of the *Divinity School Address* with its implied demand for a church reform or rebirth, is to see the discrepancy between his desired and envisioned self, and his actual, rather apprehensive, prudent self. Henry Ware Jr. had written *The Personality of the Deity* "partly with a view to them (=Emerson's positions in the *Address*)." To Ware, who says, "I am not perfectly aware of the precise nature of your opinions on the subject of the discourse, nor upon exactly what speculations they are grounded," or "I do not know by what arguments the doctrine, that 'the soul knows no persons,' is justified,"<sup>10</sup> Emerson's reply was "I could not give account of myself if challenged. I could not possibly give you one of the 'arguments' you cruelly hint at, on which any doctrine of mine stands. For I do not know what arguments mean, in reference to any expression of a thought"<sup>11</sup>—this from the same person who would soon write in "Poet" that "it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem... The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form (C, 111, 9-10)." He could have referred to the identity theory and the episte-

mological formula, 'Quantum sumus, scimus,' and to the European philosophers who propounded it, or even to some ancient Greek philosophers, but the danger was too great of thereby stripping himself of the stylish device of posturing as an original, independent, inspired Seer.

## II

*Essays: First Series* begins with the statement of the identity: "There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same (C, 11, 3)." The voice continues almost to the end with the air of the all-knowing, since "I can find Greece, Asia, Italy, Spain, and the Islands,— the genius and creative principle of each and of all eras in my own mind (C, 11, 9)." The Emersonian voice thinks that not only the civil and metaphysical history of man, but "that of the external world" can be known because it is in him. But what clearly distinguishes the voice from the earlier Emerson up to the *Divinity School Address* is the awareness it has of the double consciousness of the desired and actual self. At the end of "History" it has to add, "Is there somewhat overweening in this claim? Then I reject all I have written, for what is the use of pretending to know what we know not? (C, 11, 39)."

If we glimpse an incipient retreat of the all-knowing in "History," we find Emerson asserting a kind of agnosticism in "Spiritual Laws": "He who sees moral nature out and out and thoroughly knows how knowledge is acquired and character formed, is a pedant... The last analysis can no wise be made (C, 11, 137)." Paralleling this retreat, that of the all-daring is complete. Here the Emersonian voice defends nature against art. All conscious and purposive action has to give way to spontaneity, for "If we would not be mar-plots with our miserable interferences, the work, the society, letters, arts, science, religion of men would go on far better than now (C, 11, 139-40)."

After he has established this passive, spontaneous laissez-faire-ism, he goes on to state the innermost core of the essay, that is, separatist individualism. Emphasis is now placed, not on the fact that "There is one mind common to all individual men," but on the uniqueness of the individual. This variation of the Biblical talent receives an amplification as the rightness of minding one's own business, for only willing obedience to one's constitutional inclination, or "the choice of his constitution," is now called a sincere action. And to reinforce the position, Emerson reverses the formula, 'Quantum sumus, scimus,' and makes varied use of its negative implications. He preaches now that one should abstain from any attempt to know anything that he is not, for "what can we see or acquire but what we are?" If one disregards this lesson, his intellectual life will not be "clear and healthful," and his education will be wasted. One may "take what belongs to his spiritual

estate; nor can he take anything else." This epistemological tragedy is, however, only a preparation for another, more tragic fate: "We can love nothing but nature." Love is possible only for "that soul which . . . repeats in its own all my experience (C, 11, 151)," and there is no associative principle except "the affinities by which alone society should be formed (C, 11, 151)." Where, however, in the actual world can one hope to find his Narcissistic doubles? It sounds natural for Emerson to say that "that which I call heaven, and inwardly aspire after, is the state or circumstances desirable to my own constitution (C, 11, 140)."

If "a higher law than that of our will regulates events" and laissez-faire-ism is wisdom, and if one is destined to know and love only what he is, what would be the logical outcome in practice? It would certainly not be "dissimulation" of what he is not, nor participation in any activist movement. Hence the Emersonian precept, "Try to be yourself." Where, however, can he realize it? Since it is not among men, it must be where he is alone. "Spiritual Laws" is Emerson's statement of his will to separate himself from the activists who advocate one form of association or another, and to stick to his lot or status quo.

What hastened the retreat was not a discovery on Emerson's part of any flaw in the argument for his former world view. It was the failure of the identity theory to provide him with a definite center of ethical belief. In the social situation after the great depression of 1837 he was called upon to act. But how could he act without knowing "the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God," or with the dream of the all-knowing, all-daring scholar still unrealized? However, if, as he wrote in the journal, "I understand poverty much better than riches (J, VIII, 333)," as might be expected from the conditions he found himself in until the late 1820's, we might expect of him a view of what should be done about it, for the state of affairs caused by the depression was not to be overlooked by people with social awareness. In the editorial column of the *New Yorker*, January 20, 1838, Horace Greeley estimated "from our personal observation," that there were "no less than ten thousand—within the limits of our city—who are in utter and hopeless distress, with no means of surviving the winter but those provided by the charity of their fellow citizens." In the opening words of *Moby-Dick* we hear not only young Melville's despair in 1840, but also the echoes of social reality. O. A. Brownson's "The Laboring Classes" must be read in this context.

Even before the enormous influx of immigrants from Ireland and Germany flooded and transformed the Boston area, Joseph Tuckerman, W. E. Channing's classmate and friend, had undergone a revolution of his views on human life and moral conditions through contact with the poor there. He stated his belief thus:

There is, I think, nothing more striking in Christianity than the position and power which it gives to the social principle in its believers. Its two highest and most exalting sentiments . . . are first, that of the filial relation

of every human being to God; and secondly, that of the universal brotherhood of man. Nay, it even makes our love to man the ultimate test and evidence of our love to God.<sup>12</sup>

Here we may well recall Brownson in *New Views* introducing Cousin's theory of identity to assert union as one of the signs of the times.

Concerning the poor, a typically Emersonian utterance would be the one in "Self-Reliance" :

Then, again, do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situation. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong (C, 11, 52).

This is a restatement of what he expressed rather weakly in "Spiritual Laws." To note the difference between the two essays is to see how Emerson's desire works for creating a strong and heroic self which is not quite his actual self. Emerson's oft-repeated emphasis on self-trust was originally connected with his youthful concern about maintaining inner integrity against outside forces which pressed him to act a role that he did not believe in. But once the image of the self-reliant possessed Emerson the writer, he would expand it beyond the bounds of his personal integrity. The hope and desire to become the absolute consciousness that comprehends man and nature, was the spring of his rhapsodic eloquence in *Nature*, and the same wishful assumption of the possibility of the "all-knowing and all-daring Scholar" or "the new Teacher" prompted him to make those addresses, the one so stirring, the other so challenging. Now that the hope of being the absolute has collapsed, he turns to the glorification of the individual who would have nothing to do with the world. The American Scholar's office to "cheer, raise, and guide men" now recedes behind the self-reliant man's will to follow only "what is after my constitution." Emerson could not simply remain content with the tragic fact of man's insularity in "Spiritual Laws." He had to apotheosize it in the name of "the great man." If he could not present his great self by becoming God himself, he must show himself to be great, by separating himself from the world and simultaneously preempting God through intuition. Here we may well recall young Emerson's journal entry :

I see no reason why I should bow my head to man, or cringe in my behaviour . . . . When I consider my poverty and ignorance, and the positive superiority of talents, virtues and manners, which I must acknowledge in many men, I am prone to merge my dignity in a most uncomfortable sense of unworthiness. But when I reflect that I am an immortal being, born to a destiny immeasurably high, deriving my moral and intellectual attributes

directly from Almighty God, and that my existence and condition as his child must be forever independent of the controul [sic] or will of my fellow children,— I am elevated in my own eyes to a higher ground in life and a better self-esteem (*J*, 11, 192).

Since a desire grows where the desired is not possessed, it would be quite natural for Emerson to be troubled by the gap between his actual condition and desired vision of his self. Nothing shows it as clearly as his attitude to property. In May 1831, when he wrote to his brother William about his late wife's legacy, he was grateful for "Ellen's work of mercy,"<sup>13</sup> but ten years later the Emersonian voice in "Self-Reliance" says, "a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property, out of new respect for his nature. Especially he hates what he has, if he see that it is accidental—came to him by inheritance, or gift... (*C*, 11, 87-88)." We may also note the voice in "Compensation," too, that says, concerning the burden one has to bear for acquiring external goods without due labor, that "the gain is apparent; the tax is certain (*C*, 11, 123)." Are we to think here that in ten years Emerson came to hate the "inheritance, or gift," or to regard the inheritance as only of apparent benefit and feel that "the tax" had been more real?

If that was the case, he had been given a chance to part with it in a Utopian collectivist attempt by George Ripley. Ripley had written to him about the "idea of the Association which I wish to see established,"<sup>14</sup> and asked his endorsement. Looking back at the failure of Brook Farm, for the success of which Ripley worked day and night, and at the great amount of debt which he worked for decades to pay off, it is easy to judge that Emerson's decision not to join it was wise and prudent. We are, however, not concerned with hindsight wisdom, but with what was responsible for his choice. Ripley had written in the letter that, though he had "a passion for being independent of the world, and of every man in it," he felt "bound to sacrifice this private feeling, in the love of a great social good." More than a month later, on December 15, 1840, Emerson replied to Ripley giving reasons why he had decided not to join. He was convinced "that the Community is not good for me," and that he was "in many respects suitably placed... (*L*, 11, 368-371)".

Another chance to part with his property offered itself almost two years later, in another attempt at creating a Utopian community in New England. His response was again wise and prudent. Emerson entered the discussion with Alcott in the journal and wrote :

You ask, O Theanor, said Amphitryon, that I should go forth from this place with my wife & my children, and that you & your family may enter & possess it. The same request in substance has often been made to me before by numbers of persons. Now I also think that I & my wife ought to go forth from this house, & work all day in the fields, & lie at night under

some thicket, but I am waiting where I am, only until some god shall point to me which among all these applicants, yourself or some other, is the rightful claimant (*J*, VIII, 313).

With the reformism of the early 40's which thus intrudes upon his quiet world, Emerson might be speaking quite frankly, when he says he hates "the inheritance, or gift," or that "the gain is apparent; the tax is certain." But obviously we would be wrong, if we thought he would rather part with it than possess it in hatred or pay the "tax." Those passages in "Self-Reliance" and "Compensation" are properly read as necessitated by the ideal image of the self-reliant or the principle of retribution he is celebrating in the essays. If he had parted with the windfall inheritance of Ellen Tucker's property, he would have lost the foundation to build his freedom on, "for the best good of wealth is freedom (*C*, 11, 235)," and would have been compelled to remain a hireling minister who could little afford a manly pride and inner integrity, because "I have heard it said that the clergy... are addressed as women; that the rough spontaneous conversation of men they do not hear, but only a mincing and diluted speech (*C*, 1, 94)." Here again we may well recall what a divinity student in 1828 put down in his journal: "The chief advantage I should propose myself in wealth would be the independence of manner and conversation it would bestow & which I eagerly covet & seldom quite attain, & in some companies never (*J*, 111, 136)."

Concerning the legacy, young Emerson was determined to "adhere to y<sup>e</sup> right remembering y<sup>t</sup> there are worse things y<sup>n</sup> being defrauded, to wit, defrauding, though there is no occasion for using either of those words (*L*, 1, 345)." Whatever his feelings, he well realized the need of the legacy, so he had to "adhere to y<sup>e</sup> right." But Emerson the writer celebrates "a sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, *who teams it, farms it, peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls (*C*, 11, 76). We know how different young Emerson was from this image of self-reliance. Emerson the writer may have been true to his desire or aspiration, but not to what he lived through.

In "Nominalist and Realist" the Emersonian voice says, "The property will be found where the labor, the wisdom, and the virtue have been in nations, in classes, and (the whole life time considered, with the compensations) in the individual also (*C*, 111, 231),—a clear contradiction of what is said earlier in "Politics": "there is an instinctive sense, however obscure and yet inarticulate, that the whole constitution of property on its present tenures, is injurious, and its influence on persons deteriorating and degrading... (*C*, 111, 204)" Besides, he had a Prudhonian perception of property as theft: "... great merchants outwit and absorb the substance of small

ones and every man feeds on his neighbor's labor if he can (*J*, VII, 422)." When placed beside Brownson, who located the evil of the "whole constitution of property on its present tenures" in the institution of inheritance, Emerson in the essays clearly equivocates his position on property, because, if compelled to the logical conclusion suggested by those sentences cited above, he would have either to defend the status quo or celebrate a reform, even a revolution, which aims to change the "injurious," "deteriorating and degrading" factors in "the whole constitution of property on its present tenures." He would either have to be a Burke committed to the past or a Paine committed to the future. Neither would be welcome to Emerson who must reject the past as the self-reliant God-man and is "in many respects suitably placed." So the final reflection comes down to "This business of reform is dangerous, because it is always partial. It is handsomer to remain in the Establishment. . . (*J*, VIII, 245)" In accord with the position thus reached is the prophcy he gives in "Man the Reformer" of love which will "one day" prevail over the present system of selfishness (*C*, 1, 255).

In "Experience," Emerson's "strongest essay" in Stephen E. Whicher's estimation and born of his determination to "set his heart on honesty,"<sup>15</sup> he says, "A sympathetic person is placed in the dilemma of a swimmer among drowning men, who catch at him, and if he give so much as a leg or a finger they will drown him (*C*, 111, 81)." He had to be cautious not to be drowned. What he feared was his own sympathy, because "I understand poverty much better than riches," and had to protect himself from it. He was disgusted "at those invaders who fill a studious house with blast and running, to secure some paltry convenience. Not less I dislike a low sympathy of each with his neighbor's needs (*C*, 111, 137)." Hence the Emersonian voice in "Self-Reliance" that asks, "Are they *my* poor?" Emerson, now a Concord gentleman, loves serenity, not social commotions. He would now even regard the contemporary reform movements as "crimes" which may "spring from love" and "seem right and fair from the actor's point of view, but when acted are found destructive of society (*C*, 111, 78)." Although his life since the publication of *Nature* proved to be nothing more than a solipsistic visionary's, he was content with the serene "studious house" he lived in, keeping "the island of man inviolate." His conviction was now not the possibility of becoming the absolute consciousness but a very traditional one: "The ardors of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism,—that nothing is of us or our works,—that all is of God (*C*, 111, 69)." Thus the rebel once drunk with the vision of the all-knowing and all-daring awakes a quietist who clings to his status quo.

What is discernible in this withdrawal from his earlier position, is the failure of the identity theory to provide him with a definite center of ethical belief. The theory had provided him with a vast vista of human history, where the Proteus in him could appear in any historic personage and enjoy the creative spirit working

in him, but it failed to give him the vision he himself was to embody in pre-Civil War America. He could not commit himself to any contemporary reform movement, because it appeared "partial," or relative to the absolute. What strengthened the retreat was his historical perception that in the unceasing flux of "higher generalization" the "things which are dear to men at this hour" may not remain so very long. But if all is in the flux of creation and there is no telling what tomorrow will bring, as the voice in "Circles" thinks,—a notable difference from other activists' belief in the linear or dialectical progress of civilization which allowed them room for action for the sake of amelioration—there will remain no room for Emerson "to cheer, to raise, and to guide men."

The voice in "Circles" says, "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why (C, 11, 321),"—a confession of the loss of direction, and exactly the opposite from the desire "to know all and dare all." In "Circles" it is possible that Emerson is using the voice simply to "experiment" in the process theory and merely showing "the fault of our rhetoric that we cannot strongly state one fact without seeming to belie some other (C, 11, 39)." But if we consider the voice that believes in "preferring truth to his past apprehension of truth, and his alert acceptance of it, from whatever quarter" in "Circles" (C, 11, 309), together with the voice in "Intellect" that believes that "He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings and afloat (C, 11, 342)," it is clear that Emerson had lost his former position completely. From the throne of the assumed absolute, he had to come down to be a humble watcher from a corner of life: "People disparage knowing and the intellectual life, and urge doing. I am very content with knowing, if only I could know (C, 111, 84)."

It is because he knew very well what he had been doing all along in the lectures and essays—his own performance in literary space of consciousness—that he was sometimes worried about his sincerity. Was not his literary symbolic action too elevated to carry conviction even to himself? He put down in the journal, "I who suffer from excess of sympathy proclaim always the merits of self-reliance (J, VII, 372). He wrote "from aspiration & antagonism as well as experience (J, VII, 421)," and knew that "I am always insincere, as always knowing there are other moods." Although "There is no deeper dissembler than the sincerest person," he could also think that "You shall find him noble at last, noble in his chamber (J, VII, 423)." What remained permanent in him was an aspiration for the valor which makes him a self-sufficient being, who can enjoy "silent union, actual separateness; ideal union, actual independence (J, VIII, 306)." While Brownson's desire was for union, Emerson's was for isolation.

## Notes

- 1 *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition (Boston and New York, 1903-1904; rpt. New York: AMS, 1968), p. 24. Cited hereafter in the text as *C*.
- 2 *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960-), 111, p. 212. Cited hereafter in the text as *J*.
- 3 William Ellery Channing, *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D., Including The Perfect Life and Containing a Copious General Index and a Table of Scripture References* (London, 1884), p. 185 and p. 187.
- 4 Orestes A. Brownson, *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (Boston, 1836), pp. 114-115.
- 5 *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven, Conn., 1965), p. 131.
- 6 Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station* (New York, 1972), pp. 148-149.
- 7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* (Burlington, 1829) notes, p. 257.
- 8 Joseph Marie de Gérando, *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie*, cited in Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson The Essayist*, 1, p. 35.
- 9 Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston, 1979), pp. 41-61.
- 10 John Ware M.D., *Memoir of the Life of Henry Ware Jr.*, 11, p. 186.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 12 Joseph Tuckerman, *The Principles and Results of the Ministry in Boston* (Boston, 1838), pp. 137-138.
- 13 *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York, 1939), 1, p. 323. Cited hereafter in the text as *L*.
- 14 *Autobiography of Brook Farm*, ed. Henry W. Sams (New Jersey, 1958), pp. 307-312.
- 15 Stephen E. Whicher ed., *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1960), p. 253.