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# EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

## Teaching Emerson's *Nature* in a Japanese University

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This short essay describes my experiences teaching *Nature* in an upper-level American literature course for English majors at Nara Women's University. Emerson is not popular among Japanese students, who generally prefer modern American novelists and, to a lesser extent, Hawthorne, Poe, Twain or the early Henry James. Students at my university, however, tend to be intellectually ambitious and are eager to attempt toilsome tasks that might prove rewarding. *Nature* is exactly the kind of text that offers students such a challenge. I wanted to give them perhaps their first opportunity to understand the actual language and manner in which Emerson expresses his thoughts.

*Nature* is not easy reading for undergraduates. The teacher's task is to disentangle the complex narrative and show how the essay's argument develops. Because that is especially hard for speakers whose native language is not English, I spend some time in class translating passages, or having students translate, as I explain or answer questions as necessary. My students generally liked *Nature*'s elements of subjectivism, mysticism, and assimilation with nature. Though I cannot say definitively why Japanese students might appreciate these particular elements, I would like to share some personal observations and suggest some possible reasons for their interest in such themes.

Some extended comments about how I understand and teach *Nature* are in order before I discuss how my students have reacted to it. First, I explain that the work is a meditative prose poem, and not a philosophical essay or a religious statement. By defining it this way, I can explain and resolve the text's many repetitions and deviations, as well as one important logical jump, because a poem usually develops by flow of consciousness rather than by a linear logic. Hence I emphasize Emerson's narrative method more than his ideas themselves, treating the text as a work of art. This somewhat narratological approach to Emerson has been the one I've recently taken when reading his work on my own.

Next, I explain to students that plural voices speak in *Nature*. I call these voice A and voice B. Voice A is personal and delights in natural facts themselves, while voice B is impersonal or representative and seeks the inherent meaning of facts. Voice B leads from the text's first presented question, "To what end is nature?," to the final answer that the education of man is the purpose of nature. Personally, I think that voice A, though less important, signifies the starting point of Emerson's contemplation on nature throughout his life. The two voices speak, standing in opposite positions, so that the argument of *Nature* presents a circular—and not a linear—upward movement. Chapter XIII, "Prospects," transcends the argument developed up to that point concerning the status of nature, namely, whether it is a phenomenon or a substance. Ignoring the questions examined in the preceding chapters, this final chapter dreams of a far distant future in which the metamorphosis of man and nature is achieved. This logical leap in the last stage of the narrative's development is not a blunder but produces a beautiful effect when this text is regarded as literature.

Strictly speaking, however, Emerson's narrative is even more complex. Voices A and B sometimes speak together, as if on a borderline. Voice A sometimes shifts into voice B and *vice versa*. When the speaking voices change, the reader feels, albeit temporarily, embarrassment and confusion and the argument seems set back. Therein lies a major difficulty in reading *Nature*. Consider the following example from the "Beauty" chapter. In this section, we have been participating in voice A's joy at the beautiful aspects of nature when voice B suddenly speaks: "But this beauty of Nature...if too eagerly hunted, become[s] shows merely, and *mock[s]* us with [its] *unreality*" (14; italics mine). The beauty of nature is declared an "unreality" which "mocks" us. At this moment we feel somehow tripped up. Another example is from the "Spirit" chapter. Until this point in the text, idealism has been established as the core of Emerson's world. We are taught to neglect matter and live in the sphere of ideas. But

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### EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

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*ESP* welcomes notes and short articles (up to about 8 double-spaced, typed pages) on Emerson-related topics. Manuscripts are blind refereed. On matters of style, consult previous issues. We also solicit news about Emerson-related community, school, and other projects; information about editions, publications, and research in progress on Emerson and his circle; queries and requests for information in aid of research in these fields; and significant news of Emersonian scholars. Send manuscripts to the editor, Jennifer Gurley, English Department, LeMoyne College, 1419 Salt Springs Road, Syracuse, New York, 13214 or [gurleyja@lemoyne.edu](mailto:gurleyja@lemoyne.edu) (email submissions are much preferred).

Review copies of books on Emerson should be sent to book review editor Leslie Eckel, English Department, Suffolk University, 41 Temple St., Boston, MA 02114-4280.

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# PROSPECTS.



## Greetings from Your New *ESP* Editor

I would like to thank Wesley Mott and Robert Habich for inviting me to serve as editor of *ESP*. I hope that I will be able to do justice to the guidance both Wes and Bob have provided me over the years in my capacity as its book review editor. Many thanks also to Leslie Eckel, who has graciously agreed to step into my former role. I've long admired this well-crafted publication created by and dedicated to Emerson enthusiasts.

Emerson appeals to his readers for reasons as distinct and varied as there are audiences. He is more than a subject of scholarly debate. In the spirit of exploring the many ways Emerson compels us, *ESP* will feature a new column entitled "My Emerson" (see page 12 of this issue) that is devoted to sharing our readers' personal accounts of what Emerson means to them. Please consider submitting your own reflections for possible inclusion in the column.

The Emerson Society has expanded in recent years to include more members from around the world. To better attract and accommodate a diversity of members, the Society now has a presence on various social media and an updated website in the works. In addition, annual dues can now be paid through PayPal (see details below), and *ESP* will be available electronically through email. Please contact Todd Richardson (richardson\_t@utpb.edu) to sign up for this environmentally friendly delivery option. Finally, don't forget Bob's call (in the Fall 2012 issue) for us to double our numbers: recommend the Society to friends, colleagues, students, and your local libraries, and consider buying a subscription as a gift. At \$20 a year, it's a steal.

Thank you very much. I look forward to serving you.

—Jennifer Gurley

## Emerson Sightings/Citings

Clarence Burley would like to call to our attention the minor appearances of Henry David Thoreau and RWE in Geraldine Brooks's novel, *March* (Viking/Penguin, 2006), a tale about the (mis)adventures of the father of *Little Women* during the Civil War.

## Emerson Society Panels at ALA

The Society presents two panels annually at the American Literature Association meeting, to be held this year from May 23 to 26 in Boston. Visit [americanliterature.org](http://americanliterature.org) for more information.

### Emerson and the Mechanism of Fame

Chair: David Dowling, University of Iowa

"Emerson Estrangements: Teaching Self-Reliance Through Strategic Distance," Ruth Martin, Northwestern University (Ruth Martin is the winner of the Emerson Society's Graduate Student Award for 2013)

"Towards an Impersonal Public Life: Emerson's Response to Celebrity Culture," Bonnie Carr O'Neill, Mississippi State University

"Yeats the Emersonian," Scott Raymoure, Bard College

### Emerson and Utopianism

Chair: Leslie Eckel, Suffolk University

"New Atlantic Utopias: Rhetorical Response in Emerson and the Puritans," E. Thomas Finan, Boston University

"Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley, and the 'Pretended Siege of Babylon,'" James Hewitson, University of Tennessee

"'War,' Richard Cobden, and Free Trade Utopianism?" T. Gregory Garvey, State University of New York, Brockport

## Thoreau Society Annual Gathering

The theme of this year's gathering in Concord on Thursday, July 11, is "Mystic, Transcendentalist, and Natural Philosopher to Boot." A social hour hosted by the Emerson Society will follow the panel. Visit [http://www.thoreausociety.org/\\_activities\\_ag.htm](http://www.thoreausociety.org/_activities_ag.htm) for information and full schedule.

### Emerson as a Renaissance Man

Chair: Leslie Eckel, Suffolk University

"Emerson's *Nature* and the Renaissance Ideal," David Greenham, University of the West of England

"Acts of Friendship: Ralph Waldo Emerson as Editor," Mark Gallagher, University of California, Los Angeles

## Emerson on Social Media

### The Emerson Society on Facebook

We invite you to search for and "like" the Society's page to join our global online community of Emersonians. You can expect calls for papers from the Society and announcements of Emersonian events, a real-time version of the popular "Emerson Sightings/Citings" column from *Emerson Society Papers*, as well as photos and other intriguing features. Page managers Leslie Eckel (leckel@suffolk.edu) and Bonnie Carr O'Neill (bco20@msstate.edu) welcome your ideas and feedback via email or Facebook's "message" system at any time.

### New Emerson Society Website in the Works

Thanks to the hard work of Amy Earhart at Texas A&M University, the Emerson Society website will soon have a new look. The site will be linked with our facebook page. Stay tuned.

### Waldo Now on Twitter

We would like to thank Scott C. Crowley, one of the Emerson Society's newest life members, for sharing with us his twitter account, @EchoesofEmerson, which features daily quotations from RWE.

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## Prospects

(Continued from page 3)

### Honoring the Collected Works of RWE

We are delighted to announce the celebration of the now complete, ten-volume *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard UP), a project over 32 years in the making. The Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association, Harvard University Press, and Houghton Library will be hosting a reception at the Houghton Library on Friday, May 24, at 5:30 p.m.

### Emerson Scholars as Keynote Speakers

Mitchell Breitwieser (U.C. Berkeley) and Branka Arsic (Columbia University) are two of five keynote speakers at the Le Moyne College Religion and Literature Forum, “The Return of the Text: A Conference on the Cultural Value of Close Reading.” For more information, visit <http://www.lemoyne.edu/tabid/3128/default.aspx>.

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## Teaching Emerson’s Nature

(Continued from page 1)

here another voice cuts in, saying “Yet, if [idealism] only deny the existence of matter, it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit. *It leaves God out of me*” (37; italics mine). Accordingly, idealism’s importance begins to decline, until finally it is settled on as only “a useful introductory hypothesis.”

Another reading strategy I teach students is a way to identify degrees of importance among statements. I suggest that voice B belongs to level one, while voice A to level two. But there are also level three statements that differ from level one and two statements in a number of ways. I require students to keep that grading scale in their mind as they read. The following passage offers one typical example of these shifting levels of statements:

But beside this general grace diffused over nature, almost all the individual forms are agreeable to the eye, as is proved by our endless imitations of some of them, as *the acorn, the grape, the pine-cone, the wheat-ear, the egg, the wings and forms of most birds, the lion’s claw, the serpent, the butterfly, sea-shells, flames, clouds, buds, leaves, and the forms of many trees, as the palm.* (13; italics mine)

Nature is filled with agreeable forms, and we imitate them. That is a level one claim. Then Emerson becomes absorbed in providing examples, which is a level three statement.

The quotation below is another example of a level three statement, a deviation from levels one and two. It falls within a consideration of “the Unity of Nature” and whether

### Students Discuss Emerson, Baldwin

The Odyssey Project used the Emerson Society’s Community Service Award to fund its project “An American Inheritance: Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Baldwin,” an effort to “enable students with limited access to educational opportunities to engage in critical thinking, writing, and analysis” by studying the works of these two vital American authors. Odyssey reports that their project successfully enabled students to “feed their own intellectual curiosity” and “regain interest in their education.” For more information about how the Odyssey Project put its award to such good use, contact Bonnie Carr O’Neill ([bco20@msstate.edu](mailto:bco20@msstate.edu)).

likenesses among objects are obvious or not. The point is that every human art is said to resemble something else:

Thus architecture is called “frozen music,” by De Stael and Goethe. Vitruvius thought an architect should be a musician. “*A Gothic church,*” said Coleridge, “*is a petrified religion.*” Michael Angelo maintained, that, to an architect, a knowledge of anatomy is essential. (27; italics mine)

In this passage, architecture is referred to as an example of a human art. This italicized part is of course an extension of giving examples of resemblances. But then Emerson begins to be more drawn to particular proper names, and in so doing deviates from the original discussion of the unity of nature. Deviations such as this one are level three statements.

Students have found my basic design for teaching *Nature* to be helpful. Upon completing their first reading of the essay they have told me that they’ve felt satisfied having read, with some guidance, that famous and almost unreadable text. Unless I explain the types of voices and sudden changes of voice, both of which represent components of Emerson’s inner thoughts, students have difficulty following his particular way of thinking and consequently might fail to grasp his ideas.

However, I am not sure if my students have really appreciated Emerson’s ultimate spiritualism. They have understood and accepted but offered no particular comments about the topic in the class. One reason for this might be that because Japanese students inhabit a quite different cultural ethos, they cannot necessarily sympathize with some of Emerson’s convictions about the universe, such as the Biblical superiority of human beings to animals or the ethical purpose of nature.

However, they highly enjoyed Emerson's sensitive assimilation to the beauty of nature. Their appreciation of Emerson's love of nature makes sense, for the Japanese people are emotionally connected to nature. Some of our national holidays reflect the transition of the seasons; the haiku, our traditional poem, cannot be written without our sense of those seasons; and our paintings have been more focused on landscapes or natural objects than human beings. The students were fascinated, for example, by Emersonian passages such as this one: "[I]n the sea of crimson light, [f]rom the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea, I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind" (13). I think that Emerson's joy here is one possible response to the scene he finds himself in, for such joy is one important aspect of Emerson's writing. The students' appreciation of Emerson's sensitivity to natural beauty might eventually lead them to a greater interest in his thinking, and in how *Nature* itself follows that thinking.

Now I will describe how my students handled two of the essay's most famous and perhaps most challenging moments. I refer to two problematic scenes: the one featuring the transparent eyeball and the closing scene that imparts the Orphic vision. The eyeball scene tells of the experience of making oneself into nothing, allowing for the influx of the outer world. The eyeball itself is a metaphor for the act of seeing, which is the most important means for connecting ourselves with the outer world. My students had no difficulty in understanding and appreciating this passage. Effacement of the self is one of the fundamental Buddhist teachings, and we Japanese are familiar with it, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The eyeball scene also reports nothing other than a mystical experience, a verbally indescribable feeling of immediate unity with God that is characterized by a change in one's state of consciousness. Though my students are not mystics themselves, their favorable reaction to this scene might be attributed to their cultural background.

Raised in a tradition of transcending, it is not difficult for Japanese students to accept that this passage describes a mystical experience, understood as a sudden jump to a higher level of consciousness or a sudden transcendence from the bondage of actualities. Certainly I do not mean to generalize about the whole of Japanese culture, which includes many complicated and contradictory elements. But if I restrict myself to talking about a bridge between mysticism and Japan, I think it is correct to say that Japanese cultural tradition contains a tendency to transcend logos, language, actuality, shapes and colors: to transcend this world.

In the second problematic scene, the closing section with the Orphic poet, Emerson presents two possibilities. One is an actual social and natural change realized by man's rebirth. Emerson writes, "to pure spirit, [nature] is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient" (44). He seems to want to encourage the reader with this promise. At the same time, however, he has emphasized throughout the text that we must change our way of seeing in order "to see the miraculous in the common" (44). Hence the metamorphosis of nature might be regarded as actual or objective, but it can also be considered subjective. My students were drawn to the subjective reading.

I hesitate to claim that Zen Buddhism directly or completely influenced my students' preference for the subjective view of this passage. But I do think that it is fair to suggest that some cultural vestiges of Buddhism may play some part. Most educated persons in Japan are familiar with the following saying uttered by Kaisen, a 16th-century Zen Buddhist priest, as he was burnt to death in his temple by a feudal lord, Nobunaga: "If I halt my judgment and feeling, fire loses its attribute; it feels even cool." This is an extreme form of subjective acceptance of the actuality of the fire that suggests that the fire ceases to exist if one judges it not to. The content of this radical expression seems to live in the Japanese consciousness. Three American scholars with whom I have spoken since teaching my course all read the passage as expressing, to different degrees, an idea of actual social change. It is therefore even more interesting to me that several of my students found instead a subjective acceptance of the world.

Edward George Seidensticker, the renowned scholar of Japanese language, literature, and history, and novelist Yasunari Kawabata's translator, was perplexed by the Japanese religious belief that the soul of the deceased comes and goes between the two worlds of the living and the dead. Our imagination seems to easily transgress the boundaries of this world. Speaking of this aesthetic imagination, the traditional Japanese values of "wabi" and "sabi" are not fixed in shapes and colors and are indefinable. Likewise, in the famous stone garden of Ryoanji Temple, we do not see the actual ground of sand, but instead imagine the sea. Perhaps this is why Emerson continues to appeal to me.

*This essay grew from a talk I gave (in English) in a workshop titled "Reading Nature, Teaching Nature" at the 51st Annual Meeting of the American Literature Society of Japan. I cite The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.1. Ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1971.*

## Reviews

### Ralph Waldo Emerson *L'Amérique à L'essai*.

THOMAS CONSTANTINESCO. Paris: Editions de la Rue d'Ulm, 2012. 267 pp. € 21.00 paper.

For French-speaking enthusiasts of American transcendental literature or for the innumerable other Emersonians who love the French language, as well as for the general reader, Thomas Constantinesco's new book is a Gallic *aperçu* of Emerson's thought and his art, his self-construction as a public figure, and also his reception, particularly, of course, in France. Constantinesco is a leading specialist in the literature of nineteenth-century New England, as well as a translator of Melville. In his preface, Mathieu Duplay notes that Emerson's reception in Europe received its impetus from Emerson's own cosmopolitan outlook. Constantinesco offers a useful chronology of writers and their influence and he notes in his prologue that while Emerson was a luminary in his own generation, he and others of his time went into "eclipse; only in the 1940s would the Sage of Concord be added to the new American canon. Eloquence is a new American religion, the orator is the new minister, and the lecture hall is the new cathedral. "Eloquence," and indeed the orator's own conversation, are a form of "contact with the divine," (21) inviting the audience into the extraordinary, an experience not unlike the *furor poeticus* of Plato's *Io*, or as espoused by Leon Hebraeus.

Constantinesco teases out the continuity between poetry, eloquence, and the essay as he demonstrates for the reader Emerson's own intellectual-affective trajectory from inchoate poetic ambitions to iconic essayist realizations. There is a discussion of the extent to which Emerson's writing and the man himself remain "fragmentary and incomplete." Emerson assessed himself as a fragment and his work as but a piece of that (26). Does he incarnate the American nation: is he the heretofore lacking American philosopher? And, as Constantinesco suggests, does he weave a *social contract*: a subliminal reference here to Rousseau, who, he allows, Emerson never read?

Constantinesco also discusses an ambient desire to see Emerson as representative of every man. Very interestingly, Montaigne's influence on Emerson's writing and his persona is analyzed at length (24-26). Emerson discovered Cotton's translation of Montaigne in his father's library as a child and found it delightful. The relationship was thus born early. Whether Emerson would become a type of the human to be found in everyone, the borrowing, and ultimate transformation of this concept and others from the author of the *Essais* is discussed. Similarly to those of Montaigne, Emerson's works are a process, a series of realized impulses, as the word *essay* suggests. They form a continuity where one cannot help but refer, when discussing one of his topics, to other pieces by him on the same theme. In this continuity, moreover, is to be found a host of instances where the author contradicts himself. Having thus mapped out these characteristics of Emerson's character and *oeuvre*, Constantinesco pursues his discussion.

What rapport can exist between creatures and nature? In the essay "Experience" one finds the stipulation that space exists to separate creatures (77). An appeal to the new "molecular philosophy," introduced in a time when the terms science and philosophy were still relatively interchangeable, serves Emerson to describe the separateness of the components (atoms) of reality, and this recognition of separateness is also made apparent by the essay, which by its nature is a provisional, experimental genre. Constantinesco opines that for Emerson, to write about nature or to understand it is to experience separateness. This conclusion is the fruit of his work over ten years, Constantinesco affirms. Emerson's articulations of nature appeared in 1836 and then again in 1844. Constantinesco notes that a comparison of the two editions reveals his journey from high optimism about the individual's potential for "independence from influences" to his crestfallen avowal that nature cannot be dominated, and that metamorphoses are everywhere apparent.

Thus, the author assesses, a sort of "symbiotic relationship" that he had thought possible between "consciousness and the world" (79) proved quite improbable. For Constantinesco, the works of Emerson can be seen to revolve around two opposing concepts, those of harmony and discontinuity. He follows the articulation of these principles throughout Emerson's essays. The anatomical image Emerson deploys as a prelude to his "American Scholar" address suggests that the parts always refer to the whole, as the fingers are to the hand, allowing for greater flexibility in performing the tasks of society.

While Emerson succeeds, through his work to establish a thesis of the universality of truth and to assert that this is readily seen in the diversity of events and the variations in reality, he also obviates the threat of fiction and masters the concept of myth by domesticating them, subsuming their functions in the service of truth. Constantinesco concludes that it is through fiction and myth that Emerson comes in his essays to articulate America: a domain of the separate, as inchoate as is the nation's growth towards the realization of its ideals. This fine volume wonderfully analyzes the progress of both Emerson's self-discovery and the evolution of his prose. These are studied as a microcosm, but also as a guiding incarnation of the American psychic self-construction since its beginnings.

James H. Dahlinger  
Le Moyne College

### Thoreau in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates.

Ed. SANDRA HARBERT PETRULIONIS. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. lxx + 314 pp. \$27.50 paper.

"Time is but the stream I go a fishing in," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. It would have pleased him to know that some one hundred and sixty years later a good many people still "go a fishing" in that same deep stream—for knowledge of him. But time's currents are swift enough that a mid-nineteenth-century fish can

be hard to catch. Truly knowing others in the present is hard enough, Thoreau often noted. The danger of “indicate handling” is all the greater in transactions of consciousness carried out across a long expanse of years. In *Thoreau in His Own Time*, editor Sandra Harbert Petrulionis has sidestepped this danger by allowing Thoreau’s contemporaries to speak (mostly) from firsthand acquaintance. Stretching from Lidian Emerson’s epistolary comments of the 1840s to Mabel Loomis Todd’s recollections (not published until 1958) of her parents’ stories, Petrulionis’s chronologically organized assemblage of comments on Thoreau by “family, friends, and associates” must have taken a great many hours to pull together, and a great many more to so lucidly and informatively introduce. But, to again borrow phrasing from her subject, Petrulionis has “gotten more than her labor for her pains.” In so accessibly organizing an abundance of firsthand material under one cover, Petrulionis has not only done a great service to everyone interested in Thoreau, she has given us a fresh, vivid, and richly refracted image of a truly remarkable personality.

It is especially fitting that Thoreau of all writers should be seen in directly observed detail. As *Thoreau in His Own Time* makes repeatedly clear, the man lived in a sustained state of what might be best described as empiricist ecstasy. Of all the unusual traits remarked upon in this volume, the most frequently noted are Thoreau’s astounding powers of observation: patient, minute, and joyous. Bronson Alcott, who knew rapture when he saw it, is quoted saying of Thoreau that there were “‘doors open on all sides of him...his senses seem doubled and give him access to secrets not read easily by other men’” (10). Emerson says he believed Thoreau when he boasted that “‘he could tell by the flowers what day of the month it is, within two days’” (20). “‘Rare plants bloomed,’” John Albee wrote, “‘when [Thoreau] arrived at their secret hiding places, as if they had made an appointment with him’” (38). “‘[H]e saw more upon the ground,’” John Weiss remarked, “‘than anybody supposed to be there. His eyes slipped into every tuft of meadow or beach grass, and went winding in and out of the thickest undergrowth, like some slim, silent, cunning animal’” (57). Weiss also relates from Emerson an anecdote told more than once about Thoreau’s remarkable knack for finding Indian arrowheads in places that would have seemed long-since stripped of such artifacts. “‘There is one,’” Thoreau would say even as his companion complained of their increasing rarity, “‘kicking it up with his foot’” (57). One is reminded of Picasso’s boast: “I don’t seek, I find.” Although he was not, strictly speaking, a visual artist, one nonetheless comes away from this volume with the overriding impression that Thoreau was a man with spontaneous and remarkably assured access to a rich and radiant phenomenal world.

Many other significant aspects of Thoreau’s personality that one might not have gleaned from *Walden* or from Emerson’s ambivalent eulogy are also in evidence here. Thoreau loved children, one finds, especially Emerson’s, with whom he spent a great deal of time. They remembered his kindness and high spirits all their lives. His often frosty relationship with his more conventional neighbors thawed over the years, to the point where

many went out of their way to show signs of their esteem and affection at the time of his dying, and Thoreau himself voiced regret about his long-held disdain. Indeed, one comes away from this book with a vivid sense of the extent to which Thoreau’s (and Emerson’s) Concord was still a knowable community. Even as he so zealously protected his solitude, Thoreau, like Emerson, seems to have lived comfortably within a network of informal and unceremonious but carefully honored local relationships and obligations. It takes nothing away from Thoreau’s great assertion of individual freedom to find in this volume that in day-to-day practice his autonomy was compatible with a surprisingly high level of civic intimacy. And by the Thoreavian empirical patience with which it was researched and organized, this volume succeeds in carrying some of that intimacy intact across the currents of time.

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### **Emerson for the Twenty-First Century: Global Perspectives on an American Icon.**

Ed. BARRY THARAUD. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010. x + 610 pp. \$110.00 cloth.

This ambitious collection of essays addresses Emerson’s transnational appeal for the increasingly global field of American Studies. The book is divided into four main sections, each of which tackles a different facet of the author’s persona: “Emerson, Europe, and Beyond”; “Emerson and Science”; “Emerson Thinking”; and “Emerson and Activism.” Barry Tharaud provides a helpful editorial introduction to the collection, which, considering its wide range of focal points, benefits from his synthesizing overview, as well as from the essay abstracts that are appended at the end of the volume. Tharaud has performed an admirable service in bringing together such an outstanding body of scholarship on America’s most enduring literary icon.

“Emerson, Europe, and Beyond” is the first and longest section of the book. Stephen Tanner’s and T. S. McMillin’s essays focus on Emerson’s *English Traits*. They both stress that for Emerson, America and England correlated with the Coleridgean distinction between Reason and the Understanding. McMillin’s essay deftly moves from a philosophical appraisal of Emerson’s negotiation of the gap between nature and culture to an eco-critical and economic evaluation of how English anti-naturalism fed into the industrial malaise of the nation. He shares Tanner’s estimation that if Emerson deemed England the best of all actual nations, it was a poor best when viewed from his idealist vantage. Susan Dunston and Steven Adisasmito-Smith take us further afield with their respective contributions. Their essays are especially helpful for describing the crucial role Hinduism and Sufism played in the development of Emerson’s thought. Indeed, one need only recall the table of contents for any given issue of *The Dial* to gauge the importance of Eastern culture for Emerson and his idealist compatriots. As Wesley

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Mott insists in his essay, in a jingoistic age, Emerson was stridently cosmopolitan in his selection of representative men. Jan Stievermann brings this first section to a close. He too contests the dominant image of Emerson as an American nationalist, and contends that Emerson embodied a religiously motivated cosmopolitanism. According to his insightful analysis, Emerson viewed America as a political framework within which the dignity of all its citizens could be realized.

The second and third sections of the book, “Emerson and Science” and “Emerson Thinking,” represent two competing tendencies in Emerson’s thought, and may thus be read in counterpoint to one another. Michael Branch, Laura Dassow Walls, David Robinson, and Gayle Smith each in their own fashion address Emerson’s reception of the prevailing sciences of his day. Branch reads Emerson’s early natural science lectures to provide an important context for re-reading *Nature*. Smith engages with the same early lectures, but she shifts the focus from Emerson’s engagement with science to the role natural landscapes played in his metaphysical rhetoric in *Nature*. Robinson’s and Walls’s essays complement each other nicely, providing evidence for a shift in the author’s thinking from a primarily metaphysical cast of mind to one that derived creative inspiration from developments in the geological, biological, and physical sciences. Whereas the earlier Emerson focused on the mind’s role in manufacturing matter, the later Emerson reversed the polarity and became more invested in the material atomization of spirit. Branka Arsić’s beautifully scripted essay engages with Emerson’s thoughts on dreams, mourning, and other forms of demonological “science.” Arsić provides an exquisite reading of Emerson’s “Demonology” and mines his journals for appropriate contextual clarifications.

“Emerson Thinking,” as its title suggests, engages with Emerson the philosopher. David LaRocca’s whimsical but fatal treatment of Emerson’s use of ocular metaphors for subjectivity draws attention to the author’s early visual problems. The critic’s focus on a period of time when Emerson’s perception really was threatened puts his famous transparent eyeball passage in a fascinating new light. John Ronan offers an equally biographical assessment of the author’s philosophy. His article shows how Emerson’s relationship with Margaret Fuller, as revealed by his journal entries, influenced his published thoughts in essays like “Friendship.” John Michael is the only author in the collection to tackle Emerson’s poetry, perhaps because, as the critic admits, Emerson was more gifted as an essayist than as a poet. Michael diagnoses the reason for this discrepancy: in his prose, Emerson engaged with the problem of mortality, whereas his poetry tended to be the forum for his unequivocal affirmations of faith in a benevolent universe. George Stack and Maria DiMaria bring this section to a close by asking whether Emerson can be considered a forerunner of postmodernism. What this co-authored essay does best is to delineate the divide between

modernism and postmodernism by situating the Emersonian self as the site of the contest between them. Emerson’s aversion to conformity aligns him with the radical politics of postmodernity, but the authors find that Emerson was more of a romantic than a postmodernist.

Given the stated aim of the collection, the final section of the book, “Emerson and Activism,” contains some of the most compelling essays in the volume. David Reynolds’s and Len Gougeon’s contributions trace the history of the growing militarism of the American transcendentalist movement as the abolitionists steadily marched towards the Civil War. They focus on John Brown’s pivotal role in concentrating abolitionist energies on violent resistance, especially following the divisive Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. T. Gregory Garvey’s study of Emerson’s cosmopolitan universalism resumes where Jan Stievermann left off. His essay is especially interesting in its negotiation of the relationship between cosmopolitanism and the demands of individual autonomy. Eduardo Cadava brings the volume to a close with his brilliant analysis of Emerson’s essay, “Fate.” He concentrates on the role that the importation of Peruvian manure played in the American agricultural industry, especially for its tobacco and cotton plantations, to show that Emerson was opposed to the racist ideology of manifest destiny.

The iconographic image that emerges from the pages of *Emerson for the Twenty-First Century* is of an author who was deeply committed to the political advancement of liberty, and who drew freely upon multiple cultural traditions to elaborate his romantic idea of America. Most importantly, his faith in the universal dignity of humanity served in direct opposition to the jingoistic nationalism and racist imperialism of his age. His indefatigable idealism, which remains his most enduring legacy, is what gave him the elevated vantage he attained on the political madness of his day. As Barry Tharaud mentions in his study of Emerson’s influence on Nietzsche, Gide, and Bowles, it remains to be seen what his influence in the twenty-first century will be, but this volume is an excellent touchstone for the many faces of Emerson today.

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### **American Spaces of Conversion: The Conductive Imaginaries of Edwards, Emerson, and James.**

ANDREA KNUTSON. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. ix + 200 pp. \$65.00 cloth.

While Andrea Knutson reminds us that the idea of conversion in its theological sense is “almost nonexistent” in Emerson, she brightly demonstrates how much his sense of spiritual renewal and growth derives from Puritan patterns of conversion (94). Her book provides an intellectual history of the “morphology of conversion” from Thomas Shepard through Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, and William James, by which she means the progressive stages of thinking and awareness that shape an individual’s

“will to believe.” For Knutson, Shepard’s doctrine of preparationism remained vital in both the spiritual discipline and focus on interior life that Edwards describes as the “attention of the mind in thinking” and that Emerson and James saw, too, as the basis of knowledge and truth. She is most interested in how the Puritan language of conversion becomes a means of thinking about the role of perception in the structure of belief and how American writers, after Shepard, equated an active, lively consciousness with piety and grace. Knutson traces narratives of conversion where “consciousness becomes figured as a conductive imaginary in which spiritual and philosophical/scientific truths unfold, bringing God’s world into being through thinking” (78). Faith, from Shepard’s Puritanism to James’s Pragmatism, becomes “a force of the mind” and a developing receptivity to the world realized through the daily ordeal of living in it.

The book begins with a subtle discussion of how Shepard’s conversion narratives struggle to maintain a “believing attitude,” as James calls it, in the face of the uncertainty and disappointments of the move to New England. If the migration failed to give assurance of grace, it encouraged a new critical habit of mind associated with the preparatory work of gaining belief. New England was no longer a sign of arrival, but one stage in the ongoing process of conversion that also legitimized the potential or “promise” of regeneration. Knutson suggests that the Puritans assimilated this sense of uncertainty and “open-endedness” into their idea of faith, and also the need to adapt continually to new experiences with original perspectives. What Emerson later calls “the advancing spirit” in America, Knutson sees first in Shepard’s sense of the Puritan consciousness as an evolving register of the effects of experience and of the mind itself as a constructive force of knowledge and belief. Puritans constantly examined their daily lives to look for evidence of grace, so the journey toward assurance was nothing less than a reflection on their lives as dynamic in spirit, and trailblazing, as the Puritan migration itself.

Knutson’s subsequent chapters describe a similar kind of “experiential piety” in Edwards, Emerson, and James. Like Shepard, Edwards sees conversion as a new habit and “force of the mind” in which the saint moves beyond the limits of old knowledge toward uncertain truths. Because Edwards finds the will to believe in a sense of potential, he looks ahead to Emerson and James, who also see beliefs as provisional and responsive to the circumstances in which they emerge. In Emerson, as Knutson suggests, knowledge requires an “ongoing process of interpretation” where an “ever-expanding consciousness” makes room for new ideas (103, 93). Central to the idea of conversion, in *Nature* especially, is a constant exertion of consciousness beyond comfortable forms of knowledge, a process that Knutson finally and ingeniously links to the experience of reading Emerson’s prose. In other words, to read onwards through Emerson’s vague, disorienting style and shifting contexts is to engage in the kind of mental work and imaginative growth that conversion also demands. The “blurry views of emergent meaning” (119) we gain in reading *Nature* become in effect an *ordo salutis*, or

series of progressive steps toward awareness and grace that retain a theological sense of preparationism. As Knutson evocatively writes, “the historical process of conversion is reborn in Emerson as a process of knowing” (133).

The book finally reads Emerson and the others as precursors to James’s own sense of conversion as the critical and psychological adjustments we make when we feel “the gap between a fact and its interpretation” (158). In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James characterizes conversion, in the age of Darwin, as a process of “perpetual adaptations” to the evolving nature of experience. In this way, conversion exists at the heart of the pragmatist challenge to dogmatism, as an open series of critical revisions within the “sphere of thought.” Religious feeling and belief are much like the “strenuous mood” James says we feel when we make room for new ideas or the perceptual revolutions that are the only means Emerson gives for “gaining a purchase on life.”

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### **Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatic Tradition from Emerson to Ellison.**

JAMES M. ALBRECHT. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. xii + 376 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

James Albrecht’s “pragmatic genealogy of individualism” traces an Emersonian and Pragmatist tradition of democratic individualism that might serve as a valuable political alternative to the problematic classic liberal model best represented by John Locke and Adam Smith (3). This latter tradition, which Albrecht views as essentially bankrupt, grounds its individualist *ethos* in the assumption of self-interested, rational individuals whose “natural” liberty (and, crucially, property) the state is tasked with protecting from encroaching social institutions (3). Albrecht extends his own genealogy back through Emerson and forward to the cultural theory of Kenneth Burke and the fiction of Ralph Ellison, but he locates the pragmatic individualist worldview that unites these authors in some of classic Pragmatism’s most fundamental principles. Pragmatist individualism assumes a *relational* self, which exists only in interaction with the social and material world and, importantly, has a fundamental responsibility to others. Its underlying metaphysics are *pluralist*, insofar as it conceives of human agency, truth, and value as conditioned by circumstance and thus finite; it is *melioristic*, in that it acknowledges the sufficiency of human ability to remake a “resistant-yet-malleable” world, existential limitations notwithstanding (16); and it is *democratic* in its commitment to the ongoing liberation of individual capacity, an objective which directs its pursuit of social and political reform.

Albrecht’s treatment of Emerson as crucial Pragmatist precursor and founding democratic individualist—arguably the most ambitious strain of *Reconstructing Individualism*—involves contesting the pervasive critical reading of Emerson as a naively optimistic, socially irresponsible “idealist of the monistic variety, whose ‘transcendentalist’ fascination with the absolute tends to ignore or subsume the particulars of our material existence” (26). Albrecht instead locates the author as

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a pluralist who understands individuals as sources of *limited* transcendence: creative change and agency that is both powerful and significantly constrained by situational limits and finite talents. According to Albrecht, Emerson's emphasis on self-reliance does not preclude human association and collective efforts at reform, as is often assumed; rather, the dynamics of democratic community develop out of an ethics of self-culture according to which individuals pursue their own special vocations, but also inspire and antagonize each other in an ongoing process of social transformation. In an Emersonian community, the demands of individuality exist in a "productive, vitalizing tension" with those of collective action, such as attempts at large-scale reform (110).

Albrecht's thorough presentation of Emerson as a pluralist, relational individualist serves as a convincing backdrop for his reading of Pragmatism as an expression of a shared American individualist tradition. Though readers familiar with the works of William James and John Dewey will not find Albrecht's analysis unexpected, his discussion persuasively focuses many important features of Pragmatism around an individualist philosophical center. *Reconstruction's* emphasis on *habit* as a crucial building block of democratic community for the Pragmatists serves as a striking example of such re-centering. The Pragmatist self's intrinsic relation to a fluctuating environment involves an essential ability to incorporate new modes of interaction with its environment, new habits which in turn transform the environment. Given this essential link between character and environment, James advocated the construction of those social conditions that would facilitate the development of a creative, moral selfhood, one equipped to realize the good available in any local situation. Dewey develops this Pragmatist concern for habit by gearing the experimental reconstruction of social conditions toward the habits of individualism. The education and liberation of individuality constituted, for Dewey, the moral core of democracy, properly conceived as a way of life and not only a form of government.

*Reconstructing* briefly moves into the world of fiction in its concluding analysis of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, approached through Kenneth Burke's cultural criticism. Here, Albrecht refutes the critical tendency to read *Invisible Man* as a condemnation of Emerson's thought. According to Albrecht, the form and content of *Invisible Man* affirm the more pragmatic Emerson that we have seen in this study, one whose individualist ethics always involves social responsibility and a sense of human finitude. Though Albrecht's interpretation here is persuasive, it remains unclear why Ellison in particular constitutes the sole literary presence and the end point of this project, to the exclusion of other writers previously considered by scholars of Pragmatism and literature. At this junction, one wishes for a closer engagement with that scholarship.

To my mind, greater attention to contemporary political

theory would also have been illuminating. Albrecht justifies the ongoing political value of pragmatist individualism by pointing to the shortcomings of a political liberalism read primarily through Locke and Smith. It would seem that to truly gauge Pragmatism's persisting import as an alternative to liberalism, one would want to understand the latter's contemporary incarnations, and not only its 17th and 18th-century classical roots. But this may be a question for another project.

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### **A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson.**

Ed. ALAN M. LEVINE and DANIEL S. MALACHUK. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 496 pp. \$40.00 cloth.

This new collection of essays on Emerson focuses exclusively on his political thought and covers an impressive range of his public opus from early to late essays, lectures, and addresses to abolitionist writings. The volume contains thirteen contributions divided into four segments, of which Part One, titled "Classics on Emerson's Politics," features four essays (by Stanley Cavell, George Kateb, Judith Shklar, and Wilson Carey McWilliams) previously published in multiple separate volumes. This review centers, therefore, on the remaining three sections, which consist of nine original contributions.

The volume is part of the *Political Companions to Great American Authors* series, a line that describes itself as approaching "the classic texts not with a 'hermeneutics of suspicion,'"—recalling Paul Ricoeur—"but with the curiosity of fellow citizens who believe that the great authors have something of value to teach their readers" (viii). A similar belief in the possibility of credulous reading is indeed present throughout *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. The majority of the collection's contributions engage in dismantling the misconceptions and falsities imposed on Emerson by past interpretations. "This volume has sought to correct two trends in Emerson scholarship," writes G. Borden Flanagan in the concluding essay, "the underappreciation of Emerson's political thought and the tendency to read doctrines and positions into Emerson that belong more to ourselves (or to our enemies) than to him" (415). The main goal, adds Daniel S. Malachuk, is "to illuminate the thought of the real Emerson" (269). Hence, in disclosing rather than inventing what the authors believe to approximate a neutral ("real") Emerson, the collection sets about to rescue his political thought from various ideological agendas. But in claiming to have uncovered a "zero-degree" level of the text, it gets implicated in creating, and often merely repurposing, yet another myth—this time of a quintessentially liberal Emerson.

In a lengthy, informative introduction, the editors Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk accurately register and diagnose the awakened interest in Emerson's politics in the past four decades, and they are appropriately surprised to find that theirs is the first collection exclusively dedicated to Emerson's

political theory. Commendably, they set about to “debunk the old myth” about Emerson’s “apolitical individualism” that dominated scholarship for more than a century and presented Emerson as an aloof elitist withdrawn from social and political concerns (1-2). The *Political Companion* invalidates this old myth first by reinterpreting Emerson’s key concept—self-reliance—as the stronghold of democracy. Jack Turner, James H. Read, and Len Gougeon, the three authors grouped in the volume’s second section, titled “Self-Reliance Properly Understood,” argue that self-reliance, for Emerson, is a vehicle of political action and civic participation, synonymous with an ethical stance of “moral suasion” through which collective action can be effected. Only a sovereign individual can encourage “others to become self-reliant” and bring about social change (6). By demanding “a commitment to action” and by encouraging others to act (211), self-reliance propels a critical attitude to conformity, a more responsible relation to the world in a time of crisis (176), and a “full-fledged ethics of liberal democratic citizenship” (125). It is this juncture of ethics and politics that makes this volume’s contribution to Emerson scholarship timely.

But for “moral suasion” to be operative, the authors argue, one must believe in “the transcendental nature of moral ‘truth’” (29). Part Three of the volume, titled “The Stubborn Reality of Emerson’s Transcendentalism,” proceeds to resurrect Emerson’s idealism while arguing for a strong activist bent in his work. The three essays in this section argue that Emerson’s transcendentalism, wrongly discarded by various groups of ideologically driven interpreters (mainly of a “post-modernist” stripe), ought to be restored because the overtly religious inflections of “transcendentalist equality” (30) are inseparable from Emerson’s “transcendental philosophy in the service of social reform” (186). Emerson’s democracy, in other words, hinges on the idealist conception of the universal value of equality. To that effect, Malachuk calls for a re-transcendentalization of Emerson, while Levine urges us to distinguish Emerson from the two skeptics with whom he has been persistently compared: Nietzsche and Montaigne. In Levine’s view, Emerson’s belief in the Over-Soul and “higher law” informs “a much more optimistic and democratic moral vision” than the aristocratic skepticism of the other two philosophers (227). Somewhat less enthusiastically than either Levine or Malachuk, Shannon L. Mariotti understands Emerson’s idealism to be limiting because it is grounded in “focal distancing”: “a carefully cultivated mode of transcendental perception” that enabled him to engage with the “ideal realm of universals” at the expense of the ugly reality of the material realm which remains unintegrated into his ideal vision (306-7). In the concluding section, titled “Emerson and Liberal Democracy,” Neal Dolan focuses on property, commerce, and a “duality at the core of [Emerson’s] attitude toward these central values of modern liberalism” (353-4); Jason Frank emphasizes “dynamic,” transformational representation as Emerson’s “distinctive approach to political activism” (384); and Flanagan discusses “fundamental unity,” equality, and “excellence [as] the purpose of politics” (416). Thus, in laying out

the consequences of the previous two tasks, the volume’s final part gestures toward liberal democracy as a logical consequence and outgrowth of Emerson’s idealism.

Valuable for its revival and elaborations of Emerson’s political significance, the collection is fissured by two mutually related problems. Some of the key terms of Emerson’s philosophy—Over-Soul, genius, higher law, and equality—never receive serious critical interrogation and are in fact appropriated from the “old history” of Emerson scholarship that this volume attempts to combat. For example, self-reliance is always an affirmation of the *individual*; equality is equality of human beings, and is a universal and fundamental value; and politics is the field of already determined power relations rather than a zone within which these relations are negotiated and reformulated. On the basis of these uncritically accepted definitions, the collection stages a revitalization of Emerson’s transcendentalism which then allows for all-too-easy identifications of his political thought with liberalism. In the end, the collection inadvertently, and perhaps even despite itself, opens up an important question that concerns Emerson’s politics as much as it does the intimate relationship between idealism and liberalism. The nine essays in this collection urge us to investigate the extent to which idealism’s refusal of materialism, as well as its immersion in what it perceives as essential values (in this case human rights, the individual, or property), inform the political ontology of liberalism. At their core, the nine original essays give us little more than an unfolding of the political consequences of a traditional idealist Emerson, the very Emerson the collection editors venture to read anew.

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# My Emerson

*A column devoted to our readers' personal reflections on Emerson*

DORIS BICKFORD-SWARTHOUT

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I discovered Ralph Waldo Emerson years ago while researching my first book, *An Age of Flowers*. Its subject was the growth, during the nineteenth century, of interest in nature, from the sentimental language of flowers to gardening as a spiritual experience. Eventually, there was a “back to the land” movement, evolving into what would later be called ecology. Reading works on this subject brought me, as one might expect, to Henry David Thoreau. This was the 1970s and he had been rediscovered by a large segment of young people and was worshipped in an almost cult-like fashion. Little “Walden”’s had sprung up around the country. All of this reading led me to the Transcendentalists. I knew from history *who* they were, but I had read little of their work.

It was about that time that I found a copy of Emerson’s *Nature*. I was overwhelmed by the words. Before long, I had read and re-read the essay, marking, underlining and circling. I wanted to know more about this man. Since we own a used bookshop it wasn’t difficult to find a volume of his *Collected Essays*. I read them all, trying to absorb and learn.

By then my research had begun to suffer. My book deadline was fast approaching and Emerson was set aside. But once hooked on his philosophy of life, he is never completely out of mind. He made it into several pages of that book.

I imagine Emerson has been important to more readers than we realize, many of whom we will never know. A few years ago, I went to a sale at a farm whose barn was filled with all kinds of items. In one corner was a stack of very dusty frames. I checked for condition and bought a few. Later at home I dusted them off and was amazed to find one containing a collage of Emersonian items. His portrait in the center was surrounded by turn-of-the-century picture postcards of Emerson’s home and Concord vicinity. Who assembled this I couldn’t know, but it was lovely to think it was done by someone in that quiet rural setting.

Another wonderful experience was coming upon a slim volume of the poetry of John Keats. He being a favorite of mine, I put it aside to look at. Imagine my delight when, upon opening it, I discovered tucked in the endpapers a tissue-paper carefully folded over a single clover. An attached note

said “picked in Emerson’s garden, Concord, May 29, 1908.” It is in a small frame and rests proudly on my shelf.

It is difficult to say how Emerson has influenced me most because his influence is subtle. It pops out at the most unexpected times. During the recent political debates, for example, one side or the other would be accused of changing its opinions. When I heard that criticism, the first thing that came to my mind was Emerson and his urging one to speak the truth as you see it, even if that is different from what you believed yesterday. To me that means: keep thinking.

One of the things I most admire about him is how he downplayed himself and urged his readers or listeners to be themselves. He seemed to be saying that his thoughts were only his and that everyone needed to find his or her own way. That is a wonderful trait, as so many philosophers, theologians and teachers imply (and often outright state) that their words and thoughts are the absolute truth. I love Emerson for what he made me do: think for myself and do my own spiritual searching.

It is easy to relate to Emerson once you really begin to know him. He is very much a human being. From a childhood of poverty—I have read that one winter he and his brother had to share the same coat—to his later struggles as a student, he is a real person. Thoreau had his Walden, and his friend Alcott, his communes. Emerson, however, had a home and family. He lived with his books and friends. So I couldn’t put him aside—his greatness, for me, was real.

I also very much enjoyed his *Journals* and *Letters*, especially the record of his travels in Europe. He seemed so at ease in his travels. Human and unpretentious, he was ready to appreciate each experience though it was not his style of life. He was wonderfully tolerant. I can imagine him sitting in the pews of Europe’s grand cathedrals filled with joy seeing the beautiful, and enjoying the art and feeling the ritual.

The ecclesiastical life-style was not for him, of course. As he said in his poem, “The Problem”: “I would not the good bishop be.” This is a sample of his uniqueness: he knew what he did and did not believe, but he did not dictate. In all, I came to admire the sense of freedom that was at the core of his life.