Susan L. Dunston, Professor Emerita, English, at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, received the Emerson Society’s Distinguished Achievement Award at its annual meeting via teleconference on May 22, 2020. Her groundbreaking scholarship concerning Emerson’s connections to transnationalism, feminism, and ecocriticism has been well regarded for years. Among her many contributions to the profession was her instrumental role in the international conference held in Florence, Italy, in June, 2012, named by her “Conversazioni in Italia: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Poe” — a title that beautifully characterizes her skill at promoting conversation even among colleagues from distinct disciplines.

Dunston’s most recent book, *Emerson and Environmental Ethics* (Lexington, 2018), epitomizes the wide-ranging nature of those conversations. Adding significantly to our understanding of Emerson as an environmentalist and nature writer, she goes beyond the acknowledged intellectual lineage of Emerson to John Muir and instead engages in creative dialogue with Indigenous science and ethics, Sufi poetry, feminism, and systems thinking, among others. The emerging picture of Emerson is a protean yet profoundly relevant environmental ethicist who “yokes philosophical thinking to practical action …. [H]is philosophy is sensuous, experimental, and reformist. As a practice it is attentive, relational, empathetic, and aesthetically sensitive.” As one reader has noted, Dunston deserves credit for demonstrating that Emerson’s *Nature* is, after all, “much more ‘earthy’” than we typically realize. The book has already gained a wide audience among Emersonians, ecocritics, and scholars of American philosophy.

Dunston’s engagement with such extensive philosophical and cultural traditions began as an undergraduate and master’s student at the University of New Mexico. On taking American literature with James F. Barbour, she found in Emerson a deeply inspiring figure able to carry on with purpose and dignity in the face of heartrending personal loss. Recognizing true scholarly talent in the making, Barbour recommended that Dunston pursue a Ph. D. with a dissertation on Emerson. Fortunately for all who admire her work, she took his advice and wrote the dissertation *The Romance of Desire: Emerson’s Commitment to Incompletion* under the direction of Russell B. Goodman and Michael Fischer and received the degree at the University of New Mexico in 1994.

The dissertation, published under the same title in 1997 by Fairleigh Dickinson, places Emerson in conversation with Cavellian anti-foundationalist philosophy and contemporary feminism “for their inflection of Emerson’s thought and his prophesy of theirs.” As Dunston explains, these texts “comingle, suggest each other, and resist each other in a textual romance.” Anti-foundationalist and feminist writers “remind me of close siblings or lovers who cannot leave each other alone when they most want to.”

Such meaningful conversation, whether separated by oceans and borders or found in close personal relationships, has emerged in Dunston’s subsequent scholarship. She was “international before international was cool” as one critic recently put it. In “Emerson’s Philosophy of Creativity,” pp. 222–232 in Sophie Laniel-Musitelli and Thomas Constantinesco, eds., *Romanticism and Philosophy: Thinking with Literature* (Routledge 2015), Dunston draws upon William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Asian mysticism to argue that “Emerson’s...
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Review copies of books on Emerson should be sent to book review editor Prentiss Clark, Department of English, University of South Dakota, Dakota Hall, Room 212, 414 E. Clark St., Vermillion, SD 57069.

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[Term expires at end of year in parentheses.]
ALA Call for Proposals
The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will sponsor two panels at the annual meeting of the American Literature Association, to be held May 27–30, 2021, in Boston.

“Emerson and Health”
The Emerson Society invites proposals on the topic of “Emerson and Health.” Papers might want to consider topics such as body and mind, “health of the eye,” food, exercise, mortality, and grieving. The Society also welcomes proposals that view the term “health” globally, in social, political, environmental, or cosmic terms.

“Emerson Studies Now: A Roundtable Discussion”
Over thirty years after the formation of the Society, this roundtable will be discussing the current state of Emerson studies and possible orientations for future research, teaching, and outreach to the broader public. Participants will be invited to express their views in particular concerning the proper relation between the historical Emerson and current cultural and political issues. Have these taken too large a place in the field? Manifestoes, provocations, strong opinions, animadversions, and untimely or contrarian views on these and other themes relevant to the topic are most welcome. The Society seeks a frank and open discussion with the widest possible range of viewpoints.

Graduate Student Conference Paper Award
The award provides $750 of travel support to present a paper on an Emerson Society panel at the American Literature Association Annual Conference (May 2021) or at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering (July 2021). Submit a carefully crafted 1-2-page single-spaced conference paper proposal by January 15, 2021. Proposals should address the 2021 CFPs posted at emersonsociety.org.

Thoreau Annual Gathering
The Emerson Society will sponsor a panel at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering each summer in Concord, Mass. (July 8-12, 2021). Conference theme information is at thoreausociety.org. We will consider papers both on the topic below and on the conference theme more generally.

“Other Views of Emerson’s Writing and Activism”
The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society invites proposals on this topic. The Society particularly welcomes proposals that explore historical and current perspectives on Emerson in terms of gender, class, race, religion, nationality, or culture.

Send 300-word abstracts by Jan. 10, 2021.
Membership in the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society is required.
E-mail joseph.urbas@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

Graduate Student Conference Paper Award
The award provides $750 of travel support to present a paper on an Emerson Society panel at the American Literature Association Annual Conference (May 2021) or at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering (July 2021). Submit a carefully crafted 1-2-page single-spaced conference paper proposal by January 15, 2021. Proposals should address the 2021 CFPs posted at emersonsociety.org.

Fellowships Postponed
Barbara Packer Fellowship Applications Postponed until 2022
Due to the pandemic, the American Antiquarian Society now has a backlog of scholars waiting to fulfill the terms of their fellowships. The AAS will not be able to accept applications for the 2021–2022 cycle; however, plans for the 2022–2023 cycle are underway. Those interested in applying to the Packer Fellowship should be advised of the January 15, 2022, deadline.
www.americanantiquarian.org/short-termfellowship

The Houghton’s Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellowship Postponed
Details to come in Fall 2021.
library.harvard.edu/grants-fellowships/houghton-library-visiting-fellowships
Treasurer’s Report: The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society, Inc.
21 May 2020

Society Membership (as of May 18, 2020) totals 105

- 12 Institutional members
- 42 Life members
- 51 All other categories combined

Members come from 24 states and 5 foreign countries

2 New Life Members — last year total members 116

Finances

Major Expenses (May 19, 2019, to May 19, 2020)

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**Awards Announcements**

2021

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society announces three awards for projects that foster appreciation for Emerson.

*Graduate Student Paper Award*

Provides $750 of travel support to present a paper on an Emerson Society panel at the American Literature Association Annual Conference (May 2021) or the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering (July 2021).


Proposals should address the 2021 CFPs posted at emersonsociety.org.

*Research Grant*

Provides $1,000 to support scholarly work on Emerson.

Preference will be given to junior scholars and graduate students.

Submit a carefully crafted 1–2 page, single-spaced project proposal, including a description of expenses, by April 1, 2021.

*Pedagogy or Community Project Award*

Provides $1,000 to support projects designed to bring Emerson to a non-academic audience.

Submit a confidential letter of recommendation, and a carefully crafted 1–2 page project proposal, including a description of expenses, by April 1, 2021.

All proposals will be evaluated based on clarity, originality, and relevance to the award or grant.

Please send proposals to Kristina West (kristina.west@btopenworld.com).

Award recipients must become members of the Society; membership applications are available at [www.emersonsociety.org](http://www.emersonsociety.org).
theory-practice of creativity … abandons artifacts for creating and mastery for improvising.” In “Ethics,” pp. 171-179 in Wesley T. Mott, ed., Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context (Cambridge 2014), Dunston sees “Self-Reliance” as central to Emerson’s understanding of ethical behavior. That is, having a thriving “self” depends upon meaningful relationships with “family, friends, community, nation, globe, and nature” (175). Dunston holds up Emerson as an example of a life well lived.

The theme of close personal relationships continues in other important essays. Her most recent, “A Source for Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘Terminus’ in William Henry Furness’s ‘To Columbus Dying’” (RALS 40: 30-50 [2019]), is far more than a source study. Dating the origins of “Terminus” to 1844 allows her to go beyond the usual interpretive preoccupation with old age and on to the power of lifelong friendship to heal from tragedy and engender new vision and creation. In “Philosophy and Personal Loss” (Journal of Speculative Philosophy 24.2: 158-170 [2010]), Dunston affirms the power of relationships even through their heartbreaking loss. She meditates personally and poignantly on Emerson’s sorrow and how, through his mature philosophy in “Experience,” “he comes to take the grief that engulfs him … as a sure sign that he, grieving, expands in the warm sun. The method of his expansion is bearing, yielding, forgiving, in short, the receptive patience he counsels near the end of the essay. The form his expansion took was the continual unfolding of his life and work.”

Dunston has applied this same regard for relationships to her exemplary service for the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society. To paraphrase Emerson, she transformed her genius for transnationalism into practical power, namely through an active leadership role in the three international conferences the Society helped organize – “Transcendentalist Intersections” in Heidelberg, Germany, in July 2018; “Conversazioni in Italia,” as already mentioned; and “Transatlanticism in American Literature: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Poe” in Oxford, England, in July 2006. She served in a number of other leadership roles in the Society, including Program Chair, in which capacity she helped the Society’s board generate panel subjects with the most scholarly resonance and select finalists to present at the American Literature Association and other annual gatherings. As chair of the Special Awards Committee, she helped devise new and innovative ways to direct Society funds to the most deserving young scholars and to those involved with community outreach. As President, in addition to the myriad responsibilities that come with the office, she helped steer the Society toward greater online presence and forge a lasting bond with the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP). Even with these professional obligations and tremendous scholarly contributions, she has always given freely of her time to colleagues. Among junior colleagues, she has a well-earned reputation as a warm and approachable mentor.

In sum, Susan Dunston has come to exemplify the best in Emersonian circles. In both scholarship and professionalism, she is kind, welcoming, helpful, original, and adventurous. Dunston has said she is “so fortunate to have stumbled into the Emerson Society. It is like finding an intellectual home.” On behalf of the Emerson Society, welcome home, Professor Dunston! We are the fortunate ones, and we wish you many more productive years with us.

— Todd Richardson
Department of Literature and Language
University of Texas, Permian Basin
Emerson Society Panels Go Online

This past year, the Emerson Society took to Zoom for its American Literature Association and Thoreau Annual Gathering panels. While not being able to meet in person was perhaps not as convivial as in years past, the pivot to online streaming allowed for a broader international reach and some new faces joining the conversation. Though we hope to be able to meet in person in the future, perhaps adding more streaming and online elements to our conferences will allow for greater inclusion moving forward.

The Emerson Society had two ALA panels on Emerson and Resistance this year: one on Politics, Religion, and Culture, the other on Philosophy and Culture. The panels were organized by Joseph Urbas. Abstracts and screen shots from the meetings appear below.

Emerson and Resistance, 1: Politics, Religion, and Literature

Organizer: Ralph Waldo Emerson Society
Chair: Susan L. Dunston, New Mexico Tech

1. “Legacies of Resistance: Emerson, Buddhism, and Richard Wright’s Pragmatist Poetics”
Anita Patterson, Boston University

Emerson’s affinity with Buddhism has been the source of much controversy, and his adaptation of the doctrine translated as Buddhist “indifference” has been construed as stifling resistance to social injustice. My paper will revisit this topic, explaining why Emerson figures so prominently in discussions of Buddhism by the philosopher D. T. Suzuki and the British scholar R. H. Blyth, in order to develop a context for analyzing modes of resistance in Richard Wright’s late haiku-inspired poetry. In 1959, exiled and seriously ill in Paris, Wright carefully read Blyth and Suzuki and, by June the following year, he had composed 4,000 poems, selecting 817 for “Projections in the Haiku Manner,” a manuscript that remained in the Rare Book Collection of Yale’s Beinecke Library until its publication in 1998. A central question raised in critical debates is whether or not Wright turns away in these poems from the social and political concerns of his earlier works. Centering my analysis on the opening poem in Wright’s collection, I will argue that its significance as an act of protest and resistance is illustrative of these strategies. Not only they are the outcry of resistance against the institution of slavery, but also the sign of a self-reliant individual not enslaved to the works of his ideal poet, a poet-translator who resists the dominance of another individual through a creative translation.

3. “The Health of the Eye Seems to Demand a Horizon: Emersonian Resistance in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative”
Regina Young, Ohio University

In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson contends for the triumph of personal principles at the cost of offending others: “I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should. I will not hide my tastes or aversions.” He rejects conformity to and acceptance of anyone’s beliefs contrary to his own conscience, exhorting his readers to “live in truth,” shunning pretence. Comparing Emerson’s resistance to Fredrick Douglass’s in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845), I argue that despite both writers’ conviction (“what is true”) to fight against dominant and detrimental beliefs of their time, the process of realization (“health of the eye”) differ: for Emerson, he demanded horizon through an intellectual space of words “as hard as cannon balls;” for Douglass, self-reliance was contingent on physical confrontation as seen in his fight with Mr. Covey: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.” Moreover, for Emerson, nature teaches and “ministers,” but for Douglass, nature was oppressive due to slavery; Douglass’s enlightenment and “horizon” begin within the domestic sphere—the house of Mr. and Mrs. Auld—where he first realizes the importance of education, an understated and assumed prerequisite in Emersonian resistance and self-reliance.

(Continued on page 8)
EMERSON SOCIETY PANELS GO ONLINE
(Continued from page 7)

4. “Emerson and Reconstruction,”
Christopher Hanlon, Arizona State University

The last outpouring of Emerson scholarship to instigate an exchange that spilled into the larger field of nineteenth-century American literary studies concerned Emerson’s resistance to slavery. From about 1999–2010, scholars debated the evolution and nature of Emerson’s abolitionism, focusing mainly upon four texts that constitute Emerson’s abolitionist canon: from the gradualist Emancipation Day address Emerson delivered in August of 1844 through the series of more immediatist and yet constitutionalist orations he produced after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. The questions brought to bear on these texts by scholars such as Len Gougeon, John Carlos Rowe, Gregg Crane, and Martha Schoolman illuminated much about Emerson in particular as well as the nature of northeastern resistance between the annexation of Mexico and the Civil War; however, they also frame Emerson’s advocacy for racial justice within the antebellum project of abolition. But during the Civil War and especially after the Emancipation Proclamation, Emerson wrote extensively on the prospect of post-war racial justice in the United States. Though by the end of the war he was no longer able to inveigh as strenuously as during the 1850s, lectures such as the 1862 “American Civilization” and the 1863 “Fortune of the Republic” channel Emerson’s sense that real emancipation would still be forthcoming with the defeat of the Confederacy. “We are coming,—thanks to the war,—to a nationality,” he stated in 1863, as he insisted that “the steps already taken to teach the freedman his letters […] are not worth much if they stop there.” In this paper, I will treat Emerson’s Reconstruction writings—the texts that outline his vision for a project of post-war emancipation—offering an account of Emersonian resistance that projected beyond the plantation system.

Emerson and Resistance, 2: Philosophy and Culture
Organizer: Ralph Waldo Emerson Society
Chair: Anita Patterson, Boston University

1. “The Ethics of Resistance: Emerson on Self-Reliance and Toni Morrison on Self-Regard”
Susan L. Dunston New Mexico Tech

In 2009, Penguin published Barack Obama’s 2009 inaugural address bound with Abraham Lincoln’s first and second inaugural addresses, his Gettysburg Address, and Emerson’s “Self-Reliance.” Forming a fruitful and corrective nexus for divisiveness and despair, Obama’s list of favorite books famously includes texts by Lincoln, Emerson (specifically “Self-Reliance”), and Toni Morrison. Resistance is a way of estranging yourself from what you (and “they”) think reality is. It is a potent strategy for transcendental and transformative knowledge—a way to draw a new circle, as Emerson figures it, a way to realize “victory … for all justice” (CW 3:49). However, resistance entails a self-valuing that can strain ethics in distortions Emerson and Morrison protest. Emerson names the strategy and means to resist “self-reliance”; Morrison’s term is “self-regard.” Both writers mean the same sort of self-valuing: a caring enough to study and figure out the truth of self-in-circumstances and sufficient integrity to admit the limits of one’s knowledge and the realities of changing circumstances. Self-reliance and self-regard (and thus resistance) necessitate acknowledging what Emerson calls that “law of eternal procession” as sovereign over what “we call the virtues” (CW 2:186). While Emerson’s over-arching faith in “Circles” is that this procession “extin-

2. “Shifting Paradigms: A Cultural Context for Emerson’s Racism and Abolitionism”
Leslie Brownlee, University of California Davis

In his early journals, Ralph Waldo Emerson compares black people to animals, yet in 1844 he delivers an anti-slavery address in Concord, Massachusetts, that solidifies his status as an abolitionist. Scholars examining this transition in Emerson’s thought either, like Daniel Malachuk and Len Gougeon, remain sympathetic to Emerson’s liberal theories, or like Nell Painter, find his transgression against African American people irredeemable. This paper asserts that during and for an extended period after slavery, Americans operated in a philosophical context that rendered African American people visual fractures, thus framing African American personhood as inaccessible not just to Emerson, but to many white Americans. Situating Emerson in the larger context of shifting paradigms in the 19th century (God to science and slavery to freedom), this paper engages Tuan Yi-Fu’s theories on the hydraulic cycle, W.E.B DuBois’s theory of the black soul, and the contemporary critical work of Hortense Spillers to build upon the argument that Emerson, along with the other transcendentalists, must be evaluated within the context of these paradigm shifts. Instead of critiquing Emerson’s transition to abolitionism as too small a penance for his earlier racism, I, like Malachuck and Gougeon, remain sympathetic to Emerson’s liberal thought, emphasizing that considering the paradigm of African American invisible personhood that Emerson must penetrate, his pitches for equality are momentous in a way that sets him apart from his peers David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Alas, his move to abolitionism is one that reflects a common rupture in transcendentalist thought where resistance to politics subverts liberal intentions.

3. “Why Ralph Waldo Emerson Should be Seen as a Eudaimonist Philosopher of Virtue Ethics”
Christopher Prozenheim, Georgia State University

Emerson is a persona non grata in modern philosophy departments despite his influence on many of the most famous philosophical and religious reformers and movements across multiple nations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet, as John Lysaker put it with only a touch of exaggeration: “a dissertation on Emerson risks professional suicide.” Ignoring Lysaker’s warning, I argue we can only untangle Emerson’s philosophical legacy of social reform by clarifying Emerson’s general philosophical commitments. Following Lawrence Buell, Emerson should be seen as a virtue ethicist despite John Lysaker’s (2008) claims to the contrary. Furthermore, I would also argue there is no substantial conflict between John Lysaker’s characterization of Emerson as a philosopher and Lawrence Buell’s claims when properly supported. Recovering Emerson as a philosopher of virtue ethics matters if we want to understand Emerson’s philosophy of social reform, or if we want to convince scholars working in philosophy departments that he can’t be dismissed out of hand. Unless we can accurately characterize the general shape of Emerson’s theoretical philosophical commitments, his philosophy of social
reform will remain obscured. So long as it remains obscured, it will be more difficult for Emerson’s philosophy of social reform to set the world right today.

The Way to Mend the Bad World Is to Create the Right World: The Transcendentalists and Forms of Righting the World

Chair: Kristina West

1. “Radical Transcendentalism: Emerson and Civil Disobedience in the 21st Century”
Kristina West, University of Reading

Nineteenth-century Concord was a hotbed of revolution, from anti-slavery movements to support of John Brown, reaching as far as Louisa May Alcott’s advocacy of the rights of women to vote. However, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s status as a political radical is one that often seems lost beneath Henry David Thoreau’s work on civil disobedience and even Bronson Alcott’s willingness to go to jail in protest at the plans to annex Texas as a slave territory. Yet Emerson’s philosophy and approach to social issues was both personally and politically radical throughout his lifetime.

This paper will engage with some of Emerson’s approaches to ‘righting the world’ via readings of anti-capitalist passages from ‘Domestic Life’, nonconformity in ‘Self Reliance’, and discussion of the relationship between man and state in ‘Politics’, and it will consider what he terms ‘the last defiance of falsehood and wrong’ as the state of heroism. I will read these claims against a wider Transcendentalist approach via Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ and discussion of radical personal and social approaches to ‘righting the world’ in Bronson Alcott’s published writings and journals.

Finally, this paper will engage with what ideas of Emersonian ‘civil disobedience’ might mean to us in the 21st century – particularly through considering his advocacy of personal independence as a tool for wider social revolution – as the US and UK each struggle with notions of self-identity and a remaking of the world that may not always be what we would desire.

2. “Reading Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City through the Lens of Emerson’s ‘Farming’”
Ayad Rahman, Washington State University

In the 1930s, and in response to the economic depression of the time, Frank Lloyd Wright produced a new vision for the city. He called it Broadacre, a one-mile-square proposal featuring a tapestry of complex relations between home, work, and play, but also farm, road, and car. Key to its thesis is a one-acre parcel of land, large enough to build a house, feed a family, and sell the remaining produce in a roadside market for extra income. Low density, it argued against the city and for the country, against the evil powers of political and economic institutions and for a setting that could restore to the American creative potential and self-reliance. Much of its intellectual foundation rests on Emerson’s “Farming,” which Wright quoted in the whole at the end of a manifesto on Broadacre, and toward the end of his life, titled The Living City. The two insist on first values and the ability to think laterally and organically. No more fixating on the individual as a singular entity, and certainly not limited to the endless and wasteful cycle of production and consumption, but a mind capable of seeing in the part the whole and vice versa. Wright’s drawings show a mishmash of buildings and infrastructure, patched up using furrowed fields and lush gardens. What might have started as the image of a broken society is now harmonized by the terrain of the farmer. Life under this view is no longer cut up by unnecessary boundaries but united in the form of interconnected opportunities. Art and science find a happy home here. This paper will seek to read Broadacre City through the lens of “Farming,” exploring, among other subjects, questions related to “righting” vision, work, and social inequity.

3. “Emerson’s Transcendental Sonic Self and the Tuning of the World”
Christina Katopodis (CUNY Graduate Center, Hunter College),

In Emerson’s essays, music is always at work, softly ongoing, and sometimes twisted into surprising constructions: visual beats in susurring trees; undulations in Earth’s biosphere and geosphere; in polarity, the push and pull of matter and the transmission of energy between matter and spirit; and the music within, from the inspiration and expiration of breath to systole and diastole of the heart. Despite Emerson’s lament that he had no talent for music, he was an avid listener. His unique perceptiveness to soft sounds, his ability to find music and write it into unlikely entanglements of aesthetics and science, raises these questions: what does it mean to have a sound intuition and a sonic self in the nineteenth century? This paper takes up these questions in order to advance scholarship on the American impersonal: I consider Emerson’s impersonality as a temporary, deliberate posture he takes up as a listener. In this paper, I argue that the impersonal, in Emerson, contributes to the formation of a transcendent sonic self, one that is self-trusting and self-reliant, and one commensurate with the transcendental philosophies of Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. This paper considers the sonic elements at work in Emerson’s essays to reconcile the author of “Self-Reliance” with that of “Experience.” Ultimately, I show that the two Emersonian selves presented in these essays are not inherently different from one another; despite their seeming contradictions it is the pitch of philosophy that makes all the difference, to borrow Stanley Cavell’s phrase.

In the epigraph above, Emerson demonstrates that listening is perhaps not the activity we assume it is in the twenty-first century: to listen (Old English, hlysan) not only means to hear (PIE, kleu) but also to be called (Greek, klyo), and to obey (Sanskrit, srosati). Music in nature calls those who hear and feel somehow of themselves in the reverberations. The trick to locating the “sound” transcendental sonic self is to attune to the music—a practice that also preoccupied Emerson’s contemporaries, including Thoreau, Fuller, and music critic John Sullivan Dwight. Framing music as a rhythmic pulse in nature not necessarily audible to the human ear, I argue that Emerson’s sound intuition and his posture of total reception—in the declaration “All I know is reception” in his essay “Experience”—together conceive a transcendent sonic self. This sonic self forms in relation to constantly shifting environmental contexts in the natural order. Sound studies offers a vibrant entry point to study Emerson as a philosopher however the visual has dominated most Emersonian scholarship to date. This aural analysis complements visual analyses more common to Emersonian scholarship because it foregrounds the multidimensionality of his most famous metaphors and also surfaces resonances in moments less frequently studied in his published essays.

(Zoom shots, page 22)
This meticulously researched study by Roger Sedarat offers the first book-length analysis of Persian influence in Emerson’s writings. Sedarat examines what he describes throughout as Emerson’s “appropriative” practice in his translations of classical Sufi masters such as Hafez and Sa’di, questioning his radical claim to originality by showing how it is contingent on the ideas, quotations, and identities of others (2). In doing so, Sedarat demonstrates admirable familiarity with scholarship on Emerson and Persian poetry, and begins by outlining the correspondences between Emerson’s Platonism and the Sufism informing the Persian poets he both translates and imitates. Although Emerson’s Platonic and Neoplatonic affinity with Asian sources has been addressed by Frederic Carpenter, Arthur Versluis, and Robert Richardson, Sedarat’s command of several languages, familiarity with Persian originals as well as Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall’s intermediary German renderings, and knowledge of the history and central teachings of Sufism, add to the range, value, and complexity of his work. Citing Lawrence Buell and Wai Chee Dimock, who emphasized the centrality of Persian poetry as an influence on Emerson, Sedarat also builds on more recent examinations of Emerson’s engagement with Islamic texts and concepts by Jeffrey Einboden, Medhi Aminrazavi, Susan Dunstan, and others.

Sedarat’s analytical framework incorporates well-known theories of influence, hybridity, and translation to clarify the process of appropriation that is central to Emerson’s practice of translation. He adapts Harold Bloom’s reading of Emerson in The Anxiety of Influence (1973), arguing that Emerson positions his verse against what Bloom would call “parent-poems” by Hafez and Sa’di, in order to “generalize away the uniqueness of each work” (Sedarat 13; Bloom 15). Although the U.S. did not literally colonize the cultures engaged by Emerson in this study, Homi Bhabha’s post-colonial concept of a “third space of enunciation” is invoked to highlight how Emerson attempts to render the foreign invisible in a “synthesis of different traditions that transform into something new” (qtd. in Sedarat 16). Finally, Willis Barnstone’s The Poetics of Translation (1993), responding to Bloom, explains how Emerson must “reckon” (Sedarat 13) with Sa’di as an original source author: “[T]here is an anxiety-ridden conflict between originality and translation in which the paternal source of a translation must be killed or at least concealed in order to grant the translated child the dignity of originality … The source should be buried. If the burial is complete, with nothing showing, then the shadow of translation is forgotten” (qtd. in Sedarat 73).

Sedarat consistently supports his main thesis through a series of illuminating close readings. For example, his detailed analysis of “Saadi,” “Self-Reliance,” “Uriel,” and “Experience,” which considers how Emerson, Sa’di, and Hafez variously confront their spiritual reckonings with fate, vividly illustrates how “accommodating his Persian influence allows Emerson to better reconcile the dichotomy of fate versus freedom” (Sedarat 99). Elsewhere, tracking rhetorical strategies in Emerson’s reflections on language and literary appropriation—from the “Language” section of Nature, “The Poet,” and “Quotation and Originality” to “Persian Poetry,” and the Notebook Orientalist—Sedarat discovers what he identifies as Emerson’s “emerging theory of translation” (5). The metaphor of the telescope in “Persian Poetry,” with its “space-penetrating power” (Sedarat 119), obviates temporal distance and linguistic difference, enabling Emerson to supersede history and subvert equivalence of meaning in the source and target text.

A key consequence of Sedarat’s line of reasoning is that he revisits the question of Emerson’s influence on Ernest Fenollosa’s The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry (1919) altered and edited by Ezra Pound. Calling attention to the fact that Emerson preceded Pound as an appropriative American translator, Sedarat persuasively argues that Emerson should be regarded as a harbinger of high modernist poetics. To support this claim, it would have been helpful to hear more about scholarly appraisals of von Hammer-Purgstall’s German rendering of Hafez, which formed the basis for Emerson’s appropriative translations, just as Haun Saussy has reassessed Fenollosa’s knowledge and translations of Chinese poetry in a recent critical edition of his work.

Exposing the limits of Emerson’s imagined equivalence, Sedarat questions the ethics of Emerson’s appropriative practice and frequently describes it as “brazen” and “egregious.” But as the depth and extent of his knowledge of Emerson’s writings repeatedly demonstrate, this is by no means a reductive, politically correct polemic. As Sedarat contends, Emerson often “gets relatively close to source texts … [and] … despite his illiteracy in the source languages, he gets much right about the original poetry” (124). Indeed, in his final chapter Sedarat presents Emerson’s approach as a guide for two creatively adept twentieth-century poet-translators: Dick Davis, an esteemed, British-born Persian scholar, and Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet from a Shia family, who re-introduced the Persian form of the ghazal to American readers. Thanks, in part, to Emerson’s example, they achieve “greater stylistic and tonal correspondence with source poems” (Sedarat 175).

—Anita Patterson

Work Cited

Bloom, Harold

The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry

Oxford UP, 1973
Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Edited by Mark C. Long and Sean Ross Meehan. MLA, 2018, 233 pp. $40.00 cloth.

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson is a useful guide for new teachers of Emerson’s works as well as a valuable resource for longtime Emerson educators and scholars. The book consists of two parts: “Materials” and “Approaches.” In the first part, editors Mark C. Long and Sean Ross Meehan present a concise yet comprehensive overview of the critical reception of Emerson beginning in the late nineteenth century. Most useful to newcomers, this section highlights key biographies, influential theoretical studies, and exemplary editions of Emerson’s essays, lectures, poetry, and sermons—altogether providing a thorough understanding of more than a century’s worth of Emerson scholarship.

“Approaches,” the volume’s second part that comprises the bulk of the book, features an introduction and five subsections containing twenty-seven essays by veteran Emerson scholars and educators. “Approaching Emerson as a Public Intellectual,” the first section, contains seven essays that contextualize Emerson’s roles in various public spheres. David Robinson presents currents of thought prevalent during the reception of Emerson’s “The Divinity School Address” (1838) that informed Emerson’s evolving religious views. Focusing on Emerson’s conflicting essayistic impulses as a successor to Montaigne and Francis Bacon, Ned Stuckey-French makes a convincing case for teaching Emerson within creative nonfiction units or classes. With extraordinary breadth, Saundra Morris details poetry units related to diversity in America that could include poems such as “The Rhodora,” “Concord Hymn,” “Hamatrea,” or “Boston Hymn.” Citing “Circles” (1841) as a starting point, Susan Dunston tracks Emerson’s extensive range of thought, presenting him as a philosopher and inviting students, via a semester-long journal and creative project, to pursue Emerson’s vision of originality. For those who teach at faith-based institutions, Todd Richardson’s essay—which describes how to discuss Emerson as part of the Second Great Awakening—helps form conversational links between students’ religious convictions and Emerson’s own. Martin Bickman demonstrates how his students mimic Emerson’s process of active intellectual development via journaling and responding to their peers online, and Ronald Bosco asserts that reading Emerson’s own annotations and alterations in conjunction with his public writing allows students better access to Emerson’s mind.

The second section provides fresh approaches to seven of Emerson’s essays. Writing in response to a general decline in interest in teaching Nature (1836), Michael Branch proposes a way to make the essay more approachable by placing it within the realm of Emerson’s interest in natural history and his views of nature, science, and the human spirit. Andrew Kopec argues that “The American Scholar” (1837) remains as relevant as ever—arguably more so in light of the COVID-19 pandemic—as an impetus for students to debate the value of liberal arts study and to consider the divisions among their own self-culture, higher education, and what a corporate world may desire of them. Using “The Divinity School Address” (1838) as a springboard, Corinne Blackmer proposes that students in religious studies courses respond to Emerson by composing their own spiritual addresses in place of a traditional research assignment. Nels Anchor Christensen offers two experimental exercises for teaching “Circles” (1841) that help personalize one of Emerson’s more complex essays. Christensen’s essay pairs well with Wesley Mott’s reflection upon teaching “Self-Reliance” (1841) as a multi-tiered process that culminates in a research project modeled on Emerson’s own writing process. Jennifer Gurley posits teaching “Friendship” (1841) as a way to discern differences between a person’s spirit and their “appearance or circumstances” (108), while Branka Arsić offers a novel approach to “Experience” (1844) that challenges a common reading of it as Emerson’s pessimistic turn away from idealism.

The third section, “Teaching Emerson’s Other Works,” is shorter but equally as robust as the first two sections. Emerson’s sense of creative reading is at the heart of Christoph Irmischer’s essay about his poetry. Len Gougeon delineates how to present Emerson’s antislavery writings alongside transcendentalism, highlighting Emerson’s relevance in ongoing discussions of race and social justice. Carolyn Maibor chooses an 1832 sermon (“Find Your Calling”) as a basis for drawing sometimes reluctant students into discussions of both the spiritual and practical uses of work. Jean Ferguson Carr explains how to present Emerson’s artistic risks as essayist alongside the fiction of nineteenth-century women writers of the generation following his own—delineating how to bridge divides among time period, genre, and gender, and with an extended focus on Emerson and Charlotte Forten Grimké. Drawing primarily from Emerson’s late lectures and journals, Meredith Farmer emphasizes Emerson’s form and its relationship with the scientific method, bridging an oft-imagined divide between literary and scientific writing of Emerson’s time.

The final two sections, “Emerson Across the Curriculum” and “Emerson Around the World,” explore teaching Emerson in wider spheres. Dan Beachy-Quick reflects on imparting Emerson’s lessons in poetry workshops, while T.S. McMillin details an Emersonian method for encouraging students to ask questions within an environmental studies framework. David Dowling’s essay helps students grasp Emerson within an “antebellum media ecosystem” (163), while Amy Earhart models how to design close textual analysis using a digital humanities approach. Leslie Elizabeth Eckel situates Emerson within transatlantic discussions of American identity within a Global American Literature course, and Anne Fountain focuses on Emerson’s introduction to Latin America, paying particular attention to translation and cross-cultural influence. Offering an extended compare-and-contrast approach to Emerson and Nietzsche, Herwig Friedl shares a detailed list of possible topics for teachers and students to explore, and John Michael Corrigan describes Emerson’s relationship with Eastern religion and thought, leaving room for the “potential connections among perennial philosophy, colonial practices, and present-day globalization” (190). Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Emerson is a comprehensive tool for thinking about teaching Emerson. It succeeds as a starting point in either an upper-level high school or undergraduate classroom and as a spark for teachers seeking new approaches. Since its publication, teaching has changed greatly due to COVID-19, inviting more reflection on how to teach Emerson within online environments. While this extends beyond the collection’s scope, it is a testament to the work of the editors and contributors that each essay contains valuable ideas that can be adapted in any teaching environment to share Emerson with twenty-first-century students.

—Jericho Williams

Spartanburg Methodist College
Alfandary, Isabelle. “Unfounding an American Tradition: or the Performative Invention of Self in Ralph Waldo Emerson.” *Textual Practice*, vol. 33, pp. 1739-1752. [Argues that the “American philosophy invented by Emerson … stems from the invention of a new enunciative and subjective position that is contemporary to and co-substantial with him.”]

Alpert, Avram. *Global Origins of the Modern Self, from Montaigne to Suzuki*. SUNY. [Emerson helped conceptualize such values as the “refusal of imposition” and “alternation over synthesis” that can still be useful for a present-day articulation of human rights.]

Askin, Ridvan. “Emerson’s Speculative Pragmatism.” *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature*, edited by David Rudrum et al., Edinburgh, pp. 234-252. [For Emerson, it is only through art, as the “primary means of metaphysical inquiry,” that we are able to approximate fundamental reality and therefore come to know ethical conduct.]


Beebe, Brad. “‘Light is the First of Painters’: Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Luminism of John Frederick Kensett.” *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 23, pp. 467-488. [Explores thematic affinities between the Kensett’s 1869 painting *Lake George* and Emerson’s “Nature” and “Art.”]


Burney, Fatima. “Locating the World in Metaphysical Poetry: The Bardification of Hafiz.” *Journal of World Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 149-168. [Critiques Emerson’s “Persian Poetry” for imposing western bardic conceptions as well as geographic limitations on Hafiz’s poetry.]

Clark, Prentiss. “What ‘No Chart Can Tell Us’: Ordinary Intimacies in Emerson, DuBois, and Baldwin.” *James Baldwin Review*, vol. 5, pp. 23-47. [Explores the three writers’ commitment to the “ordinary intimacies of everyday life” as the location for true social change.]


Cramer, Jeffrey S. *Solid Seasons: The Friendship of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Counterpoint. [Part biography, part anthology, the book strives to deliver a portrait of a friendship scholars have long known to be nuanced, rich, troubled, and contradictory.]

Cunning, Andrew. “‘A Table, A Cup, A Meowing Cat’: Marie Howe’s Theopoetics of the Ordinary.” *Literature and Theology*, vol. 33, pp. 307-320. [Contrasts Howe’s Catholic poetics with Emerson’s more “Protestant approach to poetics.”]

Davis, Theo. “Emerson Attuning: Issues in Attachment and Intersubjectivity.” *ALH*, vol. 31, pp. 369-394. [Argues that as a child, Emerson did not experience the consistent nurturing necessary for healthy adult intersubjectivity, and his struggle to establish relationships is evident throughout his major works.]

de Stefano, Jason. “The Birth of Creativity: Emerson’s Creative Impulse.” *MLQ*, vol. 80, no. 2, pp. 167-193. [Argues that Emerson gestures toward a theory of creativity in which the impulse is not the mysterious expression of independent genius but rather of a piece with evolution.]


Dunston, Susan Lee. “A Source for Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘Terminus’ in William Henry Furness’s ‘To Columbus Dying.’” *RALS*, vol. 40, pp. 30-50. [Dates the origins of “Terminus” to 1844 and explores such compelling themes as personal loss, the strength of lifelong friendship, the enduring urge to new creation, and the restorative power of poetry.]

Fabbriches, Rossella. “Spinoza, Emerson, and Peirce: Re-Thinking the Genealogy of Pragmatism: 2019 Presidential Address.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. 55, pp. 103-18. [Suggests Emerson served as a conduit of Baruch Spinoza’s ideas to Peirce.]

Fessenden, Tracy. “Haunted America: Reading the Spiritual Turn.” *Above the American Renaissance: David S. Reynolds and the Spiritual Imagination in American Literary Studies*, edited by Harold K. Bush and Brian Yother, Massachusetts (2018), pp. 21-36. [Posits that Emerson’s turn away from institutional religion “set a template for American spiritual seeking that endures to this day.”]

Gardes, Yves. “The Impersonal Personified: Emerson’s Poet.” Textual Practice, vol. 33, pp. 1753-63. [Maintains that, in “The Discontented Poet,” Emerson confesses the “shortcomings of his endeavors to personify the ideal poet” because of the discrepancy between the “idealism of disembodied contemplation and the materialist struggle of verification.”]

Graber, Samuel. Twice-Divided Nation: National Memory, Transatlantic News, and American Literature in the Civil War Era. Virginia. [Avers in one chapter that the exploding power of print media enabled Emerson to envision an abolitionist movement infused with spiritual immediacy and therefore offer his unreserved commitment.]

Goodman, Daniel Ross. “Three Ethical Mystics: The Poetics of Ethics in the Spiritual Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Abraham Isaac Kook.” Journal of Jewish Ethics, vol. 5, pp. 111-40. [Champions thinkers who believe that spirituality must “necessarily lead to ethical behavior . . . if it is to have any merit.”]

Goodson, Jacob L. and Brad Elliott Stone. Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism: A Dialogue on Hope, the Philosophy of Race, and the Spiritual Blues. Lexington. [Labels Cornel West’s philosophy “Tragic Transcendentalism” in one chapter.]

Hamilton, Geoff. A New Continent of Liberty: Eunomia in Native American Literature from Occom to Erdrich. Virginia. [One chapter posits that William Apess’s writings reinscribe the horrific history of Native American displacement which Emerson’s Nature blithely occludes in order to show Native peoples the way toward healing and traditional lifeways.]

Hines, Adam H. “Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Jones, Jr: The Subtle Rapture of Postponed Power.” Journal of Supreme Court History, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 39-52. [Poorly researched article finds Emerson and Holmes agreeing that “If a person strove and found success, it was because of hard work. If an individual tried and failed, incompetence or laziness was the culprit.”]

Hosseini, Reza. “Emerson and the Question of Style.” Philosophy and Literature, vol. 43, pp. 369-383. [Avers that Emerson’s writing is “knowledge of ordinary and relatable memory that communicates ‘something more basic and immediate than its arguments.’”]

Howe, Jeffery, editor. William Trost Richards: Hieroglyphs of Landscape. Chicago. [Includes essays by Howe and James D. Wallace regarding Emerson’s influence, however indirect, on Richards.]

Johansson, Viktor and Claudia Schumann, editors. Educational Philosophy and Theory, vol. 51. [Special issue devoted to the implications of Emerson’s thought for present-day educational philosophy and through it, meaningful democratic engagement. Includes essays by Naïkito Saito, Claudia Schumann, Niklas Forsberg, Heikki K. Kovalainen, and Viktor Johansson.]

McCarragher, Eugene. The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity. Belknap. [One chapter argues that “enchantment with power leavened Emerson’s exuberant affirmation of the marketplace” while Thoreau and others strove to free themselves and their followers from capitalism’s thrall.]


———. A Liberal Education in Late Emerson: Readings in the Rhetoric of Mind. Camden House. [Explores the tension between the emerging research university and the liberal arts college with Emerson serving as a principled holdout.]

Noble, Marianne. Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, Dickinson. Cambridge. [Argues that Transcendentalists like Emerson “violently impose partiality upon the infinite” or “hide true selves” in their effort to achieve the infinite.]

Sedarat, Roger. Emerson in Iran: The American Appropriation of Persian Poetry. SUNY Press. [Argues that Emerson so (mis)appropriated such Sufi poets as Hafez and Sa’di that he belied his exhortation in “Self-Reliance” that “imitation is suicide.”]

Shaw, Dan. Stanley Cavell and the Magic of Hollywood Films. Edin-burgh. [In a substantial chapter drawing on Emerson, Shaw offers a Cavellian interpretation of the 2017 film The Post to illustrate the utterly necessary struggle against forces of conformity.]


Varvogli, Aliki. “The Death of Self? Narrative Form, Intertextuality, and Autonomy in Joshua Ferris’s Then We Came to the End.” MFS, vol. 65, pp. 700-718. [Shows that Ferris writes Emerson into this deeply ambivalent portrait of twenty-first century capitalism as manifested in office culture.]

Wallace, Robert M. Philosophical Mysticism in Plato, Hegel, and the Present. Bloomsbury. [Devotes a chapter subsection to Emerson’s Platonic pursuit of a “nurturing God within himself.”]


Wineapple, Brenda, ed. Walt Whitman Speaks. Library of America. [Distills nine volumes of Horace Traubel’s With Walt Whitman in Camden into one keepsake edition that introduces readers to Whitman’s thoughts on Emerson.]

Zavatta, Benedetta. Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson. Oxford. [Paints a picture of a philosopher who turned to Emerson’s writings again and again for inspiration, challenge, and even friendship.]


Zuber, Devin P. A Language of Things: Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination. Virginia. [Traces out a new lineage of environmentalist thought from Swedenborg to Emerson and onward to John Muir and others.]
Near the corner of Dunster Street and Massachusetts Avenue, where the Cambridge Savings Bank building currently stands, was once the site of Willard’s Hotel. Willard’s was at one time the unofficial center of the “village” of Old Cambridge—better known today as Harvard Square. And it was there at Willard’s Hotel, on September 8, 1836, that the Transcendental Club was born (Cooke 1:48).

The story is well known: Emerson, Henry Hedge, George Ripley, and George Putnam met at Willard’s Hotel on the day of the Harvard bicentennial “to confer together on the state of current opinion in theology and philosophy,” in which they were “agreed in thinking very unsatisfactory” (Cabot 1:244). And so it was there that the four Unitarian ministers decided they ought to meet again with more “like-minded” individuals in a kind of “symposium.” The next day, Emerson would publish *Nature* and a week later, at George Ripley’s house in Boston, the first meeting was held of what would eventually be called the Transcendental Club (Myerson 197-199).

Less well known, however, is the history of this place where the Transcendentalist movement effectively began. The site was of historical significance long before Emerson and company formed their club there. For starters, it sat adjacent to the property where Simon and Anne Bradstreet once called home. As commercial activity increased over the next two centuries, the future Harvard Square became known as the “market-place” of Old Cambridge. It also became home to communities of West Indian plantation owners, African Americans, and Irish immigrants, as well as faculty and students of the college (Maycock and Sullivan).

A federal-style mansion was built on the Square in 1773. It would become a tavern in 1781 where, a generation later, future stagecoach-company owner Abel Willard got his start in the hotel business. According to one historian of Cambridge, “‘Willard’s’ was the resort of the moderns—i.e., the less ‘advanced’ people,” that is, the younger crowd, “men whose memories were of General Bonaparte, of the Embargo and the last war,” that is, the War of 1812 (Hurd 3). Concord’s John Shepard Keyes was a regular at Willard’s during his Harvard days. Though he enjoyed drinking mint juleps and smoking cigars there with his friends, he also frequented the establishment in present-day Porter Square for its proximity to horse racing (Keyes). Nevertheless, Willard’s was probably a good place to talk if one didn’t want to run into any of “the ancients” of Harvard College (Hurd 3).

Willard’s stayed in business for about two more decades after Emerson, Hedge, Ripley, and Putnam met there. The hall and tavern of Willard’s would eventually be converted into a waiting station for the Union Railway in 1857. It remained so until its demolition in the 1920s. Today, nothing remains of the building where the Transcendental Club was dreamed up.

The original two-story building can still be seen in several historical photographs of the square. The first such image dates from the 1860s. The entire block can be seen in the center of the frame with a large elm standing directly in front of the site of Willard’s Hotel in the middle of Massachusetts Avenue.
The second photograph, dating to the United States Centennial, gives a closer view of the building. Here one can see a busy streetcar waiting room prior to the construction of the subway line in 1912. The building had recently had its roof replaced, the original having been damaged in a fire earlier that decade (Maycock and Sullivan 51). A sign on the facade proudly states that the federal-style house was built in 1773 and that a tavern owned by Revolutionary War veteran Major John Brown went into business there in 1781.

The third image, circa 1895, gives the clearest image of the former Willard’s Hotel building. The building was demolished in 1923, but that part of the Square remains a place where moderns perennially congregate, just as a young Emerson, Hedge, Ripley, and Putnam did in 1836.

My thanks go to Emily Gonzalez of the Cambridge Historical Commission and Robert A. Gross for their invaluable assistance.

As a teenager, Mark Gallagher spent many hours in Harvard Square. He teaches in the English Department at UCLA.

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Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & co, 1890

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Photos courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Society
My Emerson

A column devoted to our readers’ personal reflections on Emerson

Emerson: Resignation, Reason, and Fire

PETER BALAAM

In July of 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the commencement address for the Harvard Divinity School. As it came to be known, the “Divinity School Address” was with “The American Scholar” of the year before so provocative to the Harvard officials who were Emerson’s hosts that he was not invited back to the College for over thirty years. What went wrong? Absolutely nothing. But what happened can help us understand Emerson, whom I believe all Americans and perhaps especially Unitarians, who often claim Emerson as their own, should know better. What happened there can help us understand why Emerson had resigned from the Unitarian ministry several years before, the role of what he called “the Reason” in the religious life; and against all staid and stable religious formalism, the role he saw for the destructive and creative, above all transformative, power of the individual conscience.

Emerson (1803–1882) lived a long life and had a long and prolific career. There are many ways in; indeed, many Emersons. But he was a poet and lecturer, a “public intellectual” who commented in notoriously moony and marvelous lectures on all topics of cultural interest of the day. From his comfortable house in Concord, about 20 miles from Boston, Emerson was for several decades the unappointed figure-head of a loose band of philosopher-reformers and social experimenters said to pursue something called “Transcendentalism”—as someone called Charles Godfrey Leland recalled in his Memoirs: “Nobody knew what it was, but it was dreamy, mystical, crazy, and [catch this!] infideleterious to religion.” While Mr. Leland was actually there to see it in ways that I am not, I want in the short time I have with you this morning to significantly challenge most of his claims. The first two, (dreamy, mystical) are half correct; the latter pair (crazy and infideleterious to religion) will need our attention. Though such views are echoed to this day even by some of Emerson’s academic supporters, I believe them to be entirely false.

I want to zero in on an aspect of early Emerson that may be of interest to you as Unitarians—and that it may be good to ponder together in light of the last two weeks of lethal trouble in our state and across the nation. If Emerson brought superstition in the European past and, on the other, of a conscious, on one hand, of disdain for the benighting power of confidence that one’s present inner voice of conscience was not only a crucial connection to the divine but, as such, a source of revelation at least as important as, and at times more important than, Scripture. Emerson favored the individual’s sense of things, and feared the power of books and traditions, for the same reasons—because he set enormous store by the natural and normal and wondrous flow of moral ideas we experience not in every hour, and not necessarily at all when we hear a sermon, but whenever we are so attuned and so oriented that the divine can speak to and through and at the cognitive core within each of us. He called that core our “Reason.”

In the opening moves of his speech at the Divinity School, Emerson sends a picture of rich natural profusion and grounded human adequacy rolling like a rhetorical tsunami over eighteen centuries of Christian ambivalence about nature in a fallen world. In the text, he takes ten wondrous sentences to say—There is no problem here for miles in the month of July. Here’s the text:

“In this refugent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily. The corn and the wine have been freely dealt to all creatures, and the never-broken silence with which the old bounty goes forward, has not yielded one word of explanation. … How wide; how rich; what invitation from every property it gives to every faculty of Man!”

Emerson comes down to us as infideleterious to religion because in these sentences he is literally undoing the Biblical myth of the Fall—the whole tradition of thinking about sin and expulsion from paradise and toil and labor and pain—a whole tradition of thinking that has supported the theological idea that humanity stands in need of a redeemer. In his ebullient embrace of July, Emerson leaves no space for such gloomy problematics. Humanity is entirely self-sufficient and ready for its destined work of reading and discerning nature’s meaning: “How wide, how rich, what invitation to every faculty of [the human] ….” Enshrining human adequacy in the cognitive and intuitive work of the Reason, he also passes beyond theological and Scriptural structures of the past. Emerson had resigned from the Unitarian ministry about six years earlier over his request to be
excused from administering the rite of Communion, a liturgical ritual he felt had been arbitrarily preserved through the centuries; he found it both religiously unnecessary and entirely foreign to his feelings. In these opening sentences of the address, Emerson prominently refers to the elements of the communion service he had objected to—a site, by the way, of centuries of Christian contention, doctrinal skirmishing, and bloodshed. In our summer’s seamless profusion, he says, “the corn [that is, the kernels of wheat to be ground to make the bread] and the wine” have “been freely dealt”—that is, not just to certain Christians, those of this correct sect or that one, but “freely.” But Emerson doesn’t stop there: “the corn and the wine have been freely dealt” not just to people, but “to all creatures.” Few Emerson scholars have yet tried to argue for Emerson as a comedian—but I’m going to try someday. Subtly here, almost comically, Emerson playfully and pointedly reimagines “the corn and the wine” not as the ritual elements of the Communion service and special purview of the Church, but simply as nurturing food—the grains and fruits that are the normal if no less wondrous object of animal foraging. Emerson’s thinking here of squirrels tearing around with acorns, hummingbirds, and bees diving after the nectar within blossoming flowers, the sugars in the juice of wild grapes in the forest metamorphosing in the sun. What he is doing is broadening the bounds of what counts as sacramental miles beyond the Communion table: nature’s bounty, itself, and animals’ pursuit of it for food—these are a sacrament!

Perhaps they are. But you can almost hear the hairs standing up on the backs of the necks of the Unitarian establishment. Emerson follows his conscience here to crack open the system of his listeners’ religious imagination and to oxygenate the air. Like Jesus idly picking the heads of wheat and munching on them during the Sabbath, for all his supposed innocence, Emerson is at least half wicked. He knows how to pile burning coals on the heads of the comfortable and powerful, on the heads of those uninterested in having their power and privilege challenged.

In the address, he compares two different orientations of Christianity: the one he favors, that cultivates a religion active from within human interiority—in conscience, consciousness, and spirit; and the other, in which religion entails receiving and submitting to the established norms and guides of the Past, Scripture, doctrine, and tradition. In his religious thinking, Emerson consistently demanded, Why should our first act be to look backward? Just that question is one asked in the opening paragraph of Nature, “Why should not we, too, have a religion of revelation to us, and not a record” of those whose ancient musings produced the Bible centuries ago? Emerson is rightly perceived as infideleterious to religion if what we mean by “religion” is a religion of tradition, a religion governed by and handed down to us in books. If that’s what we mean, he was, indeed, guilty of the charge. To some these views made him crazy. To others, they made him dangerous—because he believed that what made people righteous could not be found in any book. What made people righteous—indeed, what made them people—what gave them a spark of the divine—was the work of a vital and active moral center within them that he called the Reason, and that he understood as a conduit to the divine. He sought to be the Reason’s champion and to guarantee it retained a prominent role in Unitarian religion.

Significantly, many authoritative Unitarians in Boston in the 1830s were not interested in such a religion. And since they were not, let’s look at the crazy, the anti-common-sense of this: for some of us Emerson’s views will seem quite chaotic, indeed—unnecessarily complicated. How can we better understand Emerson’s dismissal of Scripture, doctrine, tradition as guides to religious truth? To get a feel for Emerson on this terrain, think about what has more value, the coming of an idea or the record of it? The first is an action or event—the coming. The other is a text—the record. One is an occurrence we witness in awe and then labor to receive, to make sense of, to work out and to realize; the other is an object and a form, a norm we submit to, allowing it to set the terms and to guide us. Emerson says books, colleges, churches, institutions of all kinds take some past utterance and say, “This is good—let us hold by this.” As such, they pin us down, looking ever backward and not forward. And how many of us have the habit of allowing books, institutions, authoritative voices, ideas, and structures to matter ex cessively, to matter more than, to be elevated above, the promptings of our Reason?

If Emerson’s thought is demanding, and it is, this is so because his approach to the good requires us to make precisely this switcheroo. He favors attunement and attention over set and bounded knowing. He favors change over stability.

process over product
innovation over tradition
fluidity over fixity

If you ask him, Why do life this way, and can’t you leave religion at least out of it? He would tell you. Because this method is patterned on nature; in nature, nothing is stable, “Everything tilts and rocks”; nothing holds still; “If anything could stand still, he says, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted …” (119). To Emerson, it’s evident that most people have a soft spot for stability. They tend after certainty—product, statement, text, teaching, tradition. This susceptibility to certainty, Emerson says, is a great seduction. We seem to yearn to be grounded in the fruits of our Understanding brain (calculation, rational thinking, this-worldly, determinable)—and because of that, it is the effort of his intricate and difficult work always to coax and cajole us ever back to the incursions of the Reason—(intuitive, un-

(Continued on page 18)
like houses and other structures, books and traditions are, he readily admits, a great convenience, allowing us to preserve and publish and disseminate the thoughts of the past. “Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation—the act of thought—is transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man; henceforth it is settled, the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit, we say: henceforward, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly, the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry, if it is disparaged.” You hear the joke? They “stand upon” it, the book! It’s funny, right? And it is true that we cannot hear of a person who stands upon the Bible without wondering if that’s the best use for such a book.

Emerson’s prose is always astonishing. In the lines just quoted it drops on our plate piquant questions: what is the difference between Love of the hero and Worship of his statue? Emerson’s great German fan and follower of the next generation, Friedrich Nietzsche, turned that sentence into an aphorism that chills the blood: “Beware, lest a statue slay you.” Love of the hero is one thing and sacred, but worship of his statue, quite another.

Process over product.

Insight over tradition.

“The one thing in the world of value,” Emerson says, “is the active soul.” There are books and behaviors out there, and ideas in our minds about how authoritative they are, that render our souls not active but passive. When that happens, then books and religious forms and agreed upon rituals are among the greatest dangers to human persons who would live in attunement to their own moral center of consciousness and conscience.

For all their demands on familiar logic, these views are not crazy. And nor is it easy to quite denounce it all as infidelity. In fact it suggests an image of the life of faith that is if anything rather higher and more demanding than knowing our various catechisms. For all the trouble it may do to preferred systems, the claim is actually pretty simple: because Emerson takes us to be not brains but souls, he favors the Reason over the understanding. And he regards what is sacred about us as not lying in our cleverness, and certainly not in anyone else’s cleverness; what is sacred in us, for Emerson, lies in the promptings of our intuition—the images in that dream you had—the sight that took your breath away—the promptings of memory and yearning—the clarity you feel when doing some right action or witnessing an event that prompts within you the sure-footed response of tears, clapped hands, a shout of protest, a burst of laughter, the swell of pride, the sense that some things are obscene and must not, and cannot continue to happen. What we most desire, Emerson says, is to do something without knowing how or why—to give way to the force of the Reason.

Two pictures of religion: one, an attunement to conscience; the other, an allegiance to traditional forms. Which is it, people—which shall it be? How shall we begin to do what we are being called to do?

In this week of trouble, a man in Washington DC used military force to clear a public park that had become an impromptu site for the voicing of conscience. Protesters had gathered there and, their expressions of outrage over injustices perceived filled the air; fluid and flashing, they took the form of violently musical shouts. Sincere but uncertain, their views took initial form in the time-bound and never certain process of realization—this effort, their work there, was, I submit, a picture of a certain kind of virtue.

Across the park, another image of virtue was gathering. The man who lives in the stately white colonial house by the park disliked what he was seeing across the way. Clever enough to recognize the power of pictures, knowing how to fight fire with flim-flam, he ordered police to clear the park so that he could walk to a Church that stands in the park and have his picture taken. A second image of virtue, I submit. And, for the picture, an idea that the man must show strength and fixity and resolve. It must show that he embodied strength and possessed it. An idea that he should stand, tall and resolute, like a statue made of iron, backed and framed by the doorway of a famous Church. And for the statue, fixed and firm, in the man’s hand and born like a shield, a book—and, as we later heard someone say—held upside down: a Bible.

Two pictures of religion. Two pictures of virtue. Which shall it be?

Two more pictures for you: in the shade beneath the elms on the lawn at Harvard, July, 1838, a tall man with sloping shoulders and the piercing blue eyes of his Anglo-Saxon forebears speaks to a small crowd at commencement. The speaker is inviting his listeners—all look very much like him—to a broad conception of their immense and shared good fortune: In this refulgent summer, he tells them, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life.

To draw

The breath

Of life

And as those words ring in our ears, another man, in another century, in another city far to the west, is lying in the street. He, too, is speaking, saying something quite different, and also true: “I can’t breathe.”

Beware, America, lest a statue slay you.
I remember the exact date that I met Bob Richardson. It was November 19, 1981, in Boulder, Colorado, and I recall it so precisely because I recorded it in my journal. I was a young instructor holding my first academic appointment; and one of my senior colleagues had invited Bob and some other professors from the University of Denver to discuss the prospect of starting a joint-faculty seminar in Romanticism. Then began a forty-year friendship that found our getting together almost every year at the MLA Convention. There, over lunches, Larry Buell, Joel Myerson, David Robinson, and I convened what we humorously called the Transcendentalist Club, when we talked about our new projects. Over the years, I also saw Bob in Middletown, Conn.; Wellfleet and Concord, Mass.; and Chapel Hill and Hillsborough, N.C, to name but a few venues.

We learned that we had much in common. We both were born on Flag Day; we attended rival New England preparatory schools, Harvard College, and Harvard University; we both were avid book collectors; and, most important, we both loved nineteenth-century American history and literature. In a final unusual confluence, in 1988, when I left the University of Colorado for another position, I successfully lobbied for him as my replacement and he made the commute up from Denver.

By 1981 Bob already had made his mark as a scholar. In 1972, he had published *Literature and Film*, a pioneering work in the field; and, with his colleague Burton Feldman, compiled *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680–1860*. Building on the latter, in 1978 Bob brought out *Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance*. For many years he worked with novelist John E. Williams as an editor of the *Denver Quarterly*, an important literary journal that published many young and increasingly significant writers.

When I met him, he was immersed in *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1986), the first of three remarkable biographies. Nine years later, after holding a Guggenheim Fellowship, he published *Emerson: The Mind on Fire: A Biography*; and, in 2006, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*. The Emerson volume received the Francis Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians and was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle award. The James biography won the George Bancroft Prize, another top honor in American history. These three biographies, the esteemed literary critic John Banville observed,
constitute “one of the great achievements in contemporary American literary studies.” Of the Emerson volume, *Washington Post* book review editor Michael Dirda noted that it was “one of those exciting books that flash bolts of lightning across an entire intellectual era and up and down modern history.” And the Thoreau book brought Bob a different kind of prize. One of its readers, the Pulitzer Prize–winning writer Annie Dillard, admired it so much that she invited Bob to lunch. He obliged; they met again; and, not long after, they were married.

But Bob wrote more than these memorable biographies. He memorialized the Harvard professor from whom he learned the craft and art of biography in *Splendor of the Heart: Walter Jackson Bate and the Teaching of Literature* (2013). He gratified a lifelong interest in the Persian poet Omar Khayyam in *Nearer the Heart’s Desire: Poets of the Rubaiyat: A Dual Biography of Omar Khayyam and Edward Fitzgerald* (2016). He also continued his interest in Emerson by publishing *First We Read, then We Write; Emerson on the Creative Process* (2009); and in Thoreau with his introduction to his *October, or Autumnal Tints* (2012). And, of course, there were the academic’s regular appearances at scholarly conferences and the production of essays for various literary periodicals and symposia. In his later years, he continued teaching and nurturing young writers when he served on the board (and as presiding elder) of the Key West Literary Seminar.

Robert Dale Richardson, III (he used the name Robert Jr. for many of his books because he thought it less pretentious) was born June 14, 1934, in Milwaukee, Wisc., the first of three sons. He spent most of his youth, however, in Medford and then Concord, Mass., towns that his father served as a Unitarian minister. (Incidentally, the parsonage in Medford was across the street from a home that served as one of the meeting places of the first Transcendentalist Club, which Emerson and Thoreau both attended). Bob had his first brush with fame in 1947 when, on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, with his father he presented to the Library of Congress a manuscript autobiography written by none other than Lincoln himself, a treasure solicited and kept by an ancestor of Bob’s family.

Bob graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy in 1952 and from Harvard College in 1956. He continued at Harvard for his PhD (1961) in English and American Literature and Language, and wrote his dissertation on Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology*. In 1963 he became a member of the English Department at the University of Denver, where he remained for twenty-three years. He subsequently taught in various capacities at the University of Colorado, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the City University of New York, and Wesleyan University, among other institutions.

But he did not spend all his time at the podium or in the library carrell. He relished raw adventure. As a young man, he had climbed the Matterhorn and elsewhere in the Swiss Alps, and, once settled in Denver, he regularly skied Colorado’s high mountains. Later, he periodically sailed from Maine to the Maritimes in a thirty-eight-foot, two-masted wooden schooner, the *Alamar*, that he kept in Maine and skippered himself with family or friends as crew. He kayaked through miles of Idaho whitewater and, from his home on Cape Cod, retraced Thoreau’s miles-long walks up and down the Great Beach. In his sixties, he tried parasailing; and, while teaching at Sichuan University in Chengdu, China, shortly after having received a new heart valve, he unadvisedly climbed Mt. Emei, one of Buddhism’s Four Sacred Mountains.

But it is as an intellectual adventurer that we will most remember him. I recall his telling me, when he was working on Thoreau, that he gave fits to his university’s interlibrary loan staff because he was systematically reading every book or article that he knew Thoreau had read, knowledge gleaned from Thoreau’s journals, letters, library borrowing records, and the testimony of his fellow Transcendentalists. He also made long, elaborate charts of what his subject did on any day in a given year. This was a method he used as well for both the Emerson and James volumes. So, Bob was above all else an intellectual historian, tracing the growth of his subjects’ minds as they conceived and wrote the books for which they are remembered. The result was, as one reviewer observed, “a virtual intellectual genealogy of American liberalism and, indeed, of American intellectual life in general.”

Bob died in Hyannis, Mass., two days after his eighty-sixth birthday, having suffered a fall at his home in Wellfleet, where he and Ms. Dillard spent every summer. In 1959 he had married Elizabeth Hall; the marriage ended in divorce. They had two children, Lissa Richardson Biddle, a veterinarian in Walnut Creek, Calif., and Anne Richardson, a Superior Court judge in Los Angeles. In addition to Ms. Dillard and his two daughters, he leaves three step-children, Carin Clevidence of Northampton, Mass., Shelley Clevidence of
Virginia Beach, Va., and Cody-Rose Clevidence of Winslow, Ariz.; his brother David; and three grandchildren. As is only fitting, he is buried in his beloved Concord.

I feel that there is no better way to suggest the wisdom and clarity he embodied than to offer a quotation from one of the writers whom he loved so much. When in Walden Thoreau explained why he went to Walden Pond, he said this: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” I picture Bob thinking of these lines as he struggled in a storm to cross the Bay of Fundy to Newfoundland, made his way up the magnificent Matterhorn, or worked over his elaborate charts for each of his subjects’ lives.

I conclude this appreciation by quoting from another member of the remarkable James family, William’s brother, Henry, because Bob once pointed me toward it at a particularly trying time in my own life. In Henry James’s great novel, The Ambassadors, the chief character Lambert Strether offers some advice to Little Bilham, a close friend of the young Chad Newsome, whom Strether has traveled to Europe to convince to return to the United States. At one point, thinking about all the things, including love, that he has missed in his own life, Strether counsels, “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that, what have you had?”

Bob Richardson had his life, full of love and friendship and knowledge. He lived all that he could, driving life into a corner, as Thoreau said, and without flinching, sucking out all its marrow. And he was patient, kind, humble, and generous, a teacher, scholar, and friend without pretension, that first resort of the insecure. In many ways, he learned from and embodied the best of the three writers whom he brought alive for his readers. We are all indebted to him for the gifts that he shared, through his writing and his friendship. He was indeed an example in our time of that for which Emerson had called in 1837 in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard, not for a mere thinker, but “Man Thinking.” Bob Richardson was indeed our “American Scholar.”

— Philip F. Gura
Chapel Hill, N.C.
ZOOMING: ALA / THOREAU PANELS
(See page 7)