THE ARGUMENT OF LITERATURE: EMERSON, PHILOSOPHY, AND
TRADITIONS OF CRITICISM

by

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Abstract

*The Argument of Literature: Emerson, Philosophy, and Traditions of Criticism* offers four interpretations of critical moments of the career of Emerson’s work. It argues that putting Emerson’s work in the canon of philosophy requires one to redefine what philosophy is—roughly, thinking really hard about sometimes abstract questions, being able to go up and down the scale of life, back and forth across the knowledge of our times. The particular argument Emerson makes on behalf of literature is that since philosophy *should* be defined loosely and blandly as the “love of wisdom,” and wisdom can be found anywhere, one should construct the conversations of philosophy across time with more liberal principles of inclusion, such as the abstract conversations about critical self-image found in every humanistic discipline. Chapter One charts how Emersonians came to be trained in English departments, and what affect that has had on their view of Emerson. It addresses what happens if one focuses too much in one’s education on argument and loses track of one’s self-image, how one fits into the rest of the world. Chapter Two then takes up the specific moment of argument surrounding Emerson’s Divinity School Address, treating Unitarianism as a microcosm of democracy. It argues that Emerson’s rejection of authority forces the philosophical question, “How do we treat authority over ideas if there is to be freedom of thought?” Chapter Three then works out, in a systematic way in the sphere of theory, how one can maintain certain existential commitments, like a coherent self or social relations, if one takes seriously Emerson’s radical antiauthoritarianism. Chapter Four gives a full reading of Emerson’s essay on Plato, Emerson’s clearest account of what he thinks good philosophical work looks like once one relinquishes authority in the way he has.
Prelude

Toward a Philosophical Large Criticism

Jerome B. Schneewind’s *Sidgwick’s Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* would be a good paradigm for the study of Emerson undertaken here, but while his preface begins, “Henry Sidgwick’s *Methods of Ethics* is an acknowledged masterpiece of moral philosophy” (vii), we could not substitute any title of Emerson’s into that sentence. Despite being acknowledged masterpieces, Emerson’s writings are not acknowledged masterpieces of *philosophy*. This fact, more than any other, has dictated the odd shape of the following chapters—where Schneewind could begin with a simple biography of Sidgwick, move to chapters condensing the most important predecessors that were his philosophical context (Reid, Coleridge, Bentham, etc.), and end with a prolonged reconstruction of the argument of the masterpiece, that we aren’t even quite sure what Emerson’s works are masterpieces of makes such reconstruction less straightforward.

To be sure, there has been growth in reading Emerson as a philosopher in the last 40 years. However, this growth has occurred among literary critics, and is not mirrored in American philosophy departments. This further fact has had an effect on the way we then receive Emerson as a philosopher. The very idea of reconstructing the argument of Emerson’s work is a good signpost for this divide—American philosophy is largely driven by the exchange of arguments, and American literary critics are largely interested in other things and indeed are sometimes attracted to Emerson because he *doesn’t* seem to offer any arguments. So Emerson hasn’t become part of the American philosophy canon, and received reconstructive treatment like a Sidgwick, because there hasn’t seemed anything to reconstruct. And literary critics aren’t
generally interested in doing it because many tend to agree—Emerson’s doing something different, so why reconstruct arguments?

There have been, though, a mounting number of fine efforts at reconstruction. For one of the central reasons for such reconstruction is to put a philosopher in conversation with other philosophers—what Wilfrid Sellars calls a “philosophical space.” But the principal effect on the reception of Emerson as a philosopher-kind that is opaque to American philosophy departments is that good work done on him can feel out of touch with each other, sometimes confined to different disciplinary contexts. One reason for this is that philosophers in America are often the only curators of their figures, and so the philosophical problems that arise from the form of reception don’t often have challengers. As the space closes itself off, the problems ossify and become themselves the means of protection from outsiders. Changing this, though, is difficult as new critical-reception spaces arise to fill the gaps, but themselves ossify their own different problems, vaguely resembling the problems of previous spaces but in not enough detail to make anyone sure they’re talking about the same thing. And while this, too, is changing, the pace is much slower. The present study has as one hope that the pace might be quickened by the work done here.

The individual studies undertaken by the chapters hang together by taking up several different aspects of Emerson as a philosopher. They are bound together by the same braid of themes, and these themes are internally related to each other. Since a common precept for the philosopher is to have explicit theses, the first idea is a broad methodological precept, necessary to philosophical reconstruction: the interchangeability of literary themes and philosophical theses. Very simply, a thesis is the explicit reconstruction of the implicit point or significance of a theme. If a thematic in a writer is a tune returned to over and over, then to elicit its
*philosophical* significance is to give a reason for the rhythm of its return that connects to the preoccupations and positions of philosophers. Without this connection, there can be no conversation. “Thesis,” in this sense, can be taken in the old Greek musical sense of a stressed downbeat, just as “theme” is still used to talk of musical patterns.

The first theme, then, is the *conversation theme*. The central metaphor for reconstructing the history of intellectual endeavor for philosophers like Sellars, Michael Oakeshott, and Richard Rorty is the conversation. It is a metaphor that allows us to imagine intellectual interactions across time and space about topics of mutual interest. And of course, imagining such a topic for conversation partners using different languages and from different cultures almost always involves beginning with the conversations each had more locally—who or what they were responding to by saying something “philosophical.” The metaphor also suggests the process of reconstruction via the idea of translation—just as strange sounds have to be reconstructed into a language one knows how to negotiate, so do odd attitudes, techniques, and tones have to be treated as conversational transitions that make a kind of sense. This further underscores the ethical and practical nature of philosophical activity. For a contrarian might deliberately frustrate a conversation, and prove to be annoying at best; likewise, someone who never means what they say might not be someone worth talking to. But what if such frustrations had a further meaning for *that* particular conversation? What if techniques of frustrating the surface of what one says like irony, allusion, tropes of all kinds, were *pointed*?

The creation of a meaning “below” the surface of a text, often through trope, is of course a hallmark of literature, especially as opposed to philosophy (often from the philosopher’s point of view). The *philosophy and literature theme* therefore comes to the surface often from the point of view of Plato’s “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.” It has mainly been
philosophy picking the fight and setting the terms by enforcing associations between the activity of philosophy and things like argument, system, reasoning, reflection, inquiry, etc. This has given weight to the quarrel as a charged thesis that some in our recent history, like Rorty and Jacques Derrida, have wished to challenge. In a polemical situation, however, it can be easy to forget that genres are both found and created. So while Rorty wants to challenge the distinction between philosophy and literature in order to blur the difference between the two, he is on the other hand perfectly well aware that real differences do occur between writers self-consciously opting into different genres. This creates a temporal dimension to generic differentiation. The intentions, functions, and valences of writings are historical products of creating traditions, and being put into traditions by later writers.

The philosophy and literature theme, while having a specific polemical function in European intellectual history, thus quickly yields up the form theme. Once one acknowledges that philosophy has a genre, then one will quickly have to admit that there must be more than one that it is written in—and even that some of the forms of philosophy have historically not even be written. It’s also not difficult to see that some genres don’t appear to be living—just as no one writes epics as the Greeks did, so does no one really write dialogues as they did or meet in the quad and lecture while walking around campus instead of in a classroom. If the actual diversity of acknowledged philosophical work suggests a Freedom of Generic Expression amendment to the constitution of philosophy, then the point about how we actually do it still allows us room for better-or-worse judgments regarding genre-choice. It puts us in the position of asking: What does this genre (poem, dialogue, novel, mid-19th century essay, early-21st century peer-reviewed academic journal essay) give us access to in our philosophical activity? What, in fact, do we want from our philosophical activity? Might there be different forms that are better for
different kinds of philosophical activity? And the notion of form also extends down into considering smaller stylistic effects and their philosophical significance, everything from tropes to topoi to what I called their rhythm in the text.¹

As this broadened perspective on the forms of philosophical activity touches on the actual diversity found in intellectual history, the form theme becomes indelibly coupled with the *historical theme*. In making judgments about the functions of different activities and genres, we are required to know something both about when those activities were being performed and those genres chosen, and *also* about the range of needs today. The range of kinds of historical knowledge important to philosophical activity is wide and should never be prejudged. Sometimes it’s important to know who a philosopher literally conversed with; sometimes who they read; sometimes what they knew, about the past and of their time, and maybe what they ate that put them in such a bad mood; but sometimes a more aloof record of vicissitudes in an entire tradition is important. As Rorty says, “Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition—a family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida” (*Consequence* 92). It doesn’t matter if a later philosopher read an earlier one all the time; for figures like Parmenides, Protagoras, Plato, and Kant have left their DNA in the tradition, and sometimes it can be important to pinpoint those strands floating around in our genome when it seems as if they are affecting our quality of life. Neither genetics nor environment *determine* a philosopher’s activity; they are simply the condition in which the trick of editing and creating new genomic strands occurs.

Emerson’s philosophical activity is strange to the anglophone tradition of philosophy for a number of reasons I will retail, but beyond them, the more or less continued anti-historical bias
in American philosophy departments is the principal reason for beginning with my first chapter, “Emerson, There and Back Again: Philosophy and Literature in the Humanities.” For the historical record seems very clear: it wasn’t a big deal to call Emerson a philosopher when he was alive (even if some thought he was a bad one); American philosophy departments evolved into something that finds Emerson’s writing very foreign; Emerson then later made a comeback as a philosopher in English departments. Everyone knows this has something to do with the rise of literary theory against the backdrop of the importation of Continental philosophy. But I hope to tell a story that is importantly an institutional one, about the evolution of self-images and practices in both American philosophy and American literary criticism. For it’s obvious that Emerson isn’t a canonized figure in American philosophical instruction because he doesn’t have, in any obvious way, arguments. He certainly has assertions, but arguments hook assertions together in a particular way, namely one of justification. But because American philosophy doesn’t tell a very good story about itself, it’s not clear why arguments should be the only thing philosophers are instructed in. So rather than an extended methodological introduction as my first chapter, outlining why I proceed as I do (typical of the dissertation genre), I’ve begun with an interpretation of Emerson between American philosophy departments and American English departments. It puts Emerson and the study of Emerson, philosophy, and literature against the backdrop of our self-image as members and instructors in the humanities. The chapter’s central argument is that Emerson’s writing helps his readers generate a self-image for themselves, and that this genre of activity was perhaps more widely available in the 19th century and is more pressingly needed today.

I call this activity “large criticism,” following Emerson. My paradigms are the kinds of essays one gets in father Emerson’s *Monthly Anthology* and son Emerson’s *Dial* to Eliot’s
*Criterion* and Trilling’s *Partisan Review* to the “review of books” genre of magazine that is today the most reliable producer of them. This narrow genre, however, is just one thing I mean by “literature” in my dissertation’s title. By “The Argument of Literature” I want to invoke not only the old sense of “literature,” which David Bromwich reminds us was “just books” (2), as well as the narrower sense offset by philosophy, in which the idea of a poem or novel having an argument might seem strange, but also both senses of “argument,” and so including the narrow sense of explicit, premise-to-conclusion dialectical modes as well as what Milton meant by “this great argument” in *Paradise Lost* and Emerson by “a metre-making argument” in “The Poet.”

The central rhythm of this dissertation, one might say, is to justify the ways of poets to philosophers (and critics who would become philosophers, or study them, or behave like them), but because the ways are many, so are the justifications.

In Chapter One, the defense is of large criticism and of a view of Emerson that is optimistic and constructive. As I claim there, there are strong traditions of criticism in American literature departments that have become pessimistic and negative and have (only somewhat) malformed our view of Emerson. When I turn to Chapter Two, “A Fellowship of Free Inquiry: Rethinking Emerson’s Inheritance of American Liberal Christianity,” I take up one of Emerson’s defining moments in his becoming a large critic—the Divinity School Address. In the first chapter, I suggest this moment began his explicit division from American philosophy, but in the following chapter I focus on it as his division from American religious practice. This has philosophical interest because one facet we underplay, perhaps owing to our apotheosis of Emerson the Individual (and Self-Negating), is his outline of self-reliant intellectual activity, the ideal *social* form self-reliant inquirers would have. For all of Emerson’s anti-institutionalism, he yet thought institutions were necessary, though they must undergo radical revision of purview.
In Emerson’s ideal church, instructors would be provocateurs, taking stances as they come in order to keep everyone moving, as if inquiry were exercise.

Provocation is perhaps the central pedagogical task in Emerson’s philosophy. It is not, however, his defining trait as a philosopher, understood from the point of view of values 20th-century American philosophers have. That accolade obviously goes to inconsistency, his much-lauded/derided antipathy to being coherent, or systematic, or reasoned, or any of the other almost-synonyms one could interchange for the philosopher’s amusement. If Chapter Two followed out an institutional path, from the university to the church, professor to pastor, then Chapter Three, “O Circular Philosopher: Emerson’s Alternative Philosophical Project,” returns to the central theoretical problem for Emerson’s treatment as a philosopher: not only does he not want arguments, he wants the ability to say whatever he wants. That is pretty much it, the license we still call “poetic,” but it engages him in a distinctly philosophical conversation that we have avoided by not treating Emerson’s positions as connected in the right way. In this third chapter, then, I give an articulation of Emerson’s “circular philosophy” that is a consequence of his theses of inconsistency, whim, transition, and moods. The provocation of Chapter Two finds itself as the thesis of transition, viz. power is in movement, death in stasis, thus the task of provoking others and oneself. Emerson’s argument with traditional philosophy, from this point of view, is that the task of systematic coherence can tend to “tyrannize,” as he sometimes puts it, new thoughts by making them get in line, or out. This makes us smaller, and know less about ourselves and the world, since one has shut one’s eyes to what one might see. So Emerson takes seriously the idea that we might suddenly wake up a person that does not recognize ourselves. But the solution is not to imagine a straightjacket that could hold our personality in place, but to treat thoughts as relative to our attitude to the world, and then to keep record of the moods we
wake up in from morning to morning. This is, in essence, the trick Keats calls “negative capability”; in Emerson’s view, though, the trick also consists in circulating through all the dimensions of attitudes we may find ourselves with or talk ourselves into.

If in Chapter Three I pick up Emerson’s conversation with philosophy by abstracting it out of a series of passages in his work, tied thematically but not by other principles of biography or context, then in Chapter Four, “Philosophical Exercitations: An Interpretation of Plato in Emerson’s Essay,” I look for that conversation in one very particular place—Emerson’s essay on Plato in *Representative Men*. Rather than my previous abstract defense of inconsistency, I show that inconsistency in operation as I trace the circulation of Platonic topoi in Emerson’s essay on him. I show the essay to be rather more alert and dense in philosophical significance than one would guess from the relatively scant work on it. With pungent irony, Emerson charges Plato with failing in the task of system-building Plato dreamed for himself, falling instead into “mere philosophical exercitations”—clearly the task Emerson must be performing. And so I try and show how Emerson performs this task, through allusion and other literary tropes and figuration in a mode of essay-writing Emerson performs often, and how Emerson viewed this task as philosophical and needed. Emerson’s essay on Plato is, in essence, a wonderful performance of large criticism, given too little credit by the people who might.

So this is the great argument of the dissertation: the Emersonian argument of literature is that Plato gave us a bad idea when he didn’t stop at merely dividing philosophy from poetry, but also went on to say they were at odds with each other. Plato interpreted part of the history of generic development, from oral genres into the post-literacy age being explored just then, as an ancient fight between those who produce knowledge (philosophers) and those who don’t (poets). This made of philosophy a distinct, exclusive group of knowledge-producers. As intellectual
progress produced something distinctive like scientific progress, and something else distinctive like religious progress began to fall away, professionalization inevitably came out of Kant’s distinctions between the practical, the cognitive, and the aesthetic. But by remaining exclusive, philosophers became increasingly insular; so even if they produced knowledge, it became disjoined from anything else, perhaps being of merely themselves or their wit, or fashionable problems in academic journals, or sham-battles between figures lightly clothed in wider and morally pressing significance, such as class, race, and gender, but whose consequences beyond the academic journal industry was vague. That’s the nightmare Emerson envisioned, and that’s his argument for expanding our sense of education and vocation, philosophical, literary, or otherwise, beyond the neatly professional and become a large criticism with provocateurs ranging the landscape. This does not destroy institutions, let alone lives or the polis, it enriches them. Emerson articulated this vision, performed this activity, and thought through its consequences in a manner that can appear opaque but clarifies when viewed against particular historical and critical backdrops.

\[1\] My sense of form and its conceptual valence is, in a general way, deeply indebted to the work of Kenneth Burke and, in a particular way, to Angus Fletcher’s *Colors of the Mind*. See especially Fletcher’s essential reinterpretation of New Critical procedures: “The trained critic will treat the poem in a variety of ways, all of which concern ideas *about* the poem. Among these approaches might be comparing a poem to other poems, and noting some special linguistic or poetic or rhetorical feature, and describing the historical genesis of the poem. In short, the critic articulates a rich sense of its context, intertext, subtext, as well as its lexis and its tradition. These are all learned and technical responses, which permit us to go round and about the poem. What I mean [in saying that one can “think a poem” as well as interpret it] is a more neutral, more naive kind of response, as if one were looking for some order or rhyme of thoughts that, of itself, the poem might disclose to the thinking mind, the mind that looks for logics and underlying rhythms. . . . As always, when doing theory, the fundamental response is to the rhythm of the work. It has been said that among the many subtle shades of meaning Aristotle gives to the term *logos*, one is rhythm. A poem has a rhythm, not primarily because of the way it may relate to other works, but owing to some properties of its own internal organization” (112). The only thing to add is that among the notes orchestrated rhythmically in a text are the motifs of
other texts. This makes philosophy, in an important sense, indistinguishable from criticism of a philosophical text as both involve the creation of such contrapuntal motion.
Chapter One

Emerson, There and Back Again: Philosophy and Literature in the Humanities

When Transcendentalism attacked the foundation of accepted faith, Unitarian laymen looked to philosophy to buttress the established religion. The laity were not disappointed. . . . Adept and knowledgeable in argument, the Harvard thinkers consistently outmaneuvered the Transcendentalists philosophically. Although Emerson and his well-known circle won over a band of converts, the philosophical bases of Unitarianism remained unshaken.


Kuklick, I gather, takes this as rather a grand day for American philosophy; but without disputing this as the beginning of American philosophy as a discipline, nor directly contesting a positive evaluation of it, consider how extraordinary a beginning it is, extraordinary that it should be even plausible as such a beginning. The period in question is the middle of the nineteenth century, a time at which Marx could announce . . . that “the criticism of religion is in the main complete.”

. . . [H]alf of the story Kuklick tells is that the philosophical defense was precisely taken against Emerson and Transcendentalism, and here the defense seems to have been much more lasting. There has been no serious move, as far as I know, within the ensuing discipline of American philosophy to take up Emerson philosophically. . . . [The] moral is that Emerson and Thoreau are as much threats, or say embarrassments, to what we
have learned to call philosophy as they are to what we call religion, as though philosophy
had, and has, an interest on its own behalf in looking upon them as amateurs. . . .

——Stanley Cavell, “The Philosopher in American Life”

In a kind of field-defining *Summa Emersonica*, Lawrence Buell begins his chapter on Emerson and philosophy, “To discuss Emerson as a philosopher you must first face the question of whether he was a philosopher at all” (*Emerson* 199). This is an important fact about the state of that conversation at the beginning of the 21st century, and that it *was* even a pertinent question was the result of much work. Thirty years earlier, Buell was able to state with equal plausibility that “undoubtedly Emerson and his circle *are* more important for historical reasons than for the quality of their achievements in art, philosophy, and theology” (*Literary Transcendentalism* 2, emphasis his). Part of Buell’s license for saying the latter, however, was his offloading responsibility for the judgment to the philosophers themselves. Because without a doubt, at the beginning of the 1970s it would have been hard indeed to find a philosopher in the United States, England, or on the European continent who took Emerson seriously as a philosopher. How different the intellectual milieu than in 1840 when Richard Monckton Milnes declared Emerson the “eldest palpable and perspicuous birth of American Philosophy” (60).

One relevant way to consider the transformation of Emerson’s fortunes is by wondering about the criteria for differentiating a philosopher from other occupations. As Buell continues in his earlier work, “[Emerson and his circle’s] stature increases when one considers them as ‘thinkers’ or ‘prophets’ rather than in terms of a particular intellectual discipline” (2). Buell never here states criteria for telling the difference, and this is what leaves the implicit authority to the philosophers, those within philosophy as a discipline.¹ By the middle of the 20th century,
though, there was recognized a wide divorce within Western, post-Greek, Eurocentric philosophy between, broadly, two traditions of work—the anglophone, analytic tradition dominant in philosophy departments in the United States, England, and Australia and the “Continental” tradition, whose central work was widely seen to be done in French and German. This divorce is itself emblematic of the problem of considering Emerson as a philosopher. Even as Buell shifted responsibility for the claim of philosophical achievement to the experts, there was no consensus among experts about what they were all expert in. And if that’s so, then 1) how do we consider Emerson a philosopher, and 2) how do we account for what happened to him in the space of about a century?

In this chapter, I want to retail some important moments of the historical question in order to elicit some considerations for answering the first, discipline-demarcating question. The context for both questions, however, will be some of the struggles that have emerged for the humanities in general during the 20th century, and that we still deal with today. For it should be clear that if one isn’t sure what one is expert in, it might be the very applicability of the concept of expertise that should be in question. And if today we find it easy to regard “profession,” “discipline,” and “expertise” as quite nearly interdefinable notions, then the example of philosophy and Emerson as philosopher raise broader questions about the humanities and its relationship to professionalization and to other professionalized disciplines represented in the modern American university. My hope, then, in raising these questions in the context of Emerson and philosophy is to elicit some alternatives for the humanities in terms of its activities and self-image, and from a tradition of thought that is distinctively Emersonian.

Louis Menand, in his recent book *The Marketplace of Ideas* (2010), implicitly traces a central phenomenon in the history of American higher education, which might be put this way: If
“the pursuit, production, dissemination, application, and preservation of knowledge are the central activities of a civilization” (13), and since the end of the 19th century we’ve come to think of the natural sciences as paradigms for these activities, then what is the place of the liberal arts and humanities? The hinge in his story that takes us from the first expression of this anxiety (his chapter on “The Problem of General Education”) to its most recent manifestation (“Interdisciplinarity and Anxiety”) is what Menand calls “The Humanities Revolution.”

In this stage the humanities went on the offensive against what was causing its anxiety of placement: “The vocabulary of ‘disinterestedness,’ ‘objectivity,’ ‘reason,’ and ‘knowledge,’ and talk about things like ‘the scientific method,’ ‘the canon,’ and ‘the fact/value distinction’ began to be superseded, particularly in the humanities, by attention to ‘interpretations’ (rather than ‘facts’), ‘perspective’ (rather than ‘objectivity’), and ‘understanding’ (rather than ‘reason’ or ‘analysis’)” (80).

This, however, didn’t solve the problem of anxiety about what the liberal arts and humanities contribute to civilization because the consequence of displacing the natural sciences as a paradigm (which had caused the humanities to feel out of place) was “a great deal of paradigm loss within the humanities disciplines” (90). Without a single paradigm to anchor what is included and occluded as “work in the field,” a discipline’s face begins to blur when it looks at itself in the mirror. Too many paradigms and a discipline won’t be able to recognize itself.

This is the anxiety Menand attaches to the current phenomenon of interdisciplinarity—humanities disciplines that take on too many paradigms begin to worry about their definition. It is this anxiety that Richard Rorty began defending against in the 1970s with his paradigmatic attitude marked by a rhetoric of shrugs, insouciance, and jouissance. Rorty is one of Menand’s central figures for the humanities revolution (see Marketplace 82ff.), and it is no mistake that in
an early meditation on professionalization and philosophy from 1976, Rorty singles out Emerson among other Romantics as functioning as alternatives:

Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macauley and Carlyle and Emerson, a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre. This genre is often still called “literary criticism,” however, for an excellent reason. The reason is that in the course of the nineteenth century imaginative literature took the place of both religion and philosophy in forming and solacing the agonized conscience of the young. Novels and poems are now the principal means by which a bright youth gains a self-image. Criticism of novels is the principal form in which the acquisition of a moral character is made articulate. We live in a culture in which putting one’s moral sensitivity into words is not clearly distinguishable from exhibiting one’s literary sensibilities . . . . What culture criticism does not do is to ask whether Valéry wrote more beautiful lines than Marlowe, or whether Hobbes or Moore told more truths about the good. In this form of life, the truth and the good and the beautiful drop out. The aim is to understand, not to judge. The hope is that if one understands enough poems, enough religions, enough societies, enough philosophies, one will have made oneself into something worth one’s own understanding. (“Professionalized” 66)

Emerson in his time called this “large criticism” (“Historic Notes” 339). Implicit in Rorty’s description is the creation of a genre whose central purpose is the generation of a self-image in order to have a self-image. Rorty identifies “highbrow culture” and the “literary intellectual” as creators and consumers of this genre, the kind of writers and readers that surrounded, for
example, *The Christian Examiner* and *The Dial* in the 19th century and *The New York Review of Books* and *Raritan* today. Part of this genre for Rorty is telling oneself “a great sweeping story,” one that might appear “‘unscientific’ and ‘unscholarly,’” but that “also form[s] a genre of writing which is quite indispensable. Besides the need to ask whether certain propositions asserted by Aristotle or Locke or Kant or Kierkegaard are true or were validly inferred, there is also the need to adopt an attitude towards such men, just as one must adopt an attitude towards Alcibiades and Euripides, Cromwell and Milton, Proust and Lenin” (“Professionalized” 65). For Rorty, the development of these attitudes into a self-image means binding many of them together, making for oneself an *ethos* or character, so that they are not simply disparate, flyaway strands but large braids made to express some self-identified, common attitude. “One’s attitude towards Kant,” in Rorty’s example, cannot “be independent of one’s attitudes towards Wordsworth and Napoleon” (65). Rorty’s point is not that these attitudes cannot be independent, but that for them to be made part of one’s self-image they must be self-consciously bound together in some manner— if even merely to express that they are not related.

The problem with interdisciplinarity from this perspective is that one loses a professional self-image. This, in itself, is not bad insofar as one still can create a self-image from *something*. Perhaps one views oneself as an anthropologist of 19th-century literature, or a literary critic of 19th-century anthropology; perhaps one creates a braid out of the duties of anthropologist and literary critic, creating a hybrid set of tasks that could only be revealed as needing done after the braiding. (Maybe one creates a brand-new discipline after doing it.) All of these are possibilities, just as the odd hybrid writings of the 19th-century literary cultures fulfilled, in Rorty’s reckoning, a cultural role. But unlike the hybridity of those literary cultures, the primary role of concern with interdisciplinarity is *professional* role. Menand is sanguine about
“eclecticism” as the “fate of the academic humanities” (92), effectively saying that Rorty’s shrug is precisely the right kind of attitude toward the anxiety it causes.  

The perspective taken by this chapter is that such sanguinity needs to be earned by each and that one can only earn it by constructing a self-image that includes not only a story about professionalism, but also the range and applicability of argument. To begin, I will reframe a dispute between the intellectual historian Bruce Kuklick and the philosopher Stanley Cavell about the significance of Emerson’s falling away from American philosophy. Cavell and Kuklick between them itemize several objects of concern one must keep in perspective to understand the development of the humanities, including science as a model, connection with the past, pedagogical efficacy, and the appearance of systematic argument. All four of these worked against Emerson’s ability to become a paradigm for philosophical achievement, but it is the last that is most important for understanding his reemergence. For as Buell has suggested, and I will go on to show, Emerson gained traction during the Humanities Revolutionary period because of the currency of poststructuralist modes of thought. These modes were, in Jacques Derrida’s vocabulary, largely anti-logocentric, which for many has meant anti-argument. This is a smooth and persuasive story about Emerson’s lack of logocentric argument first being reviled and then appreciated and venerated. However, it glosses over the way in which deconstruction can curtail the range of Emerson’s writing, and that how if one shifts one’s attitudes (and story), one can see the center of gravity in Emerson as, not in a linguistic solvent, but in generating a self-image.

1. Francis Bowen, Darwin, and Professional American Philosophy

The classic history of the origins and institutionalization of American philosophy is Bruce Kuklick’s *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (1977). Harvard was undeniably the trendsetter in philosophy in the United States well into the
20th century, as well as being a major trendsetter in American university education under the
guidance of Charles William Eliot. It is during this period after the Civil War that the face of not
only American education changed, but that of professions and disciplines as well. The late 19th
century saw the establishment of the first major professional organizations in what would come
to be called the natural and social sciences and the humanities, and from this followed the
organizing of departments and faculties along those lines. Until the 19th century, inquiry can
look remarkably shapeless, or in crisis for a name, to the mind of someone on the far side of the
20th. “Science” was just taking hold as the name for what Newton had still called “natural
philosophy,” and all of the inquiries we’ve come to divide into pat boxes like “psychology,”
“economics,” or “philosophy of mind” were sharing names like “mental philosophy,” “the moral
sciences,” or “the active powers of man.” It is all this that came somewhat to an end as the gears
of professional specialization sped up, and it is to this time period that we owe most of the names
we still use for academic disciplines, and also for the broad shape of the agendas of inquiry in
those disciplines. Where Kuklick’s book on American philosophy excels as no other before it is
in its ability to bring together the shapes of ideas with the institutional conditions that helped to
form the philosophers with the ideas.

Kuklick’s story about the rise of the great department of William James, Josiah Royce,
Georges Santayana, and their colleagues and successors (like Alfred North Whitehead) has a
fairly simple beginning. The intellectual context for understanding what is often called the
“Golden Age” of American philosophy is the impact of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*
(1859). Darwin’s book sparked a sea change in the agendas of almost all intellectual inquiries as
it seemed to cut the most important cord between the dominant Christian religion and projects of
explanation—humanity as the special creature of God. The rumblings of an anti-theological
naturalism were heard in other places before Darwin, for example geology and German biblical criticism, but Darwin’s ability to explain the origins of humanity without reference to God put natural theology into retirement with respect to the future evolution of disciplinary knowledge. Before Eliot helped to give birth to the modern university, antebellum colleges were in many ways essentially constituted by their religious affiliations. Recalling resistance to his plans at Cornell University (established in 1868), Andrew D. White—author of *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896)—remarked that surrounding college presidents questioned “whether laymen had any right to teach at all, since the command to teach was given to the apostles and their successors” (qtd. in Hawkins 120). The early great historian of Harvard, Samuel Eliot Morison, says that Harvard was founded as “a religious college, but emphatically not a ‘divinity school’ or a seminary for the propagation of puritan theology,” yet adds that “a learned clergy was the immediate and pressing social need that Harvard was expected to supply” (22-23). So while the founding of Divinity Schools and seminaries was a surprisingly late-coming development (Andover Seminary in 1808 was the first), Yale and Harvard were founded with this mission of producing an educated body of clergy. At the beginning of the 19th century, then, Harvard was linked indelibly to the wider dispersion of Unitarian clergymen in the Boston, New England area, and responsive to their dispositions, creating a binding circuit between university faculty, local clergymen, and common layperson. It’s in such a context that the appointment of a faculty member could spark a theological controversy, as Henry Ware, Sr.’s did in 1805.

Kuklick effectively begins not with Darwin, though, but with a different theological controversy at Harvard in the background: Emerson’s radical Divinity School Address. Transcendentalists like George Ripley, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Orestes A. Brownson had
already begun rocking the Unitarian boat and Emerson’s shots at the Unitarian doctrine of the personality of the deity and the cold formalism of their preaching were folded into what the conservative Unitarian Andrews Norton called “The New School of Literature and Religion,” his angry riposte to Emerson’s address. It is not Norton, Henry Ware, Jr., or any of the other Unitarian establishment that Kuklick looks to as a foil for Emerson and the Transcendentalists, however, in order to explain the prehistory of the Golden Age at Harvard’s philosophy department. Kuklick uses Francis Bowen as his emblem for the transformation of American philosophy from an adjunct to Unitarian theology to its modern professional form. Bowen, as a young Harvard instructor in his twenties, wrote a review of Emerson’s *Nature* in 1837 that preceded the major philosophical work he collected in 1842 in *Critical Essays on a Few Subjects Connected with the History and Present Condition of Speculative Philosophy*. Taken together they show a pattern of response to the implications of Emerson’s address and Transcendentalism’s philosophical import generally. It is this pattern of response that Bowen’s work embodies that Kuklick argues locked the Unitarians into a losing position against Darwinian naturalism, and thus made possible the birth of professional American philosophy.

Bowen’s central argument against the writings of the Transcendentalists is that they were reliant on “*a priori* flights of fancy” (Kuklick, *Rise* 35), “a forced marriage,” as Bowen puts it, “between poetry and philosophy, the latter borrowing from the former a license to indulge in conceit and highly figurative expressions, and giving in return an abstruse and didactic form to the other’s imaginative creation” (*Critical* 6). In the same way, Bowen rejected Darwin’s *Origin of Species* as reliant on “exercises of fancy” (*Gleanings* 217). Kuklick identifies Bowen as making essentially the same argumentative move because, as Bowen construed the requirements of Lockean empiricism, the empiricist could only trust the evidence of the senses. Darwin’s
major move, of course, was to *posit*, to *hypothesize*, to *postulate* some hidden mechanism at work beneath the evidence we find of the animals we currently can look at—the developmental hypothesis of evolutionary change by natural selection based on hereditary transmission of statistically varying traits over vast amounts of time. You couldn’t prove any of that by your senses, so it was pretty easy for Bowen to suggest that Darwin was simply a speculative metaphysician set on shoring up Hume’s skepticism. And for Bowen and the Unitarian establishment any skepticism is atheistical (see *Rise* 38–42).¹⁴

In hindsight we can see how Bowen got caught, then, in a changing conception of what empirical science is allowed to do to move forward. The strictures of philosophical empiricism on science began to change in the middle part of the 19th century in response in part to the excitement around Darwin. Robert Brandom identifies two “core programs” to the projects of anglophone, analytic philosophy that we’ve inherited from modern philosophy, and these can help sort the conceptual issues embedded in the episode between Bowen and Darwin: *empiricism* and *naturalism*. Species of empiricism appeal to “phenomenal vocabulary, expressing how things appear, or to secondary-quality vocabulary, or, less demandingly, to observational vocabulary” (*Between* 2). Empiricism is an *epistemological* tradition that prioritizes in the *ordo cognescendi* what we gain from *experience* or the *senses*. Naturalism, on the other hand, is an *ontological* tradition that prioritizes in the *ordo essendi* physical objects. Species of naturalism appeal to “the vocabulary of fundamental physics, or to the vocabulary of the natural sciences . . . more generally, or just to objective descriptive vocabulary” (2).¹⁵ These two needn’t conflict, but as the vocabularies in which we describe physical objects became disjoined from the common-sense vocabularies we use to describe what we see, a conflict between these two philosophical projects arose. In Eddington’s famous example, it was only when it became
obvious that we could describe a single object as a “table” or a “cloud of electrons” that philosophers began to worry hard about how to explain which was the correct term to use. As he said in 1928, “the physicist used to borrow the raw material of his world from the familiar world, but he does so no longer” (xiii).

Increasingly toward the end of the 19th century, intellectuals moved to an ontological scientia mensura, the idea that, in Wilfrid Sellars’s words, “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what it is, and of what is not that it is not” (Empiricism 83). Philosophical naturalism, in this sense, is something like the counterpart to natural theology; if the latter suggests philosophy’s role as an adjunct to Christian belief, the former suggests its role as an adjunct to scientific. Bowen was dragged under by the riptide caused by his adherence to the Lockean thesis that knowledge demanded compliance with the evidence of the senses as natural science began moving beyond them (or under them). Skepticism, for Bowen, was a philosophical mode of opening a playspace for the human imagination to fill, a priori and irrespective of one’s experience. One used it to attack particular components of our knowledge, common sense, or the mind’s composition. “Philosophers may form what dreams they choose,” Bowen says in his review of Emerson’s Nature, “provided their speculations affect favorably their own faith and practice, and can never, from their very nature, command the belief, or bewilder the understanding of the mass of mankind” (“Transcendentalism” 7). Skepticism’s mere appearance as harbinger of atheism, Darwin’s ability to seemingly flout currently funded empirical evidence in favor of his hypothesis, and some of Darwin’s defenders’ overt Humean skepticism all combined to force Bowen into what was a losing battle.
2. Emerson and Philosophy in a University

I prefaced this chapter with Kuklick’s conclusion about Bowen’s win against Emerson, before his loss against Darwin, because Stanley Cavell’s response to Kuklick’s story is to go behind that loss to wonder about the significance of the win against Emerson and what it says about what people seem to take for granted in American philosophy as it currently composes itself. The irony in Kuklick’s treatment that someone like Cavell would have noticed is that he concedes that Transcendentalism was amenable to Darwinian developmental modes of thought (see *Rise* 59).17 So why didn’t they benefit from the demise of the Unitarian position, of Bowen and Louis Agassiz’s loss in the arena of biology? Kuklick intimates the Transcendentalists’ cavalier attitude to the actual workings of science may have played a role, saying that “their dismissal of science weakened their appeal even for sympathetic intellectuals” (25). However, “dismissal” itself seems far too strong for Thoreau and the Emerson who declared, “I will be a naturalist.” A growing crowd of scholars have refined our picture of Emerson’s relationship to the natural sciences in the intellectual milieu of his time, and this picture suggests not the antagonism of “dismissal” but the respect of someone doing a different job.18 However, even if we stipulate that Transcendentalism was weak on science-worship, that was unimportant to Bowen’s actual argument—the underlying force of his rejection of *scientia mensura* in favor of *sensus mensura* was the effect on our belief in God (see *Rise* 40),19 which is parallel to the priority Transcendentalists put on our spiritual life. So, if the declining worth of God as a chit in the game of philosophy would’ve hit Bowen and Emerson equally, and their respective stances to Darwin and the natural sciences were perhaps a draw at best, what was it about *philosophy* that continued to make it congenial to people like Bowen, but inhospitable to a re-insertion of Emersonian Transcendentalism?
It’s lack of a clear reflection on this fact that motivates Cavell’s underlying offense at Kuklick’s largely condescending treatment of Emerson.\textsuperscript{20} Kuklick narrates,

When Transcendentalism attacked the foundation of accepted faith, Unitarian laymen looked to philosophy to buttress the established religion. The laity were not disappointed. . . . Adept and knowledgeable in argument, the Harvard thinkers consistently outmaneuvered the Transcendentalists philosophically. Although Emerson and his well-known circle won over a band of converts, the philosophical bases of Unitarianism remained unshaken. (\textit{Rise} 10)

Cavell’s response is to marvel that the buttressing of religion sets the dynamic of the unfolding drama of philosophy in America while Karl Marx at the same time was announcing in Europe that “the criticism of religion is in the main complete” (qtd. in “The Philosopher” 44). His point is that the beginning of \textit{professional} philosophy has less to do with Darwin than Kuklick implies, and more to do with a different set of qualifications left comparatively unexplored. Since the philosophical defense of American philosophy, as incarnated by Bowen, was taken precisely against Transcendentalism, the “moral is that Emerson and Thoreau are as much threats, or say embarrassments, to what we have learned to call philosophy as they are to what we call religion, as though philosophy had, and has, an interest on its own behalf in looking upon them as amateurs” (“The Philosopher” 45). So, what is it that divides the professional philosopher from the amateur? Answering this question will give us a handle on some of the impertinences of Rorty’s “indispensable” “new genre” of telling “a great sweeping story” that appears “‘unscientific’ and ‘unscholarly.’”

If we place the image of science to one side, Cavell’s response to Kuklick raises three further factors, each I think with their own separate importance: the absence of argument, the
problem of pedagogy, and lack of relationship to the philosophical canon. Cavell says of Thoreau what could go for Emerson, that seemingly “a work like Walden has nothing in it to call arguments” (“The Philosopher” 14), and even as Emerson and Thoreau “proceed with the tasks of philosophy . . . they are nevertheless not interested in what we are likely to call philosophical texts more than in others, and indeed nothing is more constant in their philosophical mission than to warn the student against much book reading altogether. It is no wonder if they are an embarrassment to a university curriculum” (15). Emerson’s relationship to the philosophical canon is important insofar as professions are considered continuing conversations across history between peers doing the same job. Bowen’s defense against Transcendentalism looks especially professional to us now because it comes in the form of engagement with what we now consider a standard canon of philosophical figures—Locke, Reid, Kant, and Fichte amongst others. There are two features that stick out in Bowen’s mode, however, as opposed to how Emerson engages with figures like Plato, Plotinus, Bacon, and Montaigne. The first is that Bowen is a representative figure of the final transformation of philosophy into its modern, professional form—which is to say, he is a transitional figure in the transformation of modern philosophy as it was created by Descartes, Locke, and Kant into modern philosophy as it is received in the teaching of Descartes, Locke, and Kant in 20th century philosophy departments. Whereas in a popular figure at Harvard like Dugald Stewart one could still find Montaigne, or in Victor Cousin one would find Vico or Herder, the standard “textbook problems of philosophy” as taught in American philosophy departments effectively marginalizes those figures. Emerson thus appears marginal for not fitting into a framework of education standardized by those figures, and those figures by those problems.
Bowen looks professional because he takes direct part in an ongoing conversation deemed philosophical. However, Bowen also shows how this couldn’t be a sufficient condition: one way of achieving a foothold in a philosophical conversation is simply by reconstructing that conversation for your interlocutor. It didn’t matter to Bowen that in a writer like Emerson one found little surface engagement with philosophical tradition; Bowen supplied it for Emerson because he took it that that tradition revealed something about what our relationship to Emerson should be. One can always be enveloped into the philosophical tradition by a later reader-teacher, as Heidegger and Arthur Danto did for Nietzsche in their respective traditions. Still, there is something further that distinguishes Bowen’s engagement; not only does he develop his position through engagement with tradition, Bowen also reconstructs positions and the development of tradition in history in terms of arguments. Bowen’s philosophical writings hold up remarkably well in part because the problems he writes about are still recognizable to someone learning philosophy 200 years later, but also because his style is recognizably academic to someone reading in American philosophy journals in the 20th century.

It’s this further fact that dovetails with Cavell’s second consideration: the difficulty of Emerson’s philosophy on pedagogy. Consider the ancient Greek philosophers and the awkwardness of teaching their positions as they were expressed in physical activities. As the eminent historian of Greek philosophy Pierre Hadot says, “All [ancient] schools denounced the risk taken by philosophers who imagine that their philosophical discourse can be sufficient to itself without being in accord with the philosophical life” (What 174). If academic understanding is measured by the extent to which we can recapitulate a different point of view, then views measured in the appropriate words have a clear advantage in the modern classroom over those measured in the dynamics of experience. And this is Cavell’s point about Emerson
and Thoreau not being “interested in what we are likely to call philosophical texts more than in others.” Their philosophical interest goes beyond textual words even.

The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet . . . . His note-books impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a christianity entrenched in establishments and forms, some vigor of wild virtue. (“Self-Reliance” 48)

This is the wild virtue that nature teaches us, and it is words, “quot[ing] some saint or sage,” that makes us “ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose” (38).

One can of course take one’s students outside to sit and meditate in the grass, or take time out to perform a physical activity like dancing (as my own Philosophy 101 instructor did). But it’s easier to read descriptions of these ideas and rather learn inside and out the arguments exchanged between philosophers for those positions. (And all the easier still for ignoring them altogether if they left no arguments.) In fact, one can teach the arguments without reading the original texts, as was the case in colleges of the early 19th century using books like William Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) and many classrooms that use textbooks today—all one needs is maybe an excerpt, but mainly the authority to say that this is indeed the argument wielded by X in response to Y.\(^\text{28}\) This makes examinations easy to give. But for Emerson, it is not any argument one necessarily learns but the experience of the text itself.

For testimony on this point, we might turn to Emerson at the podium. When Emerson left the pulpit, his uncertain future dovetailed with the rise of the public lecture embodied by the lyceum movement in New England. However, at the end of his career, Emerson famously
returned to Harvard to take part in Charles Eliot’s first stab at creating a graduate school. Though the failure of the experiment was no doubt a group effort, the juxtaposition of Bowen and Emerson here is revealing. Kuklick says that “the lecturers in the 1869-1870 philosophy course showed how Eliot’s mind was working: they included Bowen, Emerson, [Charles Sanders] Peirce, and [John] Fiske. In a stroke Eliot conveyed that his university would be open to [Unitarian] orthodoxy, Transcendentalism, the new epistemological studies, and positivism” (*Rise* 134). Yet while Francis Greenwood Peabody said of Emerson’s “Natural History of the Intellect” that “it was not lectures to which we were listening, but poetry; not the teaching of the class-room, but the music of the spheres” (qtd. in Bosco, “His Lectures” 12), Kuklick could say that “the moribund state of philosophy [at Harvard] under [Bowen’s] headship in the 1850s and 1860s was the result not of the content but of the manner of his teaching” (*Rise* 134). This manner was “the rote system” (134) because Bowen “saw the purpose of teaching as the inculcation of information” (31) which thus required the heavy use of textbooks. Bowen wrote three of these in philosophy over his career, “all didactic and systematic with synopses of many thinkers” (31). “Under the best of circumstances,” Kuklick remarks, “he probably would not have been a stimulating teacher” (31). Bosco notes in his monograph on Emerson’s “Natural History of the Intellect,” on the other hand, that Emerson didn’t give an examination for the course at all (see “His Lectures” 9-10), a practice that would prove difficult to maintain in modern educational environments.

Perceiving Emerson’s performance as poetry and thinking it is the experience of the text itself that one must go through to learn anything are related ideas, and they may help to explain why Emerson did find a home in English departments (and that others, like Bowen, did not). It’s those twin intuitions that lead instructors of literature to have intense internal conflicts over
whether and where to cut down a reading for undergraduates because it is too long, some even finding the very idea of editing for such instrumental purposes anathema. (And compare the relative lack of angst on this point for editors of philosophy anthologies.) Yet, on the other hand, even in the fine arts, like painting and creative writing, one doesn’t instruct by simply standing up and giving a semester-long reading of a poem. The only way to understand Emerson’s performance as anything other than self-indulgent or irresponsible is to shorten the distance between performance art and instruction, on the one hand, and literature and philosophy, on the other. The production of literature is not an academic study in the same way that literary criticism is; it is closer to the fine arts. Emerson was doing literature, as Peabody perceived, but this reduces the valence of his performance and the possible value of it. Emerson was doing philosophy, and it is this radical idea that is an embarrassment to a modern university curriculum. For what is one to assess? If there were arguments, one could assess those, as Bowen had his students do even when they were told which were the correct positions to be defending (see Rise 31-32). But even here there’s nothing comparable in Emerson, because Emerson proves radically inconvenient when waving his flag “imitation is suicide” (“Self-Reliance” 27) and “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by every recruit to his banner” (50).

3. Philosophy and a Culture of Argument

The thread that explains how Bowen differs from Emerson on the points of an engagement with philosophical tradition and the pedagogical difficulties of Emerson’s mode has been argument, and it is for this reason that I find it is argument that proves more central to philosophy’s nervous system. Cavell concedes that the philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau isn’t enacted with something we’d like to call argument, but he does want to claim it is “a mode of
thinking, a mode of conceptual accuracy . . . based on an idea of rigor foreign to [currently-accepted philosophy’s] establishment” (“The Philosopher” 45). Emerson claimed this kind of rigor and accuracy for the poet, which is why Bowen tagged Emerson for a shotgun marriage between philosophy and literature and why the central seesaw is between Emerson in philosophy and/or English departments. “[I]n writing, there is always a right word, & every other than that is wrong” (Journals 3: 270-71), Emerson says in 1831. “[T]here was nothing arbitrary in the choice of words,” Emerson says in a lecture of 1835, “the pen of the true poet was guided by laws as rigorous as the pencil of the draughtsman” (Early 1: 215). In a journal of 1847, he says, “The problem of the poet is to do the impossible in this wise[,] namely to unite the wildest freedom with the hardest precision” (Journals 10: 91).

Emerson and Cavell’s attempt to pry accuracy, precision, and rigor away from argument is made difficult by further associations we make of that set including systematicity and clarity. Even admirers of Emerson of the period would point out that they weren’t clear if they had him right. Brownson’s first, unsigned 1838 review of the Divinity School Address is perhaps precise: “We are not always sure that we understand him” (Review of DSA 38).30 Robert Monckton Milnes declares Emerson the “eldest palpable and perspicuous birth of American Philosophy” (60) in his 1840 review, but closes a section on self-reliance by saying, “Let not Mr Emerson complain that we misrepresent him and his doctrines; if matters of this kind are so stated as to be easily misrepresented, the representation is of itself so far defective, whatever the theory itself may be” (71).31 Poe would dub this “the tone transcendental”: “Hint everything—assert nothing” (217). In his unsigned 1839 review of “Literary Ethics,” Brownson says that Emerson “is a poet rather than a philosopher,—and not always true even to the laws of poetry” (Review of An Oration 4).32
The argument over argument is as old as Plato’s ancient quarrel between philosophers and poets. Plato said the problem with poets was that, even if they said true things, what they couldn’t offer was an *account* of *why* what they said was true; they couldn’t *justify* what they said. “[A] poet is a light and winged thing, and holy,” Socrates says in the *Ion*, “and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him. So long as he has this in his possession, no man is able to make poetry or to chant in prophecy” (534b). But by inspiration, the poet needn’t even know what he or she is saying, what the words mean—one becomes simply a conduit to the Muses, the divine gods. And if this is so, how could poetry produce knowledge? True belief, Plato argued, isn’t knowledge—that’s just luck. You might be *right* that there are 187 jelly beans in the jar, but if you can’t produce any reason for thinking so, why would we say you *knew* there were 187 jelly beans? Only *justified* true belief can count as knowledge.

“Account” is one of many ways of translating that flexible Greek word *logos*, including “speech,” “discourse,” “definition,” “reason,” “explanation,” and “argument.” The link between justification, argument, account-giving, systematicity, and clarity comes out when one begins to consider how the Socratic *elenchus*, the dialectical back-and-forth of a Socratic dialogue, is first and foremost an attempt to clarify what people meant by saying that, for example, virtue is what pleases the gods. If that’s what virtue is, Socrates would counter Euthyphro, then a whole train of *systematic* consequences follow, like a domino knocking the next over—such as that what is good or virtuous or right is *then* at the whim of these gods, and is that what we really intend to mean by *right* and *good*? Even if one disagrees with Socrates’s conclusions, whatever those may be, his sheer example became the hallmark of good philosophy.
and it begins in making it clear about what follows from what if we begin from a certain position.

One way of witnessing Plato’s work in his struggles against the sophists, poets, and politicians is to see him as trying to create for perhaps the first time a culture of argument—a culture that could understand the peculiar, even mysterious normative force of a good reason. Unlike a bad punch, a bad reason has the quality of existing on the edge of us not wanting to even count it as a reason at all. This culture of argument is what was still in the making in the 19th century with continued discriminations as to what should count as a good reason for some things and not for others, and it’s not hard to see how it is still in the making in some ways today. In the story above, we can see it in a finer discrimination between the “exercises of fancy” and “hypothesis,” as well as the rejection of theological belief as having purchase in a scientific debate. In retrospect, however, we should not read onto them an anachronistic understanding of the difference between theology and science. Rather, what we witness in the 19th century is a general, slipshod and haphazard movement toward what we might now regard as a standardized body of values about when different disciplinary activities impinge on each other. And we need only look around at current political debates regarding climate change, biology textbooks, and the tax-exempt status of churches to see how such cultural debates continue.

What we see in the late-19th and into the 20th century, however, is the identification of the culture of argument with the culture of science. It is what C. P. Snow articulated in part with his famous battle between “two cultures” that have come to replace Andrew D. White’s 19th-century warfare between science and theology. Snow’s sympathies were entirely with the scientific culture, and against the literary, and it’s not a mistake he characterized the former as “intensive, rigorous, and constantly in action. This culture contains a great deal of argument,
usually much more rigorous, and almost always at a higher conceptual level, than literary persons’ arguments” (12). Professionalization seems to require a culture of argument, and so becoming a professional becomes bound up with not only argument but the image of science (and thus a much longer train of implications, like experimentalism, fallibilism, naturalism, materialism, quantifiability, group projects, etc.).

The binding of a culture of argument with a culture of science explains only in part what happened to anglophone professional philosophy. What Rorty called “physics-envy” no doubt turned the philosophy of science into a major sector of analytic philosophy’s work. However, one can love science without envying it; envy only requires some grass to be greener on the other side of the disciplinary fence. One can also be professional without arguing; professionalism only requires politeness, the ability to coexist with peers in a social environment. The problem with Kuklick’s story about Emerson and the origins of American professional philosophy is that it leaves out the role of systematic argument in the establishment of a self-image for philosophers. He takes it for granted, but it leaves him unable to offer a real explanation as to why the Darwin problem marginalized most religious thought, but wouldn’t have touched Emerson and the Transcendentalists, whose philosophical stances were amenable. To go down that road would be to broach some other questions about what philosophy departments might look like.

4. The Emerson Revival and Contemporary Philosophy and Literary Theory

It is at this point that we may finally take stock of Emerson’s rebirth as a philosopher. The Emerson Revival of the 1970s and 80s was driven in part by modern bibliographic work; as Buell points out, Emerson was “the first of the major American Renaissance authors whose letters were published in a scholarly edition” (“Introduction” 10) and Harvard’s monumental
edition of his journals and notebooks began in 1960, with the scholarly edition of his collected works beginning in the 70s. 39 Sarah Ann Wider goes so far as to suggest that “in Emerson studies the theory wars yielded new interpretations only through the advent of another force” (6)—the “textual revolutions” (171) of the editing and “publication of more words by Emerson than were published during his lifetime” (6). However, “since the late 1980s,” she says, “critics focus their main attention on Emerson’s ideas. Philosophy reclaims him” (2). Anyone familiar with anglophone philosophy departments will balk at this assessment. Yet remarkable writing that treats his thought and thinking does abound; just not much written by people trained in philosophy. My interest in the last half of this chapter is to understand one central force of his reclaiming as a philosopher by people who already read him—by literary critics. And for this we must understand those “theory wars,” and especially their origin in the wave of French and German philosophy that began to enter the American universities through the sidedoor of literature departments rather than philosophy departments. Buell has noted that “the 1970s revolution in literary theory—strongly influenced by continental philosophy—helped promote respect for Emerson’s fragmentary, self-reflexive prose as an anticipation of deconstructive thinking” (Emerson 225), and it is in this guise that Emerson began to be returned to us as a philosopher. 40 To help understand the limitations of this frame for Emerson and the cultural forces that are energized in the confrontation between argument and the humanities, I want to turn to one of the most famous controversies between deconstruction and anglophone philosophy: Derrida’s fight with John Searle in the pages of Glyph in 1977.

It’s worth returning to the controversy between Searle and Derrida because, though it had little effect on the reception of Derrida in American literary studies (across departments like English, French, Comparative Literature, etc.), it was emblematic of the massive resistance to
Derrida in especially philosophy departments dominated by analytic philosophy, and thus tells us something about both sets as they evolved from the time of the Golden Age of Philosophy at Harvard. The essential background to understand where Searle was coming from is to see that even before analytic philosophy became dominant in the anglophone philosophical world, a culture of argument had already made itself explicit as the acceptable mode of philosophical practice. In 1916, Arthur O. Lovejoy delivered the sixteenth presidential address to the American Philosophical Association (APA), “On Some Conditions of Progress in Philosophical Inquiry.” Lovejoy there declared that the fact that there were no “results” that command consensus from their efforts is a “standing scandal” (129-130). Lovejoy diagnosed the philosopher at the beginning of the 20th century as laboring under the expectation of performing “two seemingly identical, but practically incongruous, functions”—“of [producing] personal reactions upon life, or depersonalized science” (133). “To this day,” Lovejoy goes on, “there still attaches to the current conception of the office of the teacher of philosophy much of this paradoxical duality. He is, or is popularly expected to be, a creature of equivocal race, partaking somewhat of the preacher and somewhat of the sceptical inquirer, a queer hybrid of the prophet and the professor” (134).

Lovejoy’s explicit self-image for the philosopher is the scientist; his explicit definition of the philosopher’s mode, argument. Lovejoy even plants a beautiful rhetorical maneuver in “creature of equivocal race” that precisely expresses his disdain and thus attitude toward the other half of this philosophical hybrid—“equivocal,” in the sense of morally ambiguous, and thus suspicious as a philosopher, who should hold and defend sincerely held beliefs, but substituting for the bivalent situation (by metaleptically playing on “ambiguous”) he otherwise
claims to face in the modern prophet-professor. Lovejoy’s name for what was in our way for finally constructing a “scientific philosophy” (131) is “edification.”

Certainly the philosopher who argues—which is to say, the philosopher—and at the same time professes to regard a philosophy as essentially and desirably a disclosure of unstandardized private reactions upon the universe, a species of lyric cry, puts himself into a rather curious position. If agreement, and as much of it as possible, is not our aim, why argue? It may perhaps be said that the philosopher’s reasonings are only his peculiar way of uttering the burden of his soul and of edifying the like-minded, not instruments for coercing the judgment of stubborn dissenters. Yet for this purpose poetry is surely a happier medium. As a fixed form of verse, the syllogism seems lacking in charm. (131)

Lovejoy’s address on progress and professionalization is against the background of the separation of the modern secular university from the American antebellum college, essentially tied as I said earlier to its religious affiliations. Edification is what poets, prophets, and ministers do; logical inquiry and the progressive pursuit of a consensus on results are what scientists and more generally any academic professionals do. As Rorty said in his APA presidential address 63 years later, “Lovejoy, of course, won this battle” (“Pragmatism, Relativism” 170).

On the way to this win, however, the split between analytic philosophy and Continental occurred. Searle was writing after the mockery of German and French philosophy the Vienna Circle shared as a pastime with Russell and Moore’s rejection of the Hegelian Idealism of their teachers. “Metaphysics,” after Carnap’s extraordinary scorn for Heidegger, became for a time a term of abuse. For Carnap and other heroes of analytic philosophy (e.g., A. J. Ayer and Gilbert Ryle), we have to turn to the language we use if we are to discuss and argue about the philosophical issues between us. Attendant with this so-called “linguistic turn” in anglophone
philosophy was the rise of the ethos Brandom dubbed, “Faith, hope, and clarity—and the greatest of these is clarity” (Between 213). So when Carnap cited Heidegger’s “das Nichts selbst nichtet” as a paradigm of “metaphysical pseudo-statements,” Heidegger and metaphysics earned very bad reputations. So too could Derrida never escape the easy mockery made of “il n’y a pas de hors-texte.” When Searle patiently yet somewhat exasperatedly tried to defend his hero J. L. Austin from Derrida’s misguided attack, and Derrida responded with a labyrinthine 92 pages in which he starts calling him “Sarl,” Searle threw up his hands in disgust. When Jonathan Culler codified Derrida’s philosophical position in On Deconstruction, the gloves were already off for Searle, who wrote a devastating review of the book. Through the 1980s Derrida became increasingly a whipping boy for everything that seemed wrong about philosophers who didn’t have the decency to write in clear, plain-spoken English. When Bowen decried Emerson as an obscurantist, it was for the same reasons Searle decried Derrida as one at the height of deconstruction’s reception by and influence on English departments—something was felt to be at risk.

It is not easy to specify what is at risk; if it were, intellectuals wouldn’t still find the ancient quarrel between poets and philosophers compelling. For Plato, the quarrel was over a job—the activity of saying true things needed to be done, and both poets and philosophers claimed to be able to do that. In essence, Plato wanted to unionize truth-telling and kick the poets out of the polis for being illegitimate and dangerous scabs. In the same manner, professionalization in intellectual history has meant a kind of unionizing of the “the pursuit, production, dissemination, application, and preservation of knowledge,” as Menand describes “the central activities of a civilization” (Marketplace 13). That a social process of solidarity as professionalization should have anything to do with truth-production is an irony of Plato’s
dream, but it puts a finger on what has made the division between analytic philosophy and Continental philosophy at times so acrimonious. In Derrida’s hands especially, poststructuralist philosophy waged an explicit war with Plato’s union, essentially going on strike.

In hindsight, we should see the split occurring here as between two different self-images. For Searle and the analytic dispensation of philosophy, faith is put in clarity of expression because the hope is for greater and greater refinement of contentious issues. Rorty has suggested, though, that for Derrida and the Continental tradition, it is not clarity but density of expression that is the tool for enacting what is really rather their despair. The tradition that produced poststructuralism is one beholden to Nietzsche’s thought that “I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar” (Twilight 483). To borrow Wittgenstein, “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (§115).

If one starts from the position that “language speaks man,” and that “every humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one” (Heidegger, Basic 225), then one might, first, begin to dig beneath this inevitable edifice to show that, rather, “man is an invention of recent date” in the hope “that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (Foucault, Order 387), but only then to finally give up in the realization that “to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system” (Foucault, Language 230). Instead of erasure, then, one might try layering the materials of linguistic usage one has inherited on top of each other, “speak several languages and produce several texts at once” (Derrida, Margins 135), in the hope that they disturb each other, but not in the hope that they allow an escape. This will produce, however, the thought that “what we need, perhaps, as Nietzsche said, is a change of ‘style’” (135).
We might focus these two self-images, one of hope and one of despair, by saying that while Searle hoped to produce another footnote to Plato, Derrida wanted to add a marginal comment. The use of clarity as stylistic attribute is in point if one views oneself as engaged in an ongoing inquiry. One hopes in such an inquiry that the issues become more and more refined as one goes, and footnotes are a nice emblem of that—one engages in further thoughts, or fleshes out a point (perhaps by clarifying what is not meant), or accumulates further arguments or evidence, or takes on a prominent interlocutor, or otherwise adds to the main text. But the dense layering of allusion, playful style, and metaphysical vocabulary of Derrida and other French philosophers seems obscure to anglophone audiences, and certainly Derrida did not intend to make it any easier on Searle in his exchange. The use of obscurity as a stylistic attribute might be in point, though, if one doubts one should be involved in an inquiry at all. What if the entire idea of adding depth to one’s position by adding footnotes is a mirage, and rather all we are doing is expanding the marginal commentary on Plato’s dead corpus, margins filled with questions about what was meant by some word, laughter at something that struck you as funny once, and recordings of experienced doubt about what was written. Unlike an orderly footnote, one’s marginalia might grow like a kudzu vine over the “main text,” with lines drawn all over it to direct attention from what in the center is being referred to out at the margins. If one’s “main text” is one’s own, marginalia might be a good emblem for despair at ever resolving the doubts one has about what one says in the “main text”—‘Is this right?’ ‘Maybe, but I just read something that says . . .’ ‘Perhaps if I said . . .’ If one hopes to continue an inquiry, one will have an introduction with a thesis; if not, one will start with one’s fourth point, write in circumlocutions, and ask a lot of wondering rhetorical questions—as Derrida does.
The difficulty with this line of thought regarding Derrida is that, while the hope/despair distinction might get something right about the stance of Foucault and Paul de Man, it remains odd to think of Derrida’s writing in terms of despair. As Rorty and others have noted, Derrida’s tone is much gayer than the tone of de Man, whose name is as indelibly written on the movement of deconstruction as Derrida’s.\textsuperscript{53} One thing this marks is the independence of attitudes from our practices, as well as from what we think of those attitudes and practices in our self-image. If we put tone to the side for one moment, we can see the common denominator of Derrida, Foucault, and de Man as a deep suspicion of inquiry as a model for human practice. This is why the rising tide of poststructuralism in the humanities and social sciences generally could cause such a furor and frenzy of accusations that deconstruction would turn into a civilization-ending flood by first decimating the project of the University.\textsuperscript{54} It is easy for Emerson to get caught up in this. He’s clearly antiprofessional, and his writing is not only unargumentative, but also obscure and self-undermining. So when the Emerson Revival touched the Theory Revolution, it tended to bend Emerson toward the practice of Derrida and de Man—the practice of producing (Derrida) and finding (de Man) language that contains its own self-effacement.

De Man puts the point clearly for its ramifications on a philosophy that attempts to construct a line of inquiry or system of thought:

The critical deconstruction that leads to the discovery of the literary, rhetorical nature of the philosophical claim to truth is genuine enough and cannot be refuted: literature turns out to be the main topic of philosophy and the model for the kind of truth to which it aspires. But when literature seduces us with the freedom of its figural combinations, so much airier and lighter than the labored constructs of concepts, it is not the less deceitful because it asserts its own deceitful properties. (115)
Through the prism of account-giving, which is how I set up Plato’s quarrel between philosophy and poetry, the problem with philosophy is that it thinks it can find a neutral, uncontroversial ground to build its accounts on. Controversy between accounts, then, leads endlessly backwards to this search for a neutral, we-should-all-agree-to-this ground, since criticism of opposing accounts will continually lead back to their grounding on unaccounted choices of beginning, first premises. After Nietzsche, we’ve learned to call these unaccounted-for choices literary because of the use of metaphor and trope to shape the premises of construction; however, even putting to the side this Nietzschean interpretation of language, one can still see de Man’s point. If philosophy’s project is the construction of accounts justifying truths, but also criticizes poetry as saying truths without accounting and justifying them, then without a self-justifying starting point, one will have to admit that one’s beginning is essentially poetic for being unaccounted. This was Bowen’s reason for assimilating “exercises of fancy” with “hypothesis”—Bowen believed that Plato’s land beyond hypotheses was possible, and for Darwin to build up speculations without it was obscurantist, metaphysical nonsense.55

5. Deconstructive Practice and the Reading of Emerson

To prefer Bowen’s philosophy to Emerson or Derrida, we might say, as Kuklick does or Lovejoy or Searle would have, is to express one’s philosophical stance in one’s literary sensibility. And this in the same way as to prefer Bowen’s philosophy to Darwin is to express one’s scientific stance in one’s philosophical sensibility. Because Bowen was right—there is a connection between exercises of fancy, speculative skepticism, and the process of hypothesis. This philosophical sensibility has divided the future of the humanities, and especially the professional study of literature. For, the rhetoric of science, a bit too self-aware of the grammatical optative mood’s covering of wishing, hoping, and hypothesizing through the
conditional logical-locution, has rather largely been that its hypotheses, the scientific ones, are
ground on fact, quite unlike, they say, other attempts to explain the world before them (let alone
like the now-quite-distant wishing and hoping). This is, however, a concern about the rhetoric,
not the substance, of science as an institution. The problem for most professional students of
literature in the 20th century has been the philosophical distinction between rhetoric and
substance in the previous sentence, which to them looked like an aesthetic stance expressed in a
philosophical sensibility—and any good writer knows that, in practice, you can’t separate the
form from the content, the conventional from the natural, the practice from the theory. To
distinguish between rhetoric and substance in one’s philosophy is to commit an ugly error
because pragmatically specious. It’s undignified to pretend, because you don’t think the vulgar
will understand you, that you think the conceptual rhetoric one uses simply overlays the physical
scientific laws, describing them yet unconnected in a “substantive” way, though both are only
articulated in words. Berkeley’s defense of idealism has no interest to the 20th century
professional student of literature, unless it was the University of California-Berkeley’s.

And it is that turn to politics that explains the ethical earnestness which the occasional
anti-scientific rhetorical flourish can come glancing out with. Derrida’s linguistic idealism (il
n’y a pas de hors-texte) became easily grafted on to a romantic moral idealism and a pessimistic
political suspicion. Part of this suspicion was directed at “science” as an institution; one
consequent, politically-motivated action was trying to rectify the gender inequalities in the
institution, such as displays of professional recognition, sheer quantities in membership, and pay
inequities, now all having become iniquities. But another action that was seen by some 20th-
century professional students of literature as political was to deplore the rhetoric of “scientific
realism” and “fact,” and on top of that, to instead “debunk” science as just one interpretation
among many. As the creationist lawyer turn design-argument bestseller-writer Phillip E. Johnson saw quite clearly in such books as *Darwin on Trial* and *Defeating Darwinism*, this is what creates the connection between “postmodern” philosophy and the political wedge of “it says Darwin’s *theory* of evolution; so you should have to teach biblical creationism in biology class, too, for scientific parity between competing explanations.”

Leftish professional students of literature during the course of the 20th century became somewhat, say complicitish in effective right-wing political arguments in the public, and one-day legal, arena. For *literary theorists*, as they came to be called, pessimistic about the effects of the institution of science, would seize on science’s rhetoric of grounding itself on “fact” and use that rhetoric against it; for example, one might show that facts are simply the social constructs of these hypotheses, and thus there are no criteria for choosing among starting hypotheses which are epistemologically, and thus ultimately on all fours with each other. Instead, such a pessimist will devalue science as a sham-game and may apotheosize literature. One finds in de Man, Rorty says, an “exaltation of literature as having the courage of its own hopelessness” (“Deconstruction” 181). What this attitude meant in *practice* is an ever-vigilant and constantly renewed attempt to expose the hopelessness of finding a ground (or any of its analogues, like “center,” “presence,” “certainty,” etc.). For while Derrida and de Man don’t have much in common in the way of tone or style, they do have in common a feeling that philosophy’s logocentrism is inescapable. If the trail of the logocentric serpent is over everything, and we must fight this, then what we are ultimately constantly at battle with is the serpent constricting our own hearts. It is this last line of thought that makes sense of the ethical and political edge that many deconstructive critics and theorists saw in Derrida and de Man’s work. Rorty called the practice produced by this line of thought “an ascetic practice that confronts one ever and
again with ‘the presence of a nothingness’” (“Two Meanings” 114). Whatever text one confronts out there in the world, the critic must also turn inward upon his or her own language in a spiritual exercise of purging the ghosts of philosophy.

The constant, self-reflexive action of the critic is what produced a lot of the complaints about self-regarding and mechanically produced readings. What’s more interesting for our purposes is when one is confronted by a writer who seems to share this pessimism, this itch to constantly scratch at one’s own language. The seeming paradox of having the courage of one’s hopelessness is what we’ve become increasingly attuned to in Emerson. It’s the paradox of freedom and fate we’ve learned to discern at the heart of Emerson’s thought. One outcome of the Emerson Revival was the slow reversal of the received image of Emerson as Pure Optimist, someone who had no tragic sense or place for evil. The stage this has played out upon in his reception as a philosopher has been in his practice as a writer, in his own self-reflexive prose. Because of Derrida and de Man, there was a ready answer for the specifically philosophical point of his imagery and obscurity—it undermines logocentric attempts to apotheosize science, clarity, certainty, and systematicity.

Two exemplary accounts of Emerson might suffice to show the milieu’s influence on Emerson studies. Julie Ellison’s 1984 book, *Emerson’s Romantic Style*, draws together biographical work on Emerson’s development with his intellectual thought in order to focus specifically on how his style mirrored the development of his intellectual position. Emerson’s characteristic positions on self-reliance, idealism, power, fate, and the like are all read as outgrowths of his psychological development. Ellison suggests that Emerson’s encounters, for example, with the German higher criticism in the early 1820s created the context for his development as a writer:
If we understand the breakthrough of the 1820s as the consequence of—for Emerson—a new way of interpreting threats to his imaginative well-being, we can make better sense of the persistence of negativity and the way it forces him continually to rediscover self-reliance. Close readings of Emerson’s prose will, I hope, bear out the hypothesis that, while the tone and arrangement of moods of “freedom” and “fate” change somewhat over the course of Emerson’s career, the conflict between them is there from the start. (5)

Ellison produces a persuasive account of Emerson’s prose as a “repeated enactment of a single drama” of “crisis and resolution” (10). Moreover, this drama is one of criticism and interpretation. The crisis is Emerson’s fear of influence, a “paralysis before excessive knowledge” (10). Its resolution in Emerson is a new interpretation of the past that produces a discontinuity between the (now self-consciously new) present and the past, which loses its grip once the present is understood to be new. However, the resolution in freedom from influence always lands Emerson in the same place—fearful and anxious that his certainty in defeating fate’s influence is just one more illusion and that his freedom is false. Every surprising discontinuity ossifies and decays into one more dead, well-understood continuity. Emerson’s breakthrough, Ellison argues, is that this perpetual psychological crisis is transformed by Emerson into his intellectual position and style. “Surprise” is Emerson’s name for the sublime moment of writing that breaks through the crust of overdetermination by the field of society’s influence, and so “surprise” is simply the psychological side of what on the metaphysical side he names the “aboriginal Self” (“Self-Reliance” 37). And because this aboriginal self is one’s true self, one doesn’t truly exist outside of those moments of surprise—hence, one must constantly struggle to surprise oneself, since society’s grip is within us as much as without.
Ellison’s account of the relationship between Emerson’s biography, philosophy, and style is extremely suggestive for a philosophical position that wishes to take into account relationships between psychology, philosophy, and style. And since Ellison is focused on all three as interlocking, she *ipso facto* provides that account for Emerson’s philosophy. However, Ellison’s language is importantly hypothetical at the key moments of introducing her project: “If the subject of the essays is the drama of transfiguration that makes possible ‘sublime analysis’—a drama of interpretation, of theorizing—then what are the stylistic consequences of this ‘plot’? If Emerson’s subject is reading, how does this affect his writing?” (75). Her hypothesis yields impressive results, yet this drama—with its elision between reading, interpretation, and theorizing—has the distinct cast of her education at the Yale of de Man and Harold Bloom.62 Ellison’s explanation for the hypothetical quality takes into account Emerson’s oscillations of prose (“at once discontinuous and repetitive” (75)) and stance (“he alternates between the hope for transcendent resolutions and skepticism toward them” (76)), but of course these are merely further illustrations of the power of Ellison’s hypothesis. She takes advantage of the rhetoric that was in vogue—“Closure, imposed on such oscillations, is inevitably problematic” (75); “Attempts to organize his life and works according to dichotomies . . . reflect our desire to impose coherence” (76)—before asserting: “Emerson’s essays are not, I think, really ‘about’ their ostensible subject matter” (76). (The scare-quote tic is another manifestation of the milieu.)

This is the key assertion that motivates the hypothesis: the feeling that Emerson’s essays have a reality below their surface. Just insofar as we remain conversable about these feelings, though, we avoid the speculative disadvantage that traditionally plagues metaphysics—dogmatism about premises. However, if we translate Ellison’s feeling into the explicit claim it really is, we get something a bit more extraordinary: *All* of Emerson’s essays are really about the enacting of the
drama of interpretation. For this to be true without qualification is to neuter entirely any sense of his being, and intending to be, a public intellectual, pronouncing on momentous issues of the times. This is hard to square with his career as a public lecturer, his performance himself of what he called Channing’s “large criticism.”

The seduction of the claim is strongest when one thinks, with the milieu of deconstruction, that the drama of interpretation has an ethical and even political edge. It becomes even more difficult to withstand when one moves from the level of his essays and their subject to the level of the sentence. Once one begins locating this drama in the detailed particulars of his language-use, as Ellison does in the third part of her book, it becomes easy to suggest that every moment in Emerson is a moment of transfiguration. And the consequence is that every moment is a surprising change for the sake of change, and not for any other sake.

Why would Emerson do this? Deconstruction gives us an answer: because the culture around us has become dead and routinized, and needs to be surprised awake. It’s a good answer, for as Emerson says, “Our age is retrospective” (Nature 7). However, it also means we’ve barred Emerson from really saying anything to us at all. Rather, we must always remain suspicious of what he says on the surface and look for how what he says surprises himself below.

My second example displays this interpretation of Emerson in a forceful and exciting way. Unlike a machine-scrubbed, deconstructive reading of a text, any old text, Richard Poirier’s Poetry and Pragmatism (1992) is a powerful interpretation of a homegrown intellectual tradition of deconstruction that begins with Emerson and extends to William James and then Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. Poirier defines pragmatism as “an Emersonian linguistic skepticism”: “a liberating and creative suspicion as to the dependability of words and syntax, especially as it relates to matters of belief, including belief in the drift of one’s
feelings and impressions” (5). “In [the Emersonians’] view, the customary structures of sentences give precedence to substantives, while transitives, including prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs, merely speed the way toward nouns, more or less expending themselves in the process” (40). Emerson “is not describing a situation” like a theorist or cultural commentator would, but rather “his writing enacts the struggles by which he tries to keep his own language from becoming ‘faked’” (27). This enactment is why Poirier says that “style represents a movement of mind as against the stasis achieved by former movements that have become textualized or intellectualized” (65). This is just another way of suggesting that logocentrism coils itself around the mere use of language, like the philosophical notion of substantia indelibly linked to the grammatical category “substantive.”

“There is one form or institution,” Poirier says, “that for Emersonians always carries with it the absolutely inescapable taint of system and repressive inheritance. And that, of course, is language” (122). Poirier then says that the goal for Emersonians “is to make sure that language is kept in a state of continuous troping, turning, transforming, transfiguring, even to the point of transparency” (122).

“Transparency” is of course an allusion to Emerson: “I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (Nature 10). But it seems to me something different than Emerson’s hope to merge with the universe is revealed when it is put so close to the somewhat unEmersonian words of “skepticism” and “suspicion” located in the Poirierean view. When “transparency” is linked to “suspicion,” it appears more like the hope to never be fooled again, to see right through everything, including oneself. Words will never trick you again into being complicit in their repression of anyone. But even if Emerson is nothing, he sees everything. This is a dual stance, for in the vocabulary of sight to see something is to see an opacity, but according to “I am
nothing,” he wouldn’t be able to see himself—so not everything. Both claims can’t be true on
the same ground; one must shift one’s stance of interpretation, or qualify in some way, for both
to be true at the same time.

The transparent eyeball names a paradox, the untangling of which requires an oscillation
of interpretation. Qualification—like saying “well, by ‘everything’ Emerson obviously means
‘everything but himself,’ since he just said he’s nothing”—would be the weak reading from the
perspective of Emersonians who take his inconsistency seriously. The great virtue of a number
of new interpretations of Emerson like Ellison and Poirier’s is that they attempt to figure out
Emerson’s stance by taking seriously the idea that he means to contradict himself in some
manner.67 If one takes Poirier’s stance, however, one will resolve this interpretive tension
between the two by saying that the second trope (“I see all”) contradicts the first trope (“I am
nothing”), and thus is an example of Emerson troping his language to transparency by use of a
well-deployed paradox. In Poirier’s view, Emerson “chose to turn the suspicion into a modus
operandi by which his essays find occasion to say anything that comes to mind so long as he can
then find some way to unsay it” (73). But if “I see everything” unsays “I am nothing,” then it
actually reinforces “I am nothing,” because the Poirierian interpretation of Emerson’s project is
that “the act of self-erasure” is, “paradoxically, an indication of selfhood” (11). So, to apply
Poirier’s view here would be to enter a never-ending cycle, a loop in which for every “I am
nothing” interpreted as a saying, one would need to immediately wash it away by correctly
interpreting “I see all” as an unsaying. I’ve translated this into its practical dimension because it
illustrates the self-reflexive spiritual exercise of negating one’s own language that is required of
the critic to be as Emersonian as Poirier’s Emerson. One might get bored of this and move on to
other things, but if one takes the ethical dimension of this spiritual exercise seriously, then one will be suspicious of any turn away from one’s project of “self-dissolution” (20).

6. Self-Image, the Optative Stance, and the Humanities

Some critics have noted that much academic criticism in the last third of the 20th century has been decidedly on the darker side of the mood spectrum: despair, resentment, denouncing, debunking, subversion, suspicion. Some of the most important critical movements that circulated through English departments—deconstruction, Lacanianism, New Historicism, postcolonialism, cultural studies, feminism, race and ethnic studies, LGBTQ studies, everything Henry Louis Gates, Jr. once called “the Rainbow Coalition of contemporary critical theory” (17)—took intellectual inspiration from the “three masters” of what Paul Ricoeur dubbed “the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud” (32). When turned inward, this attitude can produce hopes for and a rhetoric of purity and authenticity, as we could see in Poirier. In Foucault, it produced not only the despair that we could ever imagine another system without extending this one, but also the hope of “one who writes in order to have no face” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 17). In Derrida, it produced a style too exuberant and dazzling to be plausibly without a signature, yet the effect of Foucault’s despair and Derrida’s self-reflexive idiosyncrasy is the same—the more one self-consciously aims for purity and authenticity, the more likely one is to ignore one’s audience. The hermeneutics of suspicion is a demanding discipline of ignoring the surface of your interlocutor and exposing the reality to them, no matter how or why they protest.

Mark Edmundson read the situation this way in his *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida* (1995) and I would like to adapt his analysis in order to suggest how a better understanding of Emerson’s place between literary criticism and philosophy might benefit not
only the reading of Emerson, but also the situation of literary criticism and the humanities. The bulk of Edmundson’s book argues that the major intellectual power-centers of literary theory—exemplified for Edmundson by Derrida, de Man, Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt and New Historicism, and Harold Bloom—all take their model of interpretation from a Freudian metaphor of repression. Whatever is great and beneficial on the surface is a function of some horrible blindness or limitation that only the critic can reveal to the patient. Edmundson calls this “descendentalism” (138), and we can see it as a function of the suspicious stance.69 One must doubt the sufficiency of what one is seeing to be moved to look below the surface for its true cause. And certainly, stated so abstractly, there are obvious needs for such doubt, especially on the social and political scale. But if one is always looking for terrible causes, when will one allow for good effects? Must all repression be read as suppression and oppression, or does sublimation still exist?70

I want to call the optative stance the hope that today’s whim will produce a consequence justifying it. One must blind oneself to the baleful glare of doubt or else no action will ever be taken. For Edmundson, the number one bad effect of the dominance of the suspicious stance has been the repression of the ability of a text to act on you. Certainly, this repression has been the modus operandi of a number of theoretical movements in the humanities, but it produces what Rorty has called “knowingness”—“a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm” (Achieving 126). If one knows, one will never be surprised; and if never surprised, one will never learn anything. “[T]o the degree that you read a text analytically, to the degree that your terminology claims to encompass it, claims to know the text better than it knows itself,” Edmundson says, “to that degree you give up the possibility of being read by it” (128).71 On Edmundson’s reading of the critical situation that brought us to the 21st
century, Foucault stands as the emblem of this analytic power over the text used in service of a social mission of curtailing its action on you. I’ve stood Derrida in this position, rather than the analytic, argumentative Searle, because the action of Derrida’s self-reflexive, exuberant prose functions the same way in argument—it curtails the power of opposing arguments by doubting their premises so thoroughly that discussion breaks down irremediably. Bloom, on the other hand, stands in Edmundson’s scale for a poetic vitality, “attuned to poetry’s capacity to breed excess, to open possibilities for expression and life that extend beyond the world of homogenized enterprises that we often inhabit” (234).

In the two vectors I brought together in the scene between Searle and Derrida, argument has been aligned with hope, whereas the vague wastebasket non-argument has been aligned with suspicion. The hope of argumentative exchange is to build something together—an edifice of consensus we can call “knowledge.” The suspicions that manifested in non-argumentative maneuvers were aimed at unsettling these hopes in a radical way, but to be thorough, they were inevitably and ceaselessly chased to their home in our own hearts. A return to an Emersonian tradition, however, might suggest the importance of non-argumentative forms for hopeful construction. The first is the power of poetry, broadly construed, to open possibilities. This is the experience of freedom when one has pushed back the horizon of one’s views. “[I]t is the inert effort of each thought having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance,” Emerson says, “to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify, and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep” (“Circles” 180-81). It is precisely the excess of language that crosses beyond what we expect that can break what John Dewey called “the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness” (Public 349). To be read by a text is for the text’s wave of excess to wash into
your circle, forcing you to puzzle over where it came from. In doing so, we might come to push back the wall it rushes over in search of the strange power that sent it.

The effect of this strange power can be disorienting; to lose your wall is to lose the horizon by which you navigated. Literary theories provided methods by which critics could guide themselves and so not get lost in the process of writing an interpretation. ‘What does this mean?’ ‘What does the theory tell you it means?’ Derrida, Foucault, and the rest of the Continental imports caught fire because they were strange and exotic in the environment of English departments dominated by New Criticism. But in the service of the profession, it reveals either a repressed desire for the stability of method or the sheer professional need to produce new material to publish to get tenure. The demand for professional instincts is the groundwork for a love of consensus, for wanting everyone else to use that method, too. For a method is like God—it can tell you or your interlocutor when one of you is wrong, and then you get to punish the other for it. Only a wish to be correct can explain the total breakdown on both sides between Searle and Derrida.

But Derrida, at his best, sloughs off the wish to bind oneself to external norms. Derrida introduced himself to America in 1966, at Johns Hopkins’s huge symposium, “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” by reading his anti-scientistic, anti-method “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” This is the conference that broke the levies holding French thought at bay. During the discussion afterwards, Jean Hyppolite—generally recognized now as the grandfather of poststructuralism in France for his work on and teaching of Hegel—asks a long, exploratory, multi-faceted question before closing with, “Is this what you wanted to say, or were you getting at something else?” (267) “I was wondering myself,” Derrida replies gamely, “if I know where I am going. So I would answer you by saying, first, that I am
trying, precisely, to put myself at a point so that I do not know any longer where I am going” (Discussion 267). As a slogan for a poetic philosophy, this is the hope to reach a discursive point at which there is nothing to tell you which way to go. This is the freedom of the wilderness, which can be dangerous and frightening. Emerson’s version of this antiauthoritarian freedom is: “truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster” (“Self-Reliance” 43). This isn’t anarchy, but self-discipline, self-method; “a man is a method” (“Spiritual Laws” 84), says Emerson; or as Bloom says, the object is to read where you are the method of reading.73

A classic way of defending the humanities is to say that it teaches “critical methods,” or “critical thinking,” or “critical intelligence.” The slide from Emerson to Bloom suggests something like that, but as Bloom liked to say, with Stanley Fish, literary criticism isn’t good for anything else.74 But is the importance of books nothing? They were probably something to someone that ended up in a humanities graduate school. And this is what connects Emerson’s general philosophical stance on autonomy to reading, of which literary reading is certainly one branch. What links the humanities to something as vague as “critical thinking” is, as Bromwich puts it, “the conviction that books are part of a larger discipline of humanity which the knowledge of the past may serve” (Politics 205). As Poirier put it, regarding Harvard’s famous “Hum 6” course (inaugurated by Reuben Brower and having another famous alum in Paul de Man),

Reading can be a civilizing process, not because the meanings it gathers may be good for us—they may in fact sometimes be quite pernicious—but because that most demanding form of writing and reading called literature often asks us to acknowledge, in the twists
and turns of language, the presence of ancestral kin who cared deeply about what words were doing to them and what they might do in return. (Poetry 175)

Menand notes that Harvard’s Core Curriculum, like many other general education programs, shifted in the 1960s from an emphasis on “subject matter to methods” (Marketplace 51), but Cavell’s longstanding course in Moral Reasoning, where he’d talk about Emerson, Shakespeare, or John Rawls on Tuesdays and movies like The Philadelphia Story, His Girl Friday, and Mr. Deeds Goes to Town on Thursdays, probably had little to do with anything we might think of as a method. As Cavell has said, “the philosophy I seek is not one that promises an always premature unity but one that allows me in principle to get from anywhere, any present desire, to anywhere else that I find matters to me” (“Introductory Note” 17). Such a dance surely requires years of practice, and I take it that this is why Cavell also used to say that “the most important task of teaching was simply to stand up and show students that there are grown-ups in the world who love these old books.”

In an essay called “The Cost of Professionalism in the Humanities,” Bromwich says that the humanities imply “a belief in the arts and habits of thinking about oneself through books.”

The emphasis on the past that crept into my chorus of Emersonians returns me to the connection between professionalism, self-image, and the genre of writing that Rorty said was created in the 19th century, a hybrid genre that mingles literary criticism, history, philosophy and much else into a kind of writing whose central purpose is to generate a self-image. This is unprofessional but necessary writing, and the humanities have an interest in providing a space in which the central activity is the production of a self-image. Because the humanities basically force their students to encounter a whole bunch of things different than themselves (time periods, cultures, poems-as-persons, etc.), experiencing the humanities forces one to think of one’s
relationship to a whole bunch of not-oneselves, and thus improves the chances of a student
developing the arts and habits of self-image cultivation. You can’t test for that, but it must be one
the most important things we do for the undergraduate. The suspicious stance surely produces an
image, but if one is thorough, a black hole should open up in the center, swallowing everything
you might see in the mirror. The optative stance takes seriously the idea that self-consciousness
is a never-ending, self-reflexive practice, but it’s emphasis is on building a self, not scratching
out one’s eyes.

The only difference, though an important one, between the three episodes of Bowen
versus Emerson and the transcendentalists, Lovejoy versus the edifiers, and Searle versus
Derrida and the deconstructionists is one of audience, of who they expected to be talking to. As
Kuklick points out, the wider Unitarian community hung on the edge of the exchange between
the transcendentalists and conservatives like Bowen and Andrews Norton. Lovejoy, however, in
his presidential address to the APA, argued that the prophetic stance that underlay such a
relevance to the wider community was bad for professional philosophy. So Searle, the
professional philosopher, expected his controversy with Derrida, another, to be really only
between professionals. Even more, Rorty has suggested that the problem of the exchange
between Searle and Derrida was that each was attached to different traditions with different
disciplinary routines. For the Continental philosopher, one is expected to know a lot about the
history of philosophy; for the analytic philosopher, one is not. The analytic philosopher’s
education is in what’s being hotly debated in the current journals, and most such debates are on
philosophical problems (defined, roughly, as whatever is being hotly debated). The analytic
philosopher need not know a lot of the history of philosophy; the Continental philosopher must,
but need not be any good at arguing; an analytic philosopher without such skill at argument is
anathema. Rorty’s virtue was in knowing and being interested primarily in intellectual history, outside his professional purview. It is from such a stance that he urged the importance of “large criticism,” that hybrid genre born in the 19th century but continuing in the pages of magazines like the *London Review of Books, Atlantic Monthly, The Nation, New Yorker*, and *National Review*. It’s thus significant that Searle’s argument with deconstructionism went from the pages of an obscure, short-lived academic journal to the *New York Review of Books*. Analytic philosophers did want people outside the academy, or maybe at least other people in the academy, to wake up to the danger of deconstruction. Such a flare from the precincts of professional American philosophy might be unprecedented, or at least perhaps since the Divinity School Address. Insofar as professors in humanities departments cease to be professional humanists, they will confuse the forest with the trees, battles of strictly professional importance with the battles of public moment. To reinvest time and energy into large criticism would not determine political attitude, but it would help to enrich a higher-level conversation with direct contact with the wider citizenry around it, one that needs enrichment, if only because the vulgar have insights for the learned, and teaching the vulgar to speak with the learned doesn’t appear to be a solution in and of itself.

1 The implicit deference to philosophers as gatekeepers of their discipline continues even in Buell’s later *Emerson*. For example, after observing that “today receptivity to Emerson as a bona fide philosophical thinker has never been greater” (200) at the beginning of his chapter on Emerson and philosophy, he still makes remarks like, “What prompts Emerson’s best insights are less philosophical issues as such than styles of intellectual vitality” (210). But if the reason this receptivity has gone up is because “the question of what counts as philosophical discourse again seems an open question” (200), then it is an open question as to what a “philosophical issue” is, thus making it possible that Emerson’s best insights are prompted by the philosophical issue of styles of intellectual vitality (which would, after all, be a claim Stanley Cavell would assert). Buell’s books, to be sure, had different goals than to actually pursue such questions as what makes a philosophical issue, or the difference between a thinker and a philosopher, and those goals would’ve been compromised had he.
There’s a whole story to be told about all the qualifications I’ve left in this sentence to avoid reduction of something as wide as “philosophy” to one definition of it by any particular tradition, while at the same time trying to come to grips with historical phenomena like how France and Germany seemed to dominate at least what English-speaking philosophers looked at when they thought of European philosophy. One comment that might be made, though, is that whereas a dominant mode like “analytic philosophy” seems to have arisen in the anglophone world, European philosophy came to be called “Continental” because there seemed to be family resemblances between a series of shifting modes that all seemed to be dominant for a time, from phenomenology to existentialism to hermeneutics, etc.

I should note that Menand does not emphasize the historical layout of his book, taking his chapters to be contemporary themes with specific origins in the archaeological layers of our past. This allows him to speak to separable problems in each (including a final chapter on the politics of professors, which doesn’t have any obvious historical relationship to make it the “final” of the first three), though he does plot his recognition of his implicit history at relevant junctures (e.g., 85ff).

Menand goes on: “An emphasis on universalism and ‘greatness’ was replaced by an emphasis on diversity and difference; the scientific norms that once prevailed in many of the ‘soft’ disciplines began to be viewed with skepticism (though a very rigorous skepticism); context and contingency were continually appealed to; attention to ‘objects’ gave way to attention to ‘representations.’ The area in which these transformations were most emphatic was literature, especially English and French, the fields in which much of the theorizing took place. The influence of that theorizing spread across the humanities disciplines and, during the seventies and eighties, extended into history departments, anthropology departments, and even law schools” (80-81).

Emerson’s “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England,” often anthologized and referred to for portraits of the age, has since the publication of the final volume of the *Collected Works* become non-canonical, as I expand on in note 39 below. But while the phrasing is now suspect regarding intention, I still think the sentiment accurate: “I attribute much importance to two papers of Dr. Channing, one on Milton and one on Napoleon, which were the first specimens in this country of that large criticism which in England had given power and fame to the Edinburgh Review” (“Historic Notes” 339). Compare Emerson’s letter to Mary Moody Emerson of October 18, 1842 (*Letters* 7: 513-514)—serving as the origin point for his description of Channing, it mentions Channing’s two papers, but neither “large criticism” nor the *Edinburgh Review*. See also Emerson’s description of a conversation with Wordsworth: “The Edinburgh Review, he said, wrote what would tell, & what would seek. He thought the Edinburgh Review had changed its whole tone of literary criticism, from the time when a letter was written to the Editor by Coleridge. After that, it had greatly more breadth” (*Journals* 10: 558; compare 227 and *Collected Works* 5: 166).

I should also warn against being distracted by some of Rorty’s empirical claims about “bright youth.” For philosophers like Rorty and Emerson, empirical truths are less important than the underlying shift in perspective being offered—and here the central components are genre and self-image. For the philosophical point, it’s unimportant whether Rorty’s claim was ever true that “novels and poems are now the principal means by which a bright youth gains a self-image” because it aims us at the interesting question of *where* youth are getting their self-images, and then possible shifts in self-image based on shifts in genre.
One might call Menand a fellow-traveler of Rorty’s vision of pragmatism. This comes out most clearly in the implicit story told by *Pragmatism: A Reader* that Menand edited—it ends with a series of essays more or less commensurate with Rorty’s particular understanding of pragmatism’s power. See, for example, Susan Haack’s review of Menand’s anthology, “Vulgar Rortyism”—it continues Haack’s ongoing battle with Rorty over the soul of pragmatism, and nicely illustrates one of Rorty’s central points about the importance of storytelling to self-image, especially given Haack’s own, rival anthology, *Pragmatism, Old and New.*

See Roberts and Turner, 25-26, for a description of geology in America in the years before Darwin. See Richardson, *Emerson* 11-14 and 47-51 for a description of the impact of the German “higher criticism” on Emerson and his education at Harvard.

Morison later remarks, on the founding of Harvard Divinity School, “it is curious that it should not have come earlier” (241).

See Scott 52-75, esp. 60-64, for an interesting discussion of the difference between Yale and Harvard and “provincial colleges” like Amherst and Bowdoin and the transformation of the Christian ministry by the founding of theological seminaries. While the older colleges continued to function in their capacity of producing a cultured social elite, the smaller, newer, local colleges then tended toward a more utilitarian and vocational education, making them precursors for the “more exclusively ‘professional’ form of ministerial consciousness” (63) that emerged from the new seminaries.

See Ahlstrom 393-397 for an account of Ware’s appointment as sparking the coalescence of Unitarianism and its relationship to Harvard.

Bowen’s argument is interestingly complex, for it identifies philosophical skepticism with the ability to mute our common and empirical sense in order to open a space for speculation, thus allowing “poetry and eloquence to contribute to the embellishment of philosophy” (*Critical* 30). So while Bowen notes that Kant supposed he was fighting Hume’s skepticism (see xvii), all Kant did in his view was create a space in which one could freely speculate without fear of contradiction. The argument is something like this: Bowen’s claim is that Kant inadvertently stands with Hume primarily because of his creation of the category of the “synthetic *a priori,*” which every philosophy undergrad understands to be Kant’s great achievement. The *a priori* is that which cannot be “derived from experience” (Bowen, *Critical* 53). Hume argued that the necessity of causation must be one of these because all we can be sure of from experience is that two events “are contiguous in time and place, and that the object we call cause precedes the other we call effect” (Hume 155). And so as a good empiricist, Hume rejected causation. Hume’s laughter at our ensuing melancholy in having to accept this point is because the empirical sciences are built on the idea that we can expand our knowledge by cause-and-effect reasoning. Kant rides to the rescue because he grants that 1) we can expand our knowledge, calling this “synthetic judgement”; 2) causation is a concept that can only be proven on *a priori* grounds; therefore 3) to prove the existence of causation would be to expand our knowledge *a priori*, because as Hume proved, we can only be sure of contiguity. Skepticism thus forces Kant to create a category of thought that presumes to “have an amplifying effect, and actually enlarge the given cognition” (Bowen, *Critical* 53) like empirical knowledge, and because *a priori*—before
experience—cannot be checked by experience, but which also has the force of necessity like a physical experience. “Such, indeed, is the assumed characteristic of the Transcendental Philosophy, that, resting only on the original and instinctive principles of our nature, independent of all experience, (a priori principles of pure Reason,) neither its procedures nor results have anything of the contingent and empirical character of ordinary reasoning on similar subjects, but are demonstratively certain” (71). It’s this presumption that one can move from what one thinks are one’s own “original and instinctive principles” to something “demonstratively certain,” though nothing could check against it, that offends Bowen’s empiricism and causes him to see a connection between Kant’s arguments and philosophy and American Transcendentalism’s enthusiasm and poetry, as well as then Darwin’s “exercises of fancy,” which Bowen denigrates as “mere hypothesis” (Gleanings 217).

14 For the historical impact of Darwin on this philosophical milieu that James came from (and that also pays attention to the shifting institutional situation), see Croce 85-148. For more general amplifications of Darwin’s philosophical consequences, see Dennett 17-60. Dennett argues that Darwin’s great discovery was that natural processes could be explained as algorithmic processes, which is the required link to make use of the burgeoning statistical methods in elaborating the hidden mechanism. (See esp. 48-52 where Dennett describes “Darwin’s novel mixture of detailed naturalism and abstract reasoning” that people like Bowen reacted to “as a dubious and inviable hybrid” (50).)

15 In the first section of “When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray: Irony and the Pragmatist Enlightenment,” Brandom extrapolates the pragmatists’ own version of the philosophical impact of Darwin. Brandom argues that they generalized “the new selectional and statistical forms of scientific theory” to their ontological naturalism in the form of an “ontological fallibilism or mutabilism” (3-4) applied to both objects and subjects, nature and the mind. On the side of nature, the pragmatists “saw themselves confronting a new sort of nature, a nature that is fluid, stochastic, exhibiting regularities that are the statistical product of many particular contingent interactions between things and their ever-changing environments, hence emergent and potentially evanescent, floating statistically on a sea of chaos” (4). On the side of the mind, it required a reinterpretation of epistemological empiricism. “The older empiricism thought of the unit of experience as self-contained, self-intimating events: episodes that constitute knowings just in virtue of their brute occurrence. . . . For [the pragmatists], the unit of experience is a Test—Operate—Test—Exit cycle of perception, action, and further perception of the results of the action. On this model, experience is not an input to the process of learning. Experience is the process of learning: the statistical emergence by selection of behavioral variants that survive and become habits insofar as they are, in company with their fellows, adaptive in the environments in which they are successively and successfully exercised” (5).

16 The common vulgarization of Locke as ur-Empiricist, that knowledge begins from the senses, was not one Bowen himself was prone to. Locke, of course, began with us as tabula rasa, a piece of “white paper,” and asks where the materials of knowledge come from, answering “in one word, from EXPERIENCE. . . . Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring” (121-122). Bowen interestingly begins his discussion of Locke by noting a commonality (see Bowen, Critical 50-51), one not often highlighted in our reception of Locke, though Bowen later in life exploits it to use Kantian ideas as his appreciation of Kant rose. (See Kuklick, Rise 32, 43-44.)
Further, it’s not as if Bowen found hypothesis alien to empirical knowledge, for that was the function of that other fountain of knowledge, reflection. But Bowen did see something in common between hypothesis, speculation, and poetry, and its that commonality that caused him to condemn Darwin in the same language as he condemned Emerson.

17 See also Richardson, *Emerson 546* for Emerson’s encounter with *The Origin of Species*.

18 Beginning at least with David Robinson’s “Emerson’s Natural Theology and the Paris Naturalists: Toward a ‘Theory of Animated Nature’” (1980) and Barbara Packer’s *Emerson’s Fall* (1982), Emerson’s trip in 1833 to Paris’s Jardin des Plantes has been treated as a major turning point in Emerson’s maturation. It is during this trip that Emerson records in his journal, “I am moved by strange sympathies, I say continually ‘I will be a naturalist’” (*Journals* 4: 200). See also Lee Rust Brown’s *The Emerson Museum* (1997), William Rossi’s “Emerson, Nature, and Natural Science” (2000), and especially Laura Dassow Walls’s *Emerson’s Life in Science* (2003). Jennifer Baker’s review-essay “‘Natural Science and the Romanticisms’” (2007) describes the state of this reevaluation. See also Finseth’s “Evolution, Cosmopolitanism, and Emerson’s Antislavery Politics” for a perspective on Emerson’s uptake of Darwin from the pre-Darwinian developmentalism then available to him.

19 While maintaining that philosophy has a specific task, Bowen also makes it clear that philosophy is subordinate to the tasks of theology as they relate to our religious lives. In his essay, “The Union of Theology and Metaphysics,” Bowen says, “The being of a God is a truth of practical and vital importance. The defence of philosophy against the assaults of general skepticism is a purely speculative contest. Whichever way determined, it never affected the actions of any sane person since the world began” (*Critical* 248). His example is Hume, who “still ate his dinner” (248), and was famously “ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire” rather than suffer “this philosophical melancholy and delirium” (Hume 269), which was the only consequence of the devastating skepticism he wielded in Book 1 of his *Treatise of Human Nature*. Bowen’s stance is the mirror image of Hume’s here, for Bowen argues that Hume “sought to deter men from believing in the existence of a God, by arguments that ought to have prevented him from swallowing food” (*Critical* 248) and this shows to Bowen the uselessness of such speculative skepticism and the importance of keeping it subordinate to religious belief. Hume, on the other hand, also believes the more important bit is religious belief: “Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous” (Hume 272). Further, both Bowen and Hume agree that, as Hume puts it, “Nothing is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination, and nothing has been the occasion of more mistakes among philosophers” (267; qtd. Bowen, *Critical* 30). In the range of modern philosophy, there is perceived to be an alliance between skepticism and imaginative speculation against the clarity and certainty that reason promises.

20 Warranted or not, the stance of offense as a response to a perceived stance of condescension in others seems to be of importance to Cavell. As well as the role of Kuklick’s book as a signpost (e.g. Cavell, *Themes* 32), one might compare the role of Harold Bloom’s essay-review “Mr. America” (collected as “Emerson: Power at the Crossing”) and John Updike’s essay “Emersonianism” as they appear across his work (see *Emerson* 111, 171-82 passim, and 194).

21 Bowen’s argument for and against particular philosophical positions in *Critical Essays* come through during and sometimes between the lines of essays like “Locke and the Transcendentalists,” “Kant and His Philosophy,” and “Fichte’s Exposition of Kant: Philosophy Applied to Theology.” Kuklick remarks that Bowen “was so steeped in the history of philosophy
that we must extrapolate his ideas from his exegeses of the European tradition that nourished his own thinking” (Rise 33).

22 See Kuklick’s “Seven Thinkers and How They Grew: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz; Locke, Berkeley, Hume; Kant” for a description of the making of the empiricist-to-rationalist-to-Kant sequence that is still to this day the backbone of an American undergraduate education in philosophy. The distinction between modern philosophy as it was lived and as we relive it is a very important one to make, and one that historically-minded philosophers have been making with greater and greater success in the anglophone community. Part of the reason for the big splash of Rorty’s Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) was because of the story it told about the transformation of philosophy at the hands of specific philosophers wielding specific kinds of arguments and images. However, Rorty’s book basically charted the power and force of the standard, received view of what was thought important at the time in philosophy—the “core” subjects of philosophy of language and of mind—back to their sources in Descartes, Locke, and Kant. This opened Rorty to the charge that, as Susan Neiman put it in her Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy (2002), “Rorty . . . finds it easier to reject modern philosophy altogether than to reject the standard accounts of its history” (6). Since Rorty’s book, there has been a lengthening line of books that have attempted to retell the history of modern philosophy from the point of view of moral philosophy, including Jeffery Stout’s The Flight From Authority (1981), Stephen Toulmin’s Cosmopolis (1990), and J. B. Schneewind’s The Invention of Autonomy (1998). These books reshape what is important about philosophy by showing how questions about concepts we are still concerned with, e.g. authority and freedom, look different if viewed with the lens of the commitments that motivated them as religious questions, which is historically what (in part) gave birth to them. See also Murray G. Murphey’s “Toward an Historicist History of American Philosophy” for a good description of the kind of tide that was turning when Rorty’s book came out.

23 Emerson read Stewart’s Dissertation: Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Philosophy, Since the Revival of Letters in Europe (the final clause reflecting an earlier period that didn’t differentiate as strictly as we do today) and it begins with Bacon, Hobbes, Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, and Descartes before reaching a more standard list—a list standardized by his Reidian Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind (read by Emerson in Harvard’s curriculum). The history is even further standardized by the time of Bowen’s Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Schopenhauer and Hartmann (1877), which Kuklick calls, “the finest history of modern philosophy produced by a Harvard scholar” (Rise 33). What seems to me distinctive about Bowen’s history is that it trims away the fat to isolate only the most important figures (from his point of view, of course), far more than Stewart, and many other writers after. His book sets the pace for a philosophical education.

24 For reflection on the relationships between canon, historiography, and education, see the essays and discussions between philosophers and historians in Teaching New Histories of Philosophy, the proceedings of a conference at Princeton organized by J. B. Schneewind. Almost all of Schneewind’s work has been on the history of moral philosophy as a distinct dialectical tradition from, say, epistemology or metaphysics. The proceedings offer a wide range of views on different ways of slicing up philosophical tradition. However, one glaring omission is the lack of meditation on non-European philosophical traditions. Ian Johnson’s essay-review “In Search of the True Dao” relates the origins of Bryan Van Norden’s Taking Back Philosophy in a 2016 piece co-written with Jay L. Garfield that “floated the idea of making philosophy more
dive... The two were pilloried for their effort. One criticism was that philosophy originated with Plato, so Chinese like Confucius couldn’t be philosophers. Another strange argument was that non-Western philosophers might be sages with some smart ideas but they didn’t argue their points rigorously enough” (44). The latter argument we should recognize as perhaps not strange enough, but the shocking priggish racism of the former idea is surprising, though I hung around a small state school philosophy department for two years, and the big one for three, in Wisconsin at the turn of the last century—and though we were branded in Madison for living in a bubble on our isthmus (i.e. a blue island surrounded by a sea of red), our consciousness of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, and studies of power generally, have gotten markedly better at a wider level in America since then. But for whom is the legalistic answer, ‘Oh, well since in our tradition, which we call phil-sophia, it begins with Plato, and since there’s no evidence of Plato interacting with anyone influenced by Confucius, they couldn’t be…’? What could be a more flagrantly insular technicality used to discount entire traditions of wisdom-seeking and wisdom literature? As if they literally believed what Emerson said of Plato, “He has clapped copyright on the world,” but without the devastating irony of the lines that followed: “This is the ambition of Individualism. But the mouthful proves too large. Boa Constrictor has good will to eat it, but he is foiled. He falls abroad in the attempt, and biting gets strangled: the bitten world holds the biter fast by his own teeth” (“Plato” 43). Why would anyone think that only one of thousands of cultures, even hundreds of thousands if one has a fine-grained enough ethnography, would be the professional discipline that defined “wisdom” and “thought” and “the good” and “true” and “knowledge” and “reality” and the like? The only reason is time and space and relevance—but in today’s global world, in near-collapse, why would you only want to look under one lamppost for your lost keys, which you know are under the tree out in the dark? The terrifying connection between Emerson’s image of a great monster eating the world and what even non-Marxist leftists will say about global-corporate capitalism is as good an image as any to get one to start looking for wisdom in other traditions.

25 This is not at all to suggest that Bowen did this well—certainly not in the case of Emerson specifically, nor even would I want to claim this for his engagement with American Transcendentalism, which largely exists as a shadow war to his argument with Kant and the post-Kantians. But it is in fact the pattern his response takes.

26 Heidegger gave a series of lectures on Nietzsche between 1936 and 1940, eventually published in two volumes in Germany in 1961. Rüdiger Safranski says of them that “The resulting book . . . was one of the key works in Nietzsche’s academic reception. Some especially narrow-minded philosophers considered Nietzsche worthy of study only after they had read Heidegger’s book” (341). The same could be said of Danto’s Nietzsche as Philosopher (1965). The reception of Nietzsche as a philosopher in America is more complex because what we now call “Continental philosophy” was never fully submerged. Phenomenology and existentialism were always visible, though never close to the hallways of institutional power. In this regard, Walter Kaufmann’s work as translator and expositor is fundamental to understanding the reception of early-20th century German and French philosophy in America. However, as Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen says in her chapter on Kaufmann, “Kaufmann clearly placed more emphasis on the Continental rather than the analytic dimensions of Nietzsche’s thought, and indeed his claims for Nietzsche’s relevance for analytic philosophers are largely gestured, not demonstrated. However, they opened the doors for Nietzsche’s entry into analytic philosophy. The first full-scale effort to examine Nietzsche’s anticipation of analytic themes was Arthur Danto’s Nietzsche
as Philosopher. . . . Unsurprisingly, Kaufmann later criticized Danto for turning Nietzsche into a narrow linguist analyst” (374n91).

27 See Hadot’s chapter on “Philosophy and Philosophical Discourse” in What Is Ancient Philosophy?, 172-233, and esp. 188-89 on the influence of the ancient Greek ideal of athleticism.

28 This is how Bowen conceived his Modern Philosophy: “I have endeavored to present a full analysis and criticism of the systems only of those great thinkers whose writings have permanently influenced the course of European thought, paying most attention to the earlier French and later German philosophers, with whom comparatively few English readers are at all familiar. Hence I have said little about Hobbes or Locke, Hume, Reid, or Hamilton, whose writings are accessible to all, and who ought not to be studied by thoughtful and earnest inquirers at second hand. . . . My purpose has been to furnish an exposition of their systems which should be intelligible throughout, and also comprehensive enough to enable the student to form a fair estimate of their excellences and defects, and even, if he wishes, to peruse with little difficulty the works themselves, either in the original or in an English translation” (v-vi).

29 And yet, the University of Wisconsin-Madison had its infamous “Music in Performance,” or “Clap for Credit” as local custom dubbed it. Even now, on its page at the Mead Witter School of Music’s website (https://www.music.wisc.edu/music-in-performance/), it has a discursus, “A Brief History of ‘Music in Performance,’” that owns the cheeky label and also suggests evidence for worth: “By conservative estimates, at least 80,000 students have taken this course since its inception, and many students have not only been introduced to classical music but have gone on to become avid concerto-goers and patrons, much more than what they had expected when they signed up to ‘clap for credit.’” Imagine that were true of a poetry class, or any other elongated performance, like the Gifford Lectures, two sets of ten over an academic year, but perhaps more accessible, like Ted Talks with authority and imagination.

30 Myerson speculated in Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews that this review in the Boston Morning Post was G. T. Davis’s, but Patrick Carey includes the review in The Early Works Of Orestes A. Brownson (2003).

31 I return to Milnes’s review in the third chapter.

32 Cavell has noticed that “along with the gesture of denying philosophy to Emerson goes another, almost as common, joined in, with [James Russell] Lowell and [Harold] Bloom, by so eminent a critic as F. O. Mathiessen and by Emerson’s latest biographer, Gay Wilson Allen, namely, that of describing Emerson’s prose as a kind of mist or fog . . .” (Emerson 111). Brownson stands at the front of this tradition of association. In his first review of the Divinity School Address, Brownson says Emerson’s views are “too dreamy, too misty, too vague” (Review of DSA 40) and that the “Transcendentalists, so called, are by no means philosophers” (39). In his second, unsigned review of the Address later that year, Brownson says, “we cannot help regarding its tone as somewhat arrogant . . . its philosophy as indigested, and its reasoning as inconclusive. We do not like its mistiness, its vagueness, and its perpetual use of old words in new senses” (“Mr. Emerson’s Address” 42) and concludes that while in the future we will remember Emerson’s attempt to “induce men to think for themselves on all subjects” (48), we “shall have forgotten the puerility of his conceits, the affectations of his style, and the unphilosophical character of his speculations” (49). Allen is better when he says, “In his best essays the thought has the heat of the rays of the sun focused through a magnifying lens—the style being the lens,” but he still concludes that section of his biography of Emerson with, “Emerson wrote as an artist, not as a philosopher” (374-375).
The “quarrel [of old] between philosophy and poetry” (*Republic* 607b) has been used often of late to frame the tension between philosophy and literature through related emphases on form and content, imagination and inference, rule-bound reasoning, and knowing what one is talking about. See Danto, “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art”; Nussbaum, “Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature”; Edmundson, 1-29; Rorty, “Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude”; Davis, 1-25; and Badiou, “Philosophy and Poetry from the Vantage Point of the Unnameable.” In “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing,” Rorty gives a good description of this tension within philosophy itself: “philosophy started off as a confused combination of the love of wisdom and the love of argument. It began with Plato’s notion that the rigor of mathematical argumentation exposed, and could be used to correct, the pretensions of the politicians and the poets” (91). I turn to Emerson’s interpretation of Plato in the final chapter.

What analytic philosophers now call the “JTB account of knowledge,” which is the starting point in contemporary epistemology, finds its locus in Theaetetus saying, under pressure from Socrates, that “true belief with the addition of an account was knowledge, while belief without an account was outside its range” (*Theaetetus* 201d). (See John McDowell’s notes on this passage in his translation, 228-231.) For discussion of Plato on poetry and inspiration, see Moravcsik, “Noetic Aspiration and Artistic Inspiration”; Woodruff, “What Could Go Wrong with Inspiration? Why Plato’s Poets Fail”; and Ledbetter, *Poetics Before Plato*, 78-98. See also on divine madness, Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 200-233. One important aspect to Plato’s account I’ve left to the side of this reduced picture is the role of *technē*, skill, or know-how. All of the above treat *technē*, but see especially Levin’s *The Ancient Quarrel*.

See Kerferd’s “Logos” and Peters’ entry in his *Greek Philosophical Terms* for good starting points.

Consider as an analogy current use of the term “fake news”—some have argued that we should not use the term at all because if it is *fake*, then it is not *news*. They thus would rather use a distinction between lies and news to talk about current problems in the intersection between media and political discourse. Likewise, it has continually been a problem in modern philosophy to explain *error*—starting from similar premises, philosophers find it difficult to explain how justified beliefs turn out to be false.

Compare Rorty: “We are the heirs of three hundred years of rhetoric about the importance of distinguishing sharply between science and religion, science and politics, science and art, science and philosophy, and so on. This rhetoric has formed the culture of Europe. It made us what we are today” (*Mirror* 330-31).

Rorty used this phrase in “A Tale of Two Disciplines,” but it’s a major motif in his philosophy.

The *Collected Works* has only recently been completed, with the *Uncollected Prose Writings* (2013). The importance of this final volume could not be overstated given the way it makes what will now be established, scholarly discriminations between canonical and non-canonical Emerson, “that is, what Ralph Waldo Emerson—and only he—personally wrote, authorized for publication, and saw into print” (vi). Thus superseding the heretofore canonical image of Emerson in the Riverside and Centenary Editions’ *Lectures and Biographical Sketches, Miscellanies, and Natural History of Intellect and Other Papers*, the picture of Emerson drawn from use of those books during the 50+ years of accumulated professional work after the revival started (roughly with the publication of Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen Whicher’s *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962)) might need significant revision in places.
While I think this is true, one major objection would be the overwhelming influence of Cavell’s work on the study of Emerson’s thinking at a nearly contemporaneous time as the upsurge of deconstruction. Cavell’s complex relationship to Derrida and deconstruction would, however, take us too far afield. The short answer is that Cavell and Derrida’s stances bear large resemblances, so much so that it is easy to learn the same lesson from either.

Juliet Floyd’s “Recent Themes in the History of Analytic Philosophy” is a comprehensive tour de force in charting the changes in the historiography of analytic philosophy, a field that has only recently achieved self-consciousness and confidence. See 175-80 for her notes on the changing relationship to German post-Kantian philosophy.

See Carnap’s influential “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language.”

Derrida’s response to Searle is 92 pages in its original appearance in Glyph. Going back to read the original debate is quite healthy given the way it can be described, even to this day. For example, Marc Redfield calls both Searle’s reply to Derrida’s “Signature Event Context” and Derrida’s response to Searle’s reply, “Limited Inc a b c . . .,” “hostile” (202n36). Reading hostility into either one’s remarks, it seems to me, is perhaps easy retrospectively, but if one tries to imagine what the encounter might have looked like in 1977, considerably more difficult. Take, as an example, Searle’s opening sentence: “It would be a mistake, I think, to regard Derrida’s discussion of Austin as a confrontation between two prominent philosophical traditions” (198). The “I think” is not Kant’s transcendental ego, but the softener of a measured response. To be sure, Searle’s rhetoric in the response is a typical vocabulary employed by professional analytic philosophers of the time, and quite confrontational for it: “mistake,” “failed,” “misunderstood,” “misstated,” and especially “confusion.” But aren’t all of these real possibilities? Might we not be mistaken about what we thought someone said, or the point of it? Searle says as much at the end of his introduction: “I should say at the outset that I did not find his arguments very clear and it is possible that I may have misinterpreted him as profoundly as I believe he has misinterpreted Austin” (198)—to which Searle might have followed with what Milnes said to Emerson: “Let not Mr Emerson complain that we misrepresent him and his doctrines; if matters of this kind are so stated as to be easily misrepresented, the representation is of itself so far defective, whatever the theory itself may be.” What then did Derrida do? He responded with an elaborate performance that a sympathetic reader can understand to be marginalia to Plato, but hardly a clear response to Searle’s concerns. Any sympathetic peer, reading such a response in draft before its delivery to a professional journal, would write immediately in the margins, “I think you’re going to lose your readers—If what interests you is the circumstances of coincidence and disjoining of the activities and concepts of reading, understanding, and judging-of-seriousness, could you perhaps state it more clearly and tie it to Searle more quickly?” I take it the most fair response was Rorty’s: “Derrida was . . . overhasty in picking J. L. Austin as an example of someone who accepted the traditional idea of meaning being communicated ‘within a homogenous element across which the unity and integrity of meaning is not affected in an essential way’ [Derrida, Margins 311]. Derrida says that this idea has been held thought the entire history of philosophy. When he comes to Austin, he blithely attributes to him all sorts of traditional motives and attitudes which Austin prided himself on having avoided. John Searle’s criticism of Derrida on this point seems to me . . . largely right. I cannot see that in his reply to Searle Derrida laid a glove on Searle, as far as Searle’s charges of misreading Austin are concerned—though Derrida did formulate an effective criticism of various
metaphilosophical assumptions common to Austin and Searle” (“Deconstruction and Circumvention” 86n3).

45 This kind of sentiment is not negligible, and goes back at least to the 19th century. One could compare Andrews Norton’s assault on Emerson’s Divinity School Address, “The New School of Literature and Religion,” which loudly condemns “the crabbed and disgusting obscurity of some of the worst German speculatists” and that “hasher up of German metaphysics, the Frenchman Cousin; and, of late, that hyper-Germanized Englishman, Carlyle” (33), and also Bowen’s remark after asserting that “a forced marriage has been effected between poetry and philosophy” (Critical 6) that “One would think, that men were weary of common sense expressed in pure English . . . .”

46 Bowen says in his review of Nature, “We deprecate the introduction of a new class of philosophical terms, as it encourages tyros to prate foolishly and flippantly about matters, which they can neither master nor comprehend. Once let a peculiar diction gain footing in philosophy, as it has already done in poetry, and we shall have as great a cloud of pretenders and scoliists in the former, as already exercise our patience in the latter. Nonsense cannot be concealed in plain and sober prose. It stands conspicuous in its jejuneness and sterility. But by ringing the changes on the poetical vocabulary, a mirage of meaning is produced, and the mass of readers are cheated into the belief that the author says something” (“Transcendentalism” 8). In a review of Jonathan Culler’s On Deconstruction, Searle says, “Michel Foucault once characterized Derrida’s prose style to me as ‘obscurantisme terroriste.’ The text is written so obscurely that you can’t figure out exactly what the thesis is (hence ‘obscurantisme’) and then when one criticizes it, the author says, ‘Vous m’avez mal compris; vous êtes idiot’ (hence ‘terroriste’)” (“World” 178-79).

47 Alexander Nehamas argues in “Plato on Imitation and Poetry in Republic X” that “Plato was willing to banish [poetry] because he saw it only as an imitation of an education, and of a bad education at that” (268).

48 It is really important at this point to emphasize how “Continental philosophy” is ironically more accurate than “analytic philosophy” as a moniker precisely because it just points at a geographical happenstance. Philosophy in Europe, much like anglophone philosophy, is actually quite a variegated field in doctrine, method, and attitude. Such a view, however, doesn’t help in trying to understand the inherited self-images we still receive from our recent pasts. My use of “Searle,” “analytic,” “Derrida,” and “Continental” should be understood only as reductive metonymies aimed at getting a handle on some of the phenomena that lies beneath and produces such surface perturbations as those cited in the last few paragraphs.

49 Compare Nietzsche: “It is no different in this case than with the movement of the sun: there our eye is the constant advocate of error, here it is our language. In its origin language belongs in the age of the most rudimentary form of psychology. We enter a realm of crude fetishism when we summon before consciousness the basic presuppositions of the metaphysics of language, in plain talk, the presuppositions of reason” (Twilight 482-3).

50 This is a common rendering of Heidegger in “Language”: “Secondly, speech is regarded as an activity of man. Accordingly we have to say that man speaks, and that he always speaks some language. Hence we cannot say, ‘Language speak.’ For this would be to say: ‘It is language that first brings man about, brings him into existence.’ Understood in this way, man would be bespoken by language” (Poetry 192).

51 Rorty time and again emphasizes the different educational backgrounds of the average English-speaking philosopher and the average European that makes communication so difficult. See, e.g., the late “Analytic and Conversational Philosophy.”
Here is a cento of Rorty on Derrida in “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing,” whose influence on my understanding of Derrida cannot be underestimated:

For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more—just as history does not lead to Absolute Knowledge or the Final Struggle, but to more history, and more, and still more. (94)

Consider Derrida as trying . . . to create a new thing for writing to be about—not the world, but texts. Books tell the truth about things. Texts comment on other texts, and we should stop trying to test texts for accuracy of representation. . . . (95)

Lack of seriousness, in the sense in which I just attributed it to Derrida, is simply this refusal to take the standard rules seriously, conjoined with the refusal to give a clear answer to the question, “Is it the old game played differently, or rather a new game?” (98)

Granted that Derrida is the latest and largest flower on the dialectical kudzu vine of which the Phenomenology of Spirit was the first tendril, does that not merely show the need to uproot this creeping menace? Can we not now see all the better the need to strip the suckers of this parasitic climber from the still unfinished walls and roofs of the great Kantian edifice which it covers and conceals? (103-4)

The Hegelian likes to think that there is not really a contrast between the vine and the edifice it covers—rather, the so-called edifice is just accumulated dead wood, parts of the Great Vine itself, which once were fresh and flower-laden but now have come to lie in positions which suggest the outlines of a building. (108)

Derrida’s point is that no one can make sense of the notion of a last commentary, a last discussion note, a good piece of writing which is more than the occasion for a better piece. (109)

See Rorty’s “Deconstruction,” 180-1, as well as “Deconstruction and Circumvention,” 113-18. In the latter, Rorty says that “far more than Derrida, de Man is responsible for the tone of the Anglo-American movement called ‘deconstruction’—a tone that mixes elegy with polemic” (114).

Poststructuralism was not the only cause of this, just probably its most visible lightning rod. A full account of how English departments became tangled in the “culture war” of the 1980s and ‘90s would have to pull together a number of threads, including the role of demographics, leftist politics, academic politics, splintering lines of reading and publishing, and the intellectual lineage of Freud and especially Marx. My focus has been on the lineage of Nietzsche, but my use of Ricoeur in the final section indicates how one might expand the grasp of this story.

I return to the problem of Emerson’s justifications for his mode of philosophy in the third chapter, in particular his licensing of inconsistency which seems especially problematic for coherent account-giving.

This kind of connection is what Rorty had to deal with all the time with his New-Atheist leaning friends, most especially Daniel Dennett. And if it all seemed to them, at the time, to be a philosophical problem—perhaps felt to be politically relevant, but still also theoretical, since nobody while Rorty was alive could have thought someone would put this successfully into practice—then we now face a different reality. As what happened recently in a Florida county suggests, the favor toward science is narrowing in the United States. See Annika Hammerschlag, “Evolution, Climate Change Skeptics Lose Battle Over Collier Science Textbooks” for the Naples Daily News, which details the narrow 3-2 vote by a county-level education panel to accept new biology textbooks over, largely, the objections of biblical creationists turn Darwin and climate skeptics (rather than deniers).
Rorty does not buy into all of these rhetorical moves in the sentence (most especially "social constructs" (Why not just “constructs”?) and “epistemologically, and thus ultimately” (Why do we need to conflate knowing with reality?)), but see Rorty’s discussion of the Kuhnian revolution in the history of science in Mirror, 322-33, and also Rorty’s more brash appraisal of science, scientific rhetoric, and inquiry in the essays that make up the first part of Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. For example: “When Dewey urged that we try to create [a pragmatist’s] paradise, he was said to be irresponsible. For, it was said, he left us bereft of weapons to use against our enemies; he gave us nothing with which to ‘answer the Nazis.’ When we new fuzzies try to revive Dewey’s repudiation of criteriology, we are said to be ‘relativistic.’ We must, people say, believe that every coherent view is as good as every other, since we have no ‘outside’ touchstone for choice among such views. We are said to leave the general public defenseless against the witch doctor, the defender of creationism, or anyone else who is clever and patient enough to deduce a consistent and wide-ranging set of theorems from his ‘alternative first principles’” (“Science” 42).

Though, as someone like David Bromwich in Politics by Other Means would argue in 1992, some would suspiciously expose science and literature as sham-games. Perhaps the most high profile statement of this is J. Hillis Miller’s: “I would even dare to promise that the millennium would come if all men and women became good readers in de Man’s sense, though that promise is exceedingly unlikely to have a chance to be tested in practice” (58). Such prophecies are, no doubt, bound up with the utopic ideals we strive for, but Miller displays here the kind of hyperbole that has plagued philosophy’s search for the silver bullet since Plato promised the millennium if we all became good talkers in Socrates’s sense. The counterfactual of de Man’s biography doesn’t show deconstruction to be a sham, but it does teach the lesson philosophy slowly learned for itself over two thousand years, that personal practice does not necessarily follow from devised theory.

Both were commonplaces among critics of deconstruction in the 1980s and 90s, but Searle’s summary perhaps can stand in: “I believe that any one who reads deconstructive texts with an open mind is likely to be struck by the same phenomena that initially surprised me: the low level of philosophical argumentation, the deliberate obscurantism of the prose, the wildly exaggerated claims, and the constant striving to give the appearance of profundity by making claims that seem paradoxical, but under analysis often turn out to be silly or trivial” (“Reply” 188). See Rorty’s “Deconstruction” for his consolidation of such complaints in his picture of the movement from all angles. For being a fan of Derrida, even Rorty complained about the effect of de Man on the writing of literary criticism. His fairest comment was this: “I can imagine being grateful for de Man’s obsessiveness, that is, his habit of reducing to nothingness any given texts he reads. When de Man does it, it’s interesting, but when you get thousands of Dostoevsky clones and thousands of de Man clones, it’s merely formulaic. I don’t think anyone would have objected to de Man if he had been a kind of Kenneth Burke figure, not training up generations of students. But he happened to hit the American academy at a moment when all the students desperately wanted a new gimmick. So you got these thousands and thousands of little de Mans finding the nothingness at the heart of everything. It just became a joke” (Take 137). (Clearly Rorty was unfamiliar with what was happening to Kenneth Burke in Rhetoric and Composition programs.)

This is what makes Stephen Whicher’s Freedom and Fate (1953) a prolegomena for any future attempt to reconstruct Emerson’s philosophy. Its success in bridging the divide between
Emerson’s biography and his thought, and claiming a development, left a permanent deposit in Emerson criticism.

In her Acknowledgements, Ellison thanks Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Barbara Packer, all of whom were teaching at Yale and had a major influence on the rhetoric of theory or Emerson, or both. There are two other substantial marks of the milieu in Ellison’s book that I’ll note here. One is her fascination with the fragment. Important in this regard is Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s L’absolu littéraire (1978), which popularized a very particular understanding of the fragment and was translated in 1988 as The Literary Absolute. (See the translators’ introduction to the latter for the authors’ relationship to Derrida and Continental philosophy.) The second mark is her fascination with quotation (very important to Derrida, especially in “Limited Inc”) and her reading of “Quotation and Originality,” which with Joseph Riddel’s writing on Emerson (some of which is collected in Purloined Letters (1995)) helped to move that essay toward the center of Emerson’s canon. (Riddel, I should also add, was one of the earliest literary critics to self-consciously write in the wake of Derrida.)

I think it’s deconstructive practice that leads critics to sometimes endorse bad inferences from a hidden premise like this. Paul Grimstad, for example, in his suggestive chapter on the genesis of Emerson’s experimental practice as a writer, cites a long passage of Coleridge’s Aids to Reflection that has “extravagant descriptions of the emergence of mind from out of natural processes” (19, italics Grimstad’s), illustrating Coleridge’s handle on the Kantian-like Reason/Understanding distinction. Grimstad persuasively reads the passage, and suggests Coleridge “inadvertently bequeathed to the enthusiastic American readers like Emerson and Hedge an alluring rhetorical pyrotechnics” (20). I think this a reasonable inference about Coleridge’s bequest to America (especially as opposed to Kant). However, Grimstad begins his next paragraph summarizing his argument with what seems to me a decidedly different claim: “If Coleridge’s gloss on Leighton’s aphorism [in the cited passage] is as much about a way of writing as it is about his account of the relation of nature to reason . . .” (20, italics Grimstad’s). A way of writing is not ipso facto about itself; Grimstad offers no additional evidence that this passage from Coleridge is self-reflexive, and the passage itself doesn’t seem obviously so. However, 1) deconstructionists often treat all texts as being potentially about themselves, whatever any evidence can tell us and 2) Emerson does often write self-reflexive scenes like the one Grimstad cites from Coleridge. But (1) seems an exorbitant transcendental stance that makes everything look the same, and (2) shouldn’t be confused with it. Rather, a reading of Coleridge’s prose should lead us to see the difference Emerson instead presents, making self-reflexive more often what others do not.

Part of deconstruction’s power was certainly its ability to be used on anything, which one would expect from a philosophy of reading given the age old quest to explain everything. However, I think we find in Rorty a suggestion about a difference in Poirier’s work: “Unlike many critical movements of the past, deconstructionism has not aimed at establishing a new, revised, literary canon; although some authors (e.g., Rousseau) are favored examples, deconstructionist critics are not particularly concerned to re-evaluate canonical works and to pick and choose among them. As with Freudian critics, almost any work is equally grist for their mill” (“Deconstruction” 168). Poirier does offer a new canon, and it has been taken up, worked within, and modified by such books as Jonathan Levin’s The Poetics of Transition (1999), Joan Richardson’s A Natural History of Pragmatism (2007), and Andrea Knutson’s American Spaces of Conversion (2011).
Substantia is the scholastic, Latinized version of ousia, Aristotle’s term for what Kant called the Ding an sich, the thing-in-itself.

However we may feel about the complexity of Emerson’s feelings and stance, I don’t see much point in denying that the typical rhetorical surface of his text ripples with the bright optimism that has become identified with his name. To say that Emerson is a dark, brooding bummer is about as perverse as saying Poe, appearances to the contrary, is a chipper, sunny cheerleader. I do, however, take up Emerson’s relationship to skepticism in the third chapter.

A major example is Sharon Cameron’s influential “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience.’” Taking inconsistency seriously is the main subject of the third chapter.

The following all offer versions of this diagnosis with varying polemical strengths: Robert Alter, The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age (1989); David Bromwich, Politics by Other Means (1992); Harold Bloom, The Western Canon (1994); Andrew Delbanco, Required Reading (1997); Richard Rorty, Achieving Our Country (1998); Charles Altieri, Reckoning with the Imagination (2011). One virtue of the testimony of these books is that they do not come from the political right, which honed a bonfire-like attitude toward the productions of English departments during the so-called “culture wars.”

Harold Bloom called this the reductive fallacy: “the belief that what is most real about any one of us is the worst thing that possibly could be true of us. ‘Tell me what she or he is really like,’ the reductionist keeps saying, and means: ‘Tell me the worst thing you can’” (Ruin 66).

This is, again, a difference between Derrida and Foucault with regard to tone. Rorty has said of Foucault, “You would never guess, from Foucault’s account of the changes in European social institutions during the last three hundred years, that during that period suffering had decreased considerably, nor that people’s chances of choosing their own styles of life increased considerably” (Essays 195).

See Edward Said, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism” for a diagnosis of this tendency as “functionalism,” which bows to “the temptations of a rigorous technical critical vocabulary” (145).

See Fischer, 40-42, for an interesting reading of the Searle-Derrida controversy along the lines of “heads I win, tails you lose.”

This became a refrain for Bloom when he turned to the “common reader” with The Western Canon in 1994.

“Reading the very best writers,” Bloom says, “is not going to make us better citizens. Art is perfectly useless, according to the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything” (Western 16). Fish’s argument in Professional Correctness is that techniques are internal to the practices you learn them in, so “the practice of cultural studies will not make you good, it will make you proficient in the routines that are its content” (Professional 106). As a thoroughly pragmatist argument, one can see his point, though taking the point of the title of that chapter—“Why Literary Criticism Is Like Virtue”—one wishes Fish had on occasion discriminated between the various good effects of something good for its own sake. Is there really nothing more to be said about “the ‘trickle-down’ consequences that may or may not flow” (98) from our work in the classroom?

Poirer is here echoing an instructor of another famous general education course, Lionel Trilling of Columbia’s “Lit Hum.” On Trilling’s course, see Menand, Marketplace 32-37; on Trilling’s view of modern literature as subversive and the importance of teaching it, see his “On the Teaching of Modern Literature.” Bromwich calls the notion of reading literature as civilizing
by gathering meanings good for us the “vitamin-injection theory of culture and society” (Politics x).

76 See Cavell’s Cities of Words.
77 Susan Neiman reports this in her Why Grow Up? 143. She goes on to say, “To love a book means to wrestle with it, to take it seriously enough to be unsettled by it.”
Chapter 2

A Fellowship of Free Inquiry: Rethinking Emerson’s Inheritance of American Liberal Christianity

In the first chapter, I gave an account of the trajectory of philosophy and English departments in order to explain the current shape of Emerson’s presence in the central arena of contemporary American intellectual life: the university. In this chapter I turn back to Emerson’s challenge to the central institutional factor in New England intellectual life: the Unitarian church. In the first chapter, I used Francis Bowen’s defeat at the hands of Darwin in the university setting in order to show that it was the issue of argument, and not Darwin’s ontological naturalism, that divided Emerson from the future of philosophy departments in the secular university. The crux of that story was Bruce Kuklick’s hypothesis that Bowen’s argumentative position taken against Emerson and the Transcendentalists put him and Unitarian theology into an untenable position of supporting supernaturalism while Darwin gave the first fully naturalized explanation of humanity’s origins.

The Unitarians won the battle against Transcendentalism but lost the war against Darwin and the new naturalist common sense. The central battlefield was what we call the “Miracles Controversy,” sometimes said to have been sparked by Emerson’s Divinity School Address. Bowen’s response to Emerson was essentially the same as Andrews Norton, the much more infamous figure in the Controversy: the Transcendentalists, and Emerson specifically, lack the expertise, clarity, and comprehension to be taken seriously. In this chapter, I want to return to the scene of the initial battle, the Divinity School Address. Now, though, I want to show how Emerson’s radical religious stance relates to these two twin issues of argument and naturalism.
and how recent work on 19th century Unitarianism allows us to see more precisely than ever before how Emerson’s radicalness was simply a natural progression from the Unitarian position. For granting Emerson’s naturalism, which shocked Unitarians, but also his poetic turn against argument, which shocked friend and foe alike, what are the actual implications of Emerson’s naturalism and view of argument if, as I will suggest, we have too often misunderstood their origins in Emerson’s education?

Since the foundational work of Perry Miller and Stephen Whitcher, it has been common to think Emerson was a religious radical, as well as a radical individualist, shucking off the boundaries of religion for a limitless, original relation to God. In this story, first his turn away from the ministry, and then the Divinity School Address, show Emerson’s turn to a socially problematic self-reliance. But in this story, it’s hard to get excited by Emerson’s most famous strategies in the actual Address: his naturalizing of Jesus, his plea for eloquence, and most of all, his initiation of that Miracles Controversy. Miracles were considered needed, by Unitarian theology, to certify belief in the Bible as the sacred word of God. But these same strategies seem like the commonsense of every educated person now: Jesus must have been an actual person, it’d be great if people spoke with sincere passion, and the very idea of a miracle is scorned as magic. And because Emerson’s main arguments seem uncontentious, he doesn’t look very religiously radical anymore, or only if one treats the Address as a period piece: historically significant, but no longer speaking to live intellectual issues today.

Emerson as religiously radical is the kind of lost understanding Perry Miller attempted to correct when he identified the Transcendentalists as primarily religious innovators. And while Miller’s landmark essay, “From Edwards to Emerson” (1940), established a historiographical agenda of searching out the continuities and discontinuities between Calvinism, Unitarianism,
and Transcendentalism—an agenda that has controverted many of Miller’s historical judgments—it also poses a lasting challenge to Emerson’s philosophical stance. For Miller re-asserts a powerful, orthodox challenge to religious individualism: If one eliminates the conceptual distance between one’s beliefs and the object of those beliefs—such as collapsing the distinction between human and divine, or humanity and nature—then what provides the check on those beliefs? Without some sort of friction against our beliefs, how does one avoid believing whatever one wants?

In Miller’s vocabulary, as in the 16th through 19th centuries, this is the threat of antinomianism. Antinomianism is conventionally thought an old heresy, indeed perhaps should be thought the oldest—heresy derives from the Greek haíresis, for “choice.” So wherever there have been communal norms, external to any particular individual, choice has implied a freedom from those norms. And so all forms of direct, unmediated connection between individual and object—as we can find in religious mysticisms and the concepts of intuition and revelation—have threatened the norms of the community. This is simply in a religious vocabulary what philosophers have continued to discuss in other, secular vocabularies, questions about how we can recognize error or how we can hold a community together if people can deviate whenever they want from accepted behavior, whatever the consequences. One of the goals of this chapter is to lay out enough evidence to suggest how the Unitarian community’s struggle over theology is indicative of a larger struggle over intellectual authority that reflects a more general problem in the pursuit of a secular democratic society. The argument is that Emerson understood this, and worked out consequences for our philosophical reflection. The Divinity School Address does this for the microcosm of the Unitarian Church.
Emerson’s self-reliance has been easily enfolded into threats to communal forms of religious life. But Emerson does not reject the communal form in the Divinity School Address, and he gives earnest advice to the future Unitarian preachers that had invited him to deliver it. What accounts for this? I argue in this chapter that Emerson’s rejection of external authority does not exhaust his sense of the role of the community in the working out of each individual’s search for their own original relation. Rather, Emerson is working out the consequences of a wholehearted naturalism, one that rejects breaks in the natural order, as it interacts with the religious liberalism of the Unitarians. Deists were wholehearted naturalists, but they also then went on to reject religion. The Unitarians were half-hearted naturalists because of their supernatural account of revelation, qualifying their philosophical acceptance of science as “supernatural rationalism.” Emerson instinctively rejects all supernaturalisms as, not false, but systems of external authority. He also views polemical arguments for beliefs as backwards, wastes of our spiritual energy. Emerson reconceives revelation naturalistically as a poetic act of provoking new thought. In Emerson’s view, beliefs inherently provide friction upon each other, and the role of a community and its functionaries, like the preacher, is to grease the wheels of thought constantly threatening to grind to a halt. By situating Emerson’s Divinity School Address in the context of his inheritance of Unitarianism’s Enlightenment naturalism and its liberal suspicion of religious creed, we will be able to better see Emerson’s distinctive answer to Miller’s challenge. The challenge is to show how social bonds do not completely dissolve in the acid bath of individualism. For many facets of life, like personal and familial, the dissolution of social bonds in favor of greater autonomy have not been felt to pose too great a threat to the continuation of life in general. However, for some institutions, like the university’s mandate to protect inquiry and knowledge through the creation of communities of expertise that wield
external authority over others, Emerson’s vision of self-directed religious inquiry into truth is a path largely not taken in our institutional life.

For the larger point of this chapter is to chart the full scale of Emerson’s vision of life, of how he envisions self-reliant selves interacting with each other in communities. Miller’s charge of antinomianism is aimed at the social ramifications of Emerson’s stance; he ties it to the absence of a philosophical distinction in Emerson’s work. Emerson, however, envisions a whole change to our life; his philosophical stance implies institutional and social alterations. It is these changes that nullify Emerson’s fear, at least, of antinomianism. Because Emerson’s answer to Miller’s challenge involves a significant reframing of our typical view of Emerson and Unitarianism, I proceed in this chapter somewhat circuitously. In the first section I take up Miller’s understanding of both Unitarianism and Emerson to sharpen how the current academic consensus about the history of Unitarianism corrects Miller’s picture, but leaves untouched Miller’s charge of antinomianism. In the second section, I develop Emerson’s naturalism as, adapting Daniel Walker Howe’s phrase, an “anthropological view of humanity.” By seeing how this evolved out of Unitarian thought, we can see how Emerson works out a “religion of poetry.” In the third section, I develop this picture of religious life in the context of Unitarian liberalism, the view that points of doctrine are secondary to fellowship. In this way, we will be able to see the wider ramifications of Emerson’s talk about preaching and the future of the church in the Divinity School Address. Emerson, quite aside from and parallel to the university, wanted to create in the idea of the church a space for free, self-directed inquiry into the nature of the universe. Unlike the university, this would be a space open to all, not just experts, and one with no asymmetrical authority-relations, such as those between teacher and student.
1. Toward the Divinity School Address: Miller and Revisions to Emerson and the Story of Unitarianism

The outlines of how American Unitarianism came to be have remained relatively unchanged for much of the 20th century, though there have been significant shifts in emphasis and recoveries of forgotten figures. But while the old story doesn’t seem to have changed much, the fortunes of Unitarianism generally in intellectual history have ebbed and flowed. This is largely due to the force of American evangelicalism in American political life. America’s evangelical movements, from their first eruption in the Great Awakening, have seemed to steadily come to dominate American religious life. The invention of mass media with radio and television in the 20th century, especially, helped to transform powerful, charismatic figures like a George Whitefield into Billy Graham and Pat Robertson. The further consolidation of the “Moral Majority” in the 1970s and the spread and proliferation of so-called megachurches has made 19th-century liberal religion seem a relic. As evangelicalism became a powerful electoral force, the ideas of liberal religion, and Unitarianism specifically, were forced to the edges of our historical perspective, as what we study today is in some measure conditioned by what we want to understand about the forces of today.

Miller was part of this process in the middle of the 20th century as he came to identify a dialectic between antinomian mysticism and Arminian rationalism as at the heart of American cultural evolution. Miller was, David Hollinger says, “distressed that America had chosen to follow the optimistic, rationalistic line of Benjamin Franklin and William Dean Howells, that it has been generally uncomfortable with paradox and impatient with mystery” (“Perry Miller” 161). So, Hollinger says, “Miller assiduously sought out the minority that shared the insights he valued; he effected a kind of scholarly epiphany whenever he found an American who had faced
a paradox” (161). Most especially, then, since he thought the times were doing well by the rationalists generally, Miller came to emphasize the mystical, mystery-oriented sides of things. It’s within that frame that we can understand why “his projected three-volume synthesis of the American mind in the early national period was conceived with revivalism as the initial, most basic element in American culture” (162), which had the effect of making liberal religion look marginal in step to the march of American culture.

However, as Hollinger says, “the liberalizers invite our attention because they played a greater role in American history than is commonly recognized” (After xi). Hollinger has in mind the effort of Protestant denominationalism to “accommodate” the Enlightenment. As he says, “the bulk of the men and women in control of American institutions—educational, political, and social—have sought to retain the cultural capital of the Reformation while diversifying their investments in a variety of opportunities and challenges, many of which came to them under the sign of the Enlightenment” (3). Miller, however, obscured these signs in our picture of Emerson somewhat by his tight identification of New England Arminianism with European, deistic rationalism. And so, because Emerson seems obviously not a rationalist, ahead of any defining we might want to do, he seems to fully reject Unitarianism, allowing his antinomian mysticism to fly unfettered and appear not at all under the sign of the Enlightenment.

David Robinson has argued that the work of historians of Unitarianism, like Conrad Wright, Sydney Ahlstrom, and Daniel Walker Howe, has added enough complexity of detail to require a revision to the story of Transcendentalism’s break with Unitarianism that Miller offers. In particular, Robinson says that “When the Arminian legacy is fully understood, the mystical element of [Transcendentalism] can no longer be regarded as a defining tenet, unless one focuses on the problematics as well as the presence of mystical experience” (Robinson, “Road Not
Following Robinson’s suggestion, then, we need to rehearse a few of Unitarianism’s positions to find the set of concerns that activate Emerson’s thinking before locating the problematics of mysticism and antinomianism.

It is universally agreed now that the most important theological doctrine for the Unitarians was their Arminianism, not the Arianism that their enemies used to give them their name. The latter is the traditional theological name for thinking that God is a single entity, i.e. it is anti-trinitarian. Arminianism is the traditional name for the idea that 1) human nature is not depraved (as Calvinists thought), so therefore 2) we can change and improve, ourselves and the world. Emerson was as Arminian as the next Unitarian, but essentially came to think that the Enlightenment concept of reason—received by Unitarians primarily through Locke and the Scottish Common Sense school—was what was hollowing out the Unitarian congregations.

Arminianism is simply the theological expression of a broader mood, just as Enlightenment deists gave secular expressions. Antinomian overemphasis on a covenant of grace—the experience of God central to the idea of conversion embedded in revivalism—only makes sense when contrasted with fears of a reduction to a covenant of works, making what we do to get into heaven feel transactional. William Ellery Channing’s campaign for Arminianism, embodied in the title of his “Likeness to God,” then was an attempt to counteract the pragmatic character of the Unitarian emphasis on an ethics of self-culture by affirming we are like God. It is this likeness that is the seed for making ourselves over in God’s more perfect image.

Channing in essence sprinkled the experience of grace over the hard, pragmatic work of change.

Emerson thought the Arminian mood the most important thing, and from it follows his career of attempting to boost the self-esteem of humanity. It accounts for his lifelong suspicion of Calvinism as casting a black cloud over our prospects. What gave Miller’s account of how
one gets from Calvinism to Unitarianism to Transcendentalism its cachet was the dramatic irony of Emerson’s generation stabbing the previous generation in the back to return to the revivalistic strains in Calvinism just turned away from. The weakness in the account was its overly simple acceptance of the younger generation’s stereotyping of the Unitarians as simply involved in “pale negations.” One need only look at the previous generation’s enemies, who condemned Unitarianism as irreligious, not just because of the Enlightenment faith in reason the Unitarians held in common with mutually hated deists, but the Arminianism that put them on the path to identifying themselves with God. And the latter is exactly what Emerson did exuberantly.

The revision to our picture of Unitarianism established by Wright, Ahlstrom, and Howe, then, doesn’t take our picture of Transcendentalism out of Miller’s orbit, which easily accommodates the likeness-to-God argument, though it does change some trajectories. Miller’s focus on the implied mysticism in Edwards, made explicit in Emerson (though implicit in Channing), was motivated by theological and philosophical considerations—the implication of Miller’s argument is that there are profound social effects to views about whether God and/or Nature should be identified with humanity (see esp. “From Edwards” 195). This is essentially the same stance as the theologians and philosophers who argued about it at the time. Channing, for example, criticized Emerson in the same antinomian vocabulary as Miller when he called Emerson’s stance “a kind of ego-theism” (qtd. in Peabody 365).⁶

Miller’s angle, then, was to get into focus the importance of that distinction in holding at bay dangerous philosophical views, a distinction we were losing track of in our admiration of Emersonian themes (especially the individualism that Stephen Whicher had to remind us was “God-reliant”). Robinson is right to identify Miller’s stance as “critical realism” (Robinson, “Road Not Taken” 54, 58); insofar as Miller implies a philosophical judgment about the
respective worth of Edwards’ and Emerson’s philosophies, it is that Edwards was wiser for holding the destructive powers of antinomian mysticism back by keeping firm a realist distinction between humanity and God/Nature. The latter provides the necessary resistance to keep us in check. Without such resistance to our views, it is too easy for someone to simply call true whatever they desire. This is what lay behind the original Antinomian Controversy of the 17th century, as well as behind the Old Lights’ fear of the New in the 18th—to find God inside is to risk confusing the light of truth for your own burning heart.

As I noted, one of Miller’s mistakes was to make too tight of a connection between Enlightenment rationalism and the Arminianism of the Unitarians. Miller wrote at a time when their anti-trinity Arianism—which was clearly driven by rationalism—loomed larger historiographically. Most striking when we turn to a correction of Emerson’s image, after we correct Unitarianism’s, is that Miller was not only misleading about the rationalism in Unitarianism, but equally misleading about the rationalism left in Emerson’s religious stance. The Divinity School Address only comes up in Miller’s essay when he wants to cite Emerson’s ridicule of Unitarian preaching, his famous epithets on “pale negations” and “corpse-cold Unitarianism,” and so suggest that “children of Unitarians felt emotionally starved and spiritually undernourished” (200). Maybe so, but two of the three arguments we perceive in the Address, his discussions of the role of miracles and Jesus, seem like more-rationalist-than-thou arguments. As I will outline further below, Emerson’s inheritance of German biblical criticism from his Unitarian teachers is a function of their rationalism. When Emerson is seen to fulfill Moses Stuart’s apocryphal prediction that Unitarianism was a “half-way house to infidelity,” it is partly because of these arguments he had in common with Enlightenment deists and Unitarians.
The argument in the Address that has most preoccupied us since its occasion has been Emerson’s attack on miracles, though it occupies very little space in the actual Address. However, Emerson became somewhat rightly enfolded in the breach George Ripley opened up in 1836. This is because the Unitarians had backed themselves into a corner regarding their reading of the Bible as they combated orthodox Calvinists. What has been called Unitarian “supernatural rationalism”—rationalism plus divine revelations and miracles—was a function of their attempt to prove to the Calvinists that they are indeed still Christians, not deists. Because the orthodox could claim quite high ground when they accused the liberals’ Arianism of taking the Christ out of Christianity.

However, if Ripley hedged in 1836 on whether there were any supernatural, miraculous displays recorded in the Bible, then Emerson’s Divinity School Address presented a wholehearted rejection of the supernatural. While Ripley would reason, “we know of no unerring test, by which to distinguish a miracle of religion from a new manifestation of natural powers, without a previous faith in the divinity of the performer” (131)—thus weakening it as convincing evidence on the basis of circular reasoning—Emerson would essentially accept the Humean gambit of deists: There cannot be breaks in the natural order. Emerson accepts a full naturalizing and historicizing of Jesus, just as the irreligious, German biblical critics would announce; Emerson would condemn what we call “miracle” and “revelation” because it implies that Jesus was special, existing outside the natural world, as if he were the only one who could be inspired by God.

The transition to Emerson’s attack on Unitarian preaching, however, will be unsatisfactory unless we connect the possibility of modern-day, biblical-level revelations to it. Typically we don’t, instead emphasizing the pedestrian criticisms of coldness and formality.
What we will not see is how these criticisms were not pedestrian in Emerson’s eyes, but part of a prophetic re-envisioning of our spiritual prowess that was not being hyperbolically linked to the concept of *revelation*. Stuart and Channing essentially agreed that, as Stuart said, “Men are not inspired now, as the apostles and primitive Christians were, to understand all truth” (*Letters* 160). For Channing, we are *like* God; Channing still puts tropes between us and the divine.\(^{14}\) For Emerson, “If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God” (“Address” 78);\(^{15}\) Emerson would put nothing between he and God.

This is another way of saying that Miller’s insight into the dangerous quality of Emerson’s mystical antinomianism is right, and must still be answered.\(^{16}\) We could just minimize the antinomianism and focus instead on Emerson’s cooler, calmer personal qualities, especially as they relate to his practices of self-culture. But until we amplify what Emerson means by “revelation,” Millerian critics of Emersonianism will still have a foothold in casting Emerson as entitlement to confusing passion with certainty. For that’s what undergirds the threat of mystical antinomianism—if one is certain what one finds inside is God, then one fully obfuscates whether it is God’s desires being followed, or merely one’s own.

Emerson, however, has no truck with this certainty. He could certainly *talk* a good game about certainty, but this is just one of Emerson’s many rhetorical postures and vocabularies. When we work out the consequences of his full-strength naturalism on the concept of *revelation* and then work through what Emerson wants of the preacher in the spiritual world that naturalism presents us, we will see better how Emerson meets the challenge of antinomianism.

2. The Anthropological View of Humanity and a Religion of Poetry

When we read Emerson and about Emerson, it’s easy to forget how much religious upheaval there was in his own maturation. We are taught, rightly, that the Divinity School
Address was a big deal, and as Robert Richardson says, “Indeed, the modern split between conservative and liberal Unitarians dates to this time” (Emerson 300). But Emerson did not, technically, grow up a Unitarian. Emerson was a Unitarian minister, ordained in 1829, but that was just four years after the Unitarian Church first officially organized in 1825—and even that wasn’t to universal fanfare among the earlier liberals. Emerson didn’t exactly attend Unitarian Harvard because Channing didn’t deliver his great battle cry announcing American Unitarianism’s birth, his sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” until 1819—when Emerson was finishing his sophomore year. Emerson grew up a Congregationalist, at a time historians still call “the Unitarian Controversy”—but they weren’t always self-consciously Unitarians yet, and they didn’t distinguish themselves institutionally. They were liberal Congregationalists who saw themselves for a long time as diverging from their orthodox Calvinist brethren, but wanting to introduce some reforms from the inside to their practice and thinking. In fact, much like Emerson who seemed genuinely surprised by all the hoopla created by his Divinity School Address, there’s evidence that Channing thought his 1819 battle cry was rather a reformist initiative, a bill on the Senate floor, not the initiation of a civil war.17

Though Emerson doesn’t mention Channing’s Baltimore sermon in journals or letters, historians agree that Channing’s sermon was representative of the milieu, not groundbreaking or iconoclastic. We should turn back to Channing’s sermon to understand the character of what Howe calls the Unitarians’ “anthropological interpretation of religion” (Unitarian 96) that Emerson would have matured with. This thesis is rationalist, but not in the same way wielding the charge of irrationality is. One finds the latter, polemical use of “reason” in the Unitarians; but the former is a function of a sometimes unconscious shift toward naturalism in their ontological premises. The anthropological view of humanity entered Unitarian thought primarily
through their reception of the German higher criticism in biblical studies. In their hands, religions, like texts, are the manifestations of humans.

This posture enabled the Unitarians to counter the orthodox Calvinists’ “theory of verbal inspiration.” This is the name we retrospectively give to the required thought that, via whatever route (detailed by one’s creed), the text of the Bible itself is directly inspired by God’s authority-conferring voice. The Unitarians were now able to counter, though, that to think an object we made is itself imbued with God’s authority is to blind oneself to everything we know about the history of that object’s transmission. As Joseph Buckminster would note drily, after encountering a little of this new biblical learning, a Christian “will now suspect perhaps for the first time, that our Saviour and the apostles, whom he will allow to have had a due deference to the word of God, did not use King James’s bible” (194).

The Unitarians considered their reception of German higher criticism in two ways: 1) it was a way of flexing their commitment to rational inquiry, since German biblical criticism claimed to be scientific; 2) it was a convenient axe to hack away at orthodoxy with. Channing presents the Unitarian uptake of the higher criticism as a function of a wider Enlightenment commitment, though it is being held against them for threatening religious life with deism: “We are particularly accused of making an unwarrantable use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. We are said to exalt reason over revelation, to prefer our own wisdom to God’s” (“Unitarian” 61). But, Channing goes on to say, this sense of “reason” is perfectly ubiquitous: “Now all books, and all conversation, require in the reader or hearer the constant exercise of reason” (61). This suggests that orthodox and liberal alike are in the same position, trying to interpret the book that all agree is most important. But beneath Channing’s appeal to the powers of reasoning all hold in common is a view of what kind of book it is. “Our leading principle in
interpreting Scripture is this,” Channing says, “that the Bible is a book written for men, in the
language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books”
(61). With this move, the Unitarians were able to make historical knowledge relevant to our
interpretation of the Bible.

The birth of modern scholarship, out of philology, is in some key ways due to German
quasi-irreligious inquiry into the historicity of the Bible. As it became more and more widely
accepted that the Bible was written in historical time, it made the Bible’s relationship to God-
time, or eternity, more interesting and contentious. Partly as a response to making sense of the
difference between Old and New Testaments—markers of a historical change in our relationship
to God—but also to increasing knowledge of other cultures flooding into Europe, Gotthold
Lessing in the 18th century made fully explicit and distinct the idea of religion as the education
of humankind: Revelations were an instrument God used to jolt our cultural evolution forward,
but they were keyed to the stage of cultural progress in which they were deployed. The biblical
critics were taking one step further the historicist premise of a theological tradition of
progressive revelation, of divine accommodation to the current state of humanity, and
emphasizing what our natural ontological state as mere humans means for our understanding of
the divine.

This is the anthropological stance that the Unitarians took up against their orthodox
brethren. Wayne Brown’s unsurpassed The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870
makes clear what role the uptake of German higher criticism in New England had in the
Unitarian Controversy that surrounds Channing’s Baltimore sermon—it was seen as a weapon.
After a short preamble, Channing begins the first “division” of his sermon, on principles of
biblical interpretation:
We regard the Scriptures as the records of God’s successive revelations to mankind, and particularly of the last and most perfect revelation of his will by Jesus Christ. Whatever doctrines seem to us to be clearly taught in the Scriptures, we receive without reserve or exception. We do not, however, attach equal importance to all the books in this collection. . . . The dispensation of Moses, compared with that of Jesus, we consider as adapted to the childhood of the human race, a preparation for a nobler system, and chiefly useful now as serving to confirm and illustrate the Christian Scriptures. (“Unitarian” 60)

The rhetorical display is keen: to invite the orthodox to accept the anthropological stance, begin with that historical example of evolution that all Christians agree with—the transformation of the Torah into the Old Testament. But once it sneaks in, once you allow the meaning of the Old Testament to be guided by historical and cultural knowledge of the Hebrew Torah, you bring it strikingly close to one’s own Testament. If Judaism is an expression of an ancient cultural community originally of Palestine, then does that mean Jesus or St. Paul’s work is an expression of their less ancient community?

Indeed, it does and this was the weapon the anthropological stance of the higher criticism gave them. The findings of the higher criticism were turned on all creeds and doctrines that could not be traced back to the Bible understood in its historical context. When Channing says that the Old Testament was “preparation for a nobler system,” Jesus’s, the word “system” signals his true intent—if Jesus’s original system is the true religion, then systematic creeds that exist around that system are encrustations. “All Christians,” Channing says, occasionally adopt [the commonplace principles of interpretation], not excepting those who most vehemently decry them, when they happen to menace some favorite article of their creed. . . . None reason more frequently than those from whom we differ. It is
astonishing what a fabric they rear from a few slight hints about the fall of our first parents; and how ingeniously they extract, from detached passages, mysterious doctrines about the divine nature. We do not blame them for reasoning so abundantly, but for violating the fundamental rules of reasoning, for sacrificing the plain to the obscure, and the general strain of Scripture to a scanty number of insulated texts. (65)

“We may wish, in our sloth,” Channing goes on to say, “that God had given us a system, demanding no labor of comparing, limiting, and inferring” (67). But that is not our lot; God gave us the faculty of reason and He expects us to use it. “[I]t is the part of wisdom to take revelation as it is given to us, and to interpret it by the help of the faculties” (67).

And so, in the opening wedge of Channing’s manifesto, we can discern the problem Emerson would make explicit in the Divinity School Address. Channing’s argument for Christianity as the “nobler system” for all of humankind, which liberals had in common with orthodox, hinges on making Jesus the final, “last and most perfect” source of revelation in the world. Emerson bemoans the fact that “Miracles, prophecy, poetry, the ideal life, the holy life, exist as ancient history merely” (“Address” 80). Emerson would attack our idolatry of the “person of Jesus” (82) because we’ve misunderstood what Jesus meant when he said, ‘I am God, I am His Son, I am divine.’ What he meant, Emerson says, is that we, all of humanity, are divine because ‘I, Jesus, a man, am divine.’ Jesus is not special because he was right when he said we are all special. “The idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes” (81). In other words, Emerson goes behind the scientific-rationalist posture of the higher criticism to the naturalist-rationalist ontological premise, and weaponizes that. And Emerson accepts the consequences of funding our faculties fully and having them take responsibility for religion
generally. It is “not alone in Palestine” (80) that we can find the “religious sentiment” (79). Emerson concedes that in Christianity “it reached its purest expression” (80), but the religious sentiment “successively creates all forms of worship” (79, emphasis mine).

Rather than flinging more empirical facts at the balance between interpretations of the Bible, Emerson fully embraces the naturalist philosophical position and renders a fully naturalized sense of quasi-supernaturalist concepts like inspiration and genius, as well as fully supernaturalist concepts like revelation and miracle. He also essentially shows that the concept of worship is quasi-supernatural if it accepts any form of supernatural support in its favor. Yet he still accepts the concept of progress in cultural forms such as worship, and so would avoid charges of relativism, which are often lying in the background to the charges of infidelity, atheism, and pantheism that always accompanies threats of antinomianism.

The root of antinomianism is the ability to give oneself the laws one will follow—but, critics fear, this is tantamount to making morality relative to one’s whims. Emerson, however, accepts these consequences as well. “And truly it demands something godlike in him,” Emerson says in “Self-Reliance,” “who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster” (43). Why? Because Emerson realizes that when we turn away from other authorities—God, nature, or other people, supernatural or otherwise—there is nothing that assures us of our correctness. In the final analysis all we can do is “hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation” (30). So Emerson implicitly exposes the Enlightenment-Unitarian concept of reason, which undergirds their rationalist conviction that they know what morality truly is, as itself supernaturalist in nature—for it plays the same role as the Calvinist theory of verbal inspiration: certifying one’s beliefs to be true. In Emerson there is no protection against being wrong about one’s beliefs, and so one
might be struck with an inconsistent conviction the next day. Courage, on Emerson’s view, is
daring to believe what you think no matter what you believed yesterday or will tomorrow, nor
what anyone else thought yesterday, thinks today or tomorrow. Antinomianism as an activity is
hard.

But what is most interesting is that by weaponizing a premise that is distinctly rationalist,
naturalist, and one could add modern and secular, Emerson upends the dialectic between
orthodox Calvinist and liberal Unitarian, creating the liberal-Transcendentalist/orthodox-
Unitarian distinction, all by producing a religion of poetry. This is the surprising effect of
Emerson’s adherence to premises discoverable in Enlightenment rationalism—the consequences
are Romantic. The anthropological stance that reduces religious forms to cultural forms makes
possible Emerson’s casting of religious forms as poetic forms. “All that we call sacred history,”
Emerson says in “The Poet,” “at test that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology”
(7). While others of international Romanticism have had similar projects, and the idea of a
relationship between religion and poetry has a long lineage, Emerson’s might be the most
forward-thinking for its ability to think through the premises of political democracy.

The most essential premise is some form of individualism: each person has an inviolate
core, and it is this core that things like dignity or human rights, for example, adhere to. A further
premise for the American democratic project is the essential equality of each person, declared by
Jefferson but followed through by every expansion of suffrage. This is what Tocqueville
observed when he said, “The striking feature in the social condition of the Anglo-Americans is
that it is essentially democratic” (50). Emerson’s quasi-political democratic individualism
comes out in the Divinity School Address when he thinks each person to be a locus for
revelation. Revelations can come in any form of expression, but, Emerson says in the Address,
“clearest and most permanent, in words” (84). And here Emerson brings to bear his making of life into poetry—when Emerson puts his naturalism about miracles as being “one with the blowing clover and the falling rain” (81), he’s not just implying that he rejects breaks in nature, nor only naming an instance in which the experience of nature could be personally miraculous, but also performing that miracle we call “eloquence.” Everyone’s life is capable of eloquence. “The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the should speaks, alone can teach. Courage, piety, love, wisdom, can teach; and every man can open his door to these angels, and they shall bring him the gift of tongues” (84).

Emerson’s religion of poetry is a poetry of life. And the individual, implied formulas here are all two-way for Emerson: “life is poetry” such that each life has its little poetry about it, but also “poetry is life” such that if we don’t put our lives into our poetry, it will suffer. And the latter form, “religion is life,” is what Emerson was particularly concerned about in the Divinity School Address. For Emerson and the Unitarians (and the Calvinists for that matter) all believed in the “life is religion” formula: without religion in our lives, our lives will suffer. “From the views I have already expressed, you will infer the sad conviction, which I share, I believe, with numbers, of the universal decay and now almost death of faith in society” (84). The Unitarians and Calvinists all believed immorality that way lay, and so were greatly concerned with a perceived communal loss of piety, but Emerson greatly expands the scope of what piety can touch, well beyond strict questions of moral, ethical, and/or legal behavior and into our manners, mores, and proprieties. The “sentiment of virtue”—Emerson’s central and flexible term for our internal divinity in the Address—inflects all of them. “Wonderful is [the “religious sentiment”’s] power to charm and to command. . . . It makes the sky and the hills sublime, and the silent song of the stars is it” (79).
So when Emerson bemoans a condition the Unitarians and Calvinists all noticed and were concerned about, the weakening of pious religiosity in the New England area, Emerson’s answer very logically is: then put more life into your sermons, for religion is life. “The true preacher can always be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life,—life passed through the fire of thought” (86). The preacher’s eloquence will activate theirs:

let their timid aspirations find in you a friend; let their trampled instincts be genially tempted out in your atmosphere; let their doubts know that you have doubted, and their wonder feel that you have wondered. By trusting your own soul, you shall gain a greater confidence in other men. For all our penny-wisdom, for all our soul-destroying slavery to habit, it is not to be doubted, that all men have sublime thoughts . . . (90)

It is this activation that is the central task of the preacher. For the thesis of the Divinity School Address is that our access to God and truth are “guarded by one stern condition[:] . . . It is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject” (80).27

The natural outgrowth of Emerson’s purely secular idea of progressive revelation is “The Poet.”

The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of
animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. (13)

The closer to their poetic origin, the more words are alive to us, the more they still reveal. “[A]ll the expressions” of the sentiment of virtue, Emerson says, “are sacred and permanent in proportion to their purity. The expressions of this sentiment affect us deeper, greater, than all other compositions. The sentences of the oldest time, which ejaculate this piety, are still fresh and fragrant” (Address” 79-80). Emerson’s argument in the Address is aimed at transforming spiritual energies currently going into system-building and defense (like in Andrews Norton), and instead divert them into inspired pushings against the boundaries of thought—uplifting poetic eloquence. Jesus provoked the world with his declaration that the divine was within humanity; Emerson wishes provocations of our own to spur us into our next stage.²⁸

3. Anti-Creedalism, Inquiry, and Intellectual Fellowship

To fully appreciate the significance of Emerson’s turn to provocateur in the Divinity School Address, the side of Emerson facing Carlyle, the side that makes us wonder whether Emerson really did after all expect to create controversy that day in July, we must remember that liberals were liberal because they devalued the importance of doctrinal agreement. This gave rise to both 1) initiatives for tolerance in controversy and 2) anti-creedal polemics. If difference in opinion is getting in the way of fellowship with one’s community, then one can imagine how creed in general might start to look like the problem. So, when the Unitarians weaponized the higher criticism and added it to their polemical rationalism, the form of their argument sometimes became: We must strip down to what Christianity really is by weeding out the creed and philosophy. Then we might have religion without so much controversy about what to believe.²⁹
Emerson goes a different way. Emerson grew up in a time of dissent, when there were active and momentous conversations about what to believe. He witnessed Channing’s eloquence in defending the liberal cause by focusing on, not our beliefs, but our behavior—how people embody Christian virtue in how they live. And then he saw Norton become widely regarded as “the Unitarian Pope,” with his implicit mandate that, as Emerson puts it in the Address, “you must accept our interpretations” (82). It is partly through Norton, but more widely from intellectual and religious history that Emerson came to witness the inevitability of creeds. However, instead of despairing that true religion would always have to fight against impurities, like a Norton, Emerson pushed the anthropological stance further and presented a severely un-magical Christianity in the Divinity School Address. “Historical Christianity” is just one more creed created to help us be better people. However, this is a historical Christianity that we’re actually still taking part in, one still evolving its forms to the cultural community we now are. We can provide our own fresh and fragrant revelations to transform our cultural moment, to push it forward.

We misunderstand Emerson’s religious stance unless we see how it is connected in a practical way to the activity of antinomianism—of dissenting, holding one’s own counsel, following one’s conscience. Even more, one of our central provocations are these natural revelations. But unlike Miller’s sense of antinomianism, “sublime thoughts” should not be thought of as easy. Emerson thinks we all have the potential for greatness and sublimity, but his sermonizing on those subjects would make little sense if there were not some sort of resistance to their potential flowering. Creed is a good name for this resistance because it is a medial concept—it is the kind of thing all people are tempted to create for themselves, but it is also
something we can inflict on others. So the threat is both internal and external. Provocation, then, is an effort to unsettle ossifying thoughts.

The effort to provoke through dissent, however, sits oddly with religious liberalism. A “liberal” or free and independent relation to one’s fellows regarding points of doctrine developed in New England because of the revolution in religious practice that Protestantism represented, combined with the continued use of churches. Protestantism at its lowest common denominator was a protest against existing Christian Church structures and practices, the break giving birth to the Catholic Church, the original “papist” enemy. But as one of the great historians of the Reformation, Roland Bainton, notes,

The fight for recognition on the part of the confessions [of Reformed faith as alternatives to the Catholic Church] is a phase of the struggle for religious liberty, but only a limited phase. The confessions in the sixteenth century, apart from the Anabaptists, were not fighting for the right of each individual to worship as he pleased. The Catholic party roundly denounced toleration as the most culpable indifference, and Beza, the Calvinist, stigmatized religious liberty as “a most diabolical dogma because it means that every one should be left to go to hell in his own way.” (211)

This is the dynamic set at the root of Protestantism between antinomianism and church structure that sociologists have identified as producing a recurrent schisming of sects, especially in the United States. One hardly needs to cite Emerson’s “but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil” (“Self-Reliance” 30) to see what role he plays in the Protestant drama.

In Emerson’s time and place, however, the dynamic between individual believer and social community of the church was far more real than it is today (for many) and needs to be recovered to understand Emerson’s sense of preaching and revelation. Because on the surface,
Emerson’s individualism seems so radical that it just simply spells the death of the church, the death of communal forms of religious life. But whatever the ultimate fate of communal forms of spirituality, Emerson’s thought is more subtle on this point about his individualism. He does believe community has a role in our lives; a life of self-reliance is not achieved by simply stopping up our ears as Odysseus would do for us, since the siren lives within us as well.

The dynamic between individual believer and social community at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries is embodied by the relative values of truth and fellowship. Creeds were measures of doctrines, held to be true, that directed one on how to be a good Christian. As Wright tells us, “Alarmed by the spread of Arminianism, the orthodox [Calvinists] began to smoke it out by means of creeds and confessions of faith, and to draw the party line in various acts of fellowship among the churches” (Beginnings 229). This alarm was urgently felt principally because of the discreitional but heavily used congregational practice of pulpit exchange—this circulated ministers with perhaps differing views through the corporate body of consenting churches, making possible both the anxiety of leaving one’s parish in another’s hands as well as giving the ability to choose to end the practice with some particular ministers.35 The truth of doctrines when given priority, however, becomes at odds with the distinguishable act of fellowship itself, the multifarious social activities that make up belonging to a church. And as Wright notes, “not all the Calvinists joined in the heresy-hunts which increased in frequency as the threat of Arminianism and Arianism became greater. . . . Such [moderate Calvinists] were willing to tolerate those who disagreed with them on doctrine, and refused to use creeds as devices for excluding other Christians—or at least Protestants—from fellowship” (229-230).

But what do you do if you genuinely believe that someone is, essentially, not being and acting as a Christian because in error? This is the dilemma that the Unitarians encountered. In
their first, reforming phase, future-Unitarians came to believe “the right of each man to read the Bible, and interpret it as God gave him light, to be the basic doctrine of Protestantism” (Wright, Beginnings 236). And because of differences in God-sponsored light, “the lesson of Christian charity” should be that “men should not presume to judge prematurely” (237) the relative truths that others find in the Bible. But the liberals did not abandon the notion that some doctrines were essential to Christianity. And so with the value of tolerance spreading, orthodox Calvinists began to perceive a strategy emerge among their liberal brethren: “represent [doctrines] as matters of controversy, and so, of indifference in religion” (qtd. in Wright, Beginnings 237). By affirming there are doctrinal essentials to be urgently true or false about, liberals were able to specify a criterion for a doctrinal point being secondary and tolerated—the fact of disagreement itself. As Aaron Bancroft put it early on, “truths of a secondary consideration [a preaching minister] may keep within his own breast, when the publication of them will tend to disturb the minds of men, and impede the usefulness of his ministry” (qtd. in Wright, Beginnings 237).

Liberals were shifting what was primary to secondary to maintain fellowship, and the occasion of dissent—rather than prompting a process of resolution—was enough to make a doctrinal point secondary. The problem is that this may be kept up indefinitely. And what the Miracles Controversy shows is that there were distinct limits to many Unitarians’ doctrinal tolerance and anti-creedal rhetoric. Emerson, on the other hand, takes off all limits on both. Emerson’s anti-creedalism is not just “against creed” as an abstraction, but actively and practically destructive of creed—creed is inevitable but inhibits our relation to the divine and so always needs to be overcome, disturbed in some manner when recovering that relation. But if that is, indeed, just another kind of doctrine—which it can’t help being—then Emerson’s infamous response on October 8 to his good friend Henry Ware, Jr. after the Divinity School
Address reveals the character of Emerson’s stance, though as Buell says, it “must have flabbergasted Ware” (*American* 150): “I have appreciated fully the advantage of my position for I well knew that there was no scholar less willing or less able to be a polemic. I could not give account of myself if challenged[.] I could not possibly give you one of the ‘arguments’ on which as you cruelly hint any position of mine stands. For I do not know, I confess, what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought” (*Letters* 2: 167). Arguments are secondary encrustations to thoughts, not a direct expression of them; to debate a doctrine one needs them, and so to debate is itself a sign of the thought slipping away, transforming itself into creed.

Creed is as inevitable as the fossilization of poetry into the language we commonly communicate with, so Emerson’s *liberal* anti-creedalism consists in this: everyone’s creed should be tolerated because *all* of it is secondary.37

We shouldn’t forget that Emerson delivered the Divinity School Address effectively as a layman.38 Wright said years ago that “we are now able to discern what the audience of that day [in July assembled at Harvard] could not know, and Emerson himself could not admit: that there is a hidden meaning in the Divinity School Address, the clue to which lies in Emerson’s relationship to his own minister and in the vocational crisis with which he was struggling” (*Three* 27).39 I’m not sure this was hidden from Emerson, but Wright’s point stands—Emerson was an ex-minister yet on a path of figuring out what his role in life might be, and here as a parishioner he had to listen to Barzillai Frost’s uninspired preaching in his own backyard.40 Though Emerson left the ministry, he still conceived of his talents in those terms and thought the task of ministry still very important. When Emerson criticizes the ministry in the Address it is as someone concerned for the well-being of the parish to which he belongs.41
Emerson sees that one of the essential tasks of the minister in the liberal era of tolerance is *intellectual fellowship*. Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity” takes positions, even has arguments, but it still contains a paean to diversity of thought:

Charity, forbearance, a delight in the virtues of different sects, a backwardness to censure and condemn, these are virtues, which, however, poorly practiced by us, we admire and recommend; and we would rather join ourselves to the church in which they abound, than to any other communion, however elated with the belief of its own orthodoxy, however strict in guarding its creed, however burning with zeal against imagined error. (85-86)\(^42\)

Here is the liberal fellowship Emerson would have grown up with attending Channing’s Federal Street Church with his mother. When Norton takes up the argument that erupted in 1819, however, he “shifted the area of contention from the question of biblical interpretation [as it had been in “Unitarian Christianity”] to the question of the logical possibility of the Trinitarian formulas and the Christological dogmas of orthodoxy” (Brown, *Rise* 71).\(^43\) Though both are areas Norton wished to assert authority, even more significant is that once focus was on “logical possibility,” the sacredness of the New Testament had to be defended. The orthodox Calvinist could say that they are Christians because that’s just what it means to hold the New Testament to be above all other authorities, beyond and incomparable. But the Unitarian cannot take such sacredness for granted. The liberal Unitarian must *argue* that this should be the case, and show *evidence*.\(^44\) Contrast that with Emerson’s admonishment by Ware that his sermons at Second Church didn’t cite scripture enough—Emerson simply took seriously whatever was useful to uplift spirits.\(^45\)

In Emerson’s view, Norton’s real sin in the Miracles Controversy was not the belief in miracles, it was laboring over *proving* anything about or with them, converting them into
evidence for truth rather than focusing on individual truths themselves. Norton on this scheme prioritized truth before fellowship—he would rather be right than tolerate difference. The problem that Norton represents for Emerson is deeper than dogmatism, for as he says in a journal passage from June 1838, “nothing is so shallow as dogmatism” (*Journals* 7: 32). It’s not the holding true of a belief, nor one’s continued adherence to it in the face of opposition, but the general stance toward oneself implied by it—that you’re done growing, done exploring the bounds of thought, when the lesson of the sentiment of virtue is that one’s “being is without bound” (“Address” 77).

Your soaring thought is only a point more[,] a station more whence you draw triangles for the survey of the illimitable field: and the event of each moment, the harvest, the shower, the steamboat disaster, the bankruptcy, the amour of Julia, the apoplexy of Dr Sawdust, are tests to try your theory, your truth, the approximate result you call Truth, & reveal its defects. If I have renounced the search, come into a port of some pretending dogmatism, some New Church or Old Church, some Schelling or Cousin, I have died to all use of these new events that are born out of prolific time into multitude of life every hour, I am as a bankrupt to whom brilliant opportunities offer in vain. He has just foreclosed his freedom, tied his hands, locked himself up, & given the key to another to keep. (*Journals* 7: 32)

Emerson calls this the “position of perpetual inquiry” (32). Instead of facing forward in search of the truths of proliferating events, Norton faces backwards, looking for reasons to constrict what he already believes.

What I’m calling “intellectual fellowship” is just one half of the spiritual fellowship Emerson would have the church be a public space for. The other half we can call, using William
James’s term, “passional fellowship.” This covers Emerson’s project of optimism, his aim to inspire spiritual uplift and boost our self-confidence. I would focus on the intellectual side, however, for the obvious reason that we are still struggling to work out its consequences. For it has been easy to charge Emerson’s sense of intuition with irrationalism, and use “emotionalism” as a term of abuse for his position. The fear over antinomianism has always been that one will cease to take seriously anyone else’s view of things—that one will only look inwards and never out. If such beliefs did not ripple out into an effect on others, through our senses of social order, then no one would get upset by these theological and philosophical positions. Combine privatization of religious and philosophical beliefs with Emerson’s rhetoric that deflates arguments and “external” religion, and one can get the impression that Emerson has no defense against giving license to navel-gazing egotism. But these are red herrings until we appreciate the Enlightenment sign under which Emerson’s concepts and stances achieve their contours. For the remarkable thing is how Emerson, despite making typical antinomian noises, remains committed to the importance of others in one’s own process of perpetual inquiry. From this vantage, it isn’t simply the legacy of Arminianism that needs to reframe our view of Emerson’s mysticism, as Robinson pointed out, but liberal anti-creedalism.

When Emerson talks about truth and inquiry, he is signaling his own appreciation of a shift the intellectual historian J. G. A. Pocock has called the “desacralization of politics.” Pocock’s account of the emergence of religious liberty in the context of the political strife of the English civil wars points to an important shift in our conception of religious belief that informed the American sense of religious liberty as it worked itself out politically. “At the end of the seventeenth century,” Pocock says, “reasonable religion among conservative Protestant elites, such as the English Latitudinarians or the Scottish Moderates a half-century later, had been
intended . . . to protect the established clerisies against the authority of Rome, the anarchy of the sects, or the overreaction of anticlerical erastianism to either of them” (62). In other words, liberal religion needed to find a way to protect itself from centralized authority-structures (whether a nation-state or ecclesiastical body) without eliminating the idea of authority altogether for risk of devolving into sects of one. It attempted this by “an identification of Christ’s gospel with the normal discipline of human society” (63), thus protecting ministerial influence over the behavior of parishioners while letting the value of tolerance transform religious practice into a “religion of civility” (63). At the same time, religious authorities had to relinquish their claims to a role in the authority of state-mechanisms (e.g., through disestablishment), thus creating a sense of religious liberty that mediated both claims of individuals and the state. Extricating the state from religion, however, required the reduction of religion into a “system of opinions” (61)—the only way to protect religious freedom was to disassociate religion from behavior, which the state has certain rights to limit, and make it analogous to speech. This is problematic for those that consider spiritual experience primary, but the effect was to imply, in Pocock’s words, that “the nature of religion consists of free inquiry into the constitution of the universe” (65).

If one starts from Emerson’s conviction that spiritual experience is primary and that belief is secondary, as Miller does to establish the parallel between Calvinistic revivalism and Transcendental intuitionism, then one will misunderstand the scope of Emerson’s appeal to an “original relation to the universe” (*Nature* 7). Emerson is not interested in reaffirming or certifying beliefs by experience, as a typical empiricist or intuitionist would be. Emerson is skeptical of beliefs in general as blocking from view fresh experiences that might produce fresh beliefs. Emerson accepts from Unitarianism the Enlightenment transformation of religion into a
free inquiry into the universe. This is what produces the inevitability of creeds—experience always creates belief as a residual effect because it shadows forth the past experience. Far from epiphenomenal, however, as the revivalistic stance treats beliefs, articulated belief has an ambiguous role in our lives—it can reduce fresh experiences breaking with past expectations embodied by current belief, but it also makes possible the entire range of communicative experiences between people. One cannot approach Emerson’s sense of intuition if one forgets his perception of the power of words.

Emerson’s difference with revivalistic forms of giving priority to experience can be seen by considering Emerson’s relationship to American pragmatism. In Pocock’s argument, the rigid practical distinction between speech and action is the essential implication of Jefferson’s 1786 Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom that proved to be the template for the First Amendment. Until recently, free speech law has attempted to hew closely to a strong version of this distinction, making it exceptionally difficult to curb speech (unlike the state’s easier ability to curb action). But as Stanley Fish argued in There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech, the distinction between speech and action is an effective fiction, not one that can be held all the way down. Emerson implied as much when he said, “Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (“The Poet” 6). One persuasive reading of pragmatism makes its central premise Charles Sanders Peirce’s use of Alexander Bain’s definition of belief as a habit of action: “And what, then, is belief? It is the demi-cadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life. We have seen that it has just three properties: First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit” (“How to Make” 129; italics Peirce’s). Peirce’s view was followed up by William James, who urged that if different beliefs did not
make a difference to practice in some way, then it was not a difference worth worrying about. These views imply that experience is a continuum that takes into account both articulated belief and actions taken because of belief. Dewey called this the “means-end continuum,” which Richard Rorty describes this way: “[Dewey’s] central argument was that the use of new means changes ends, that you only know what you want after you’ve seen the results of your attempts to get what you once thought you wanted” (“Pragmatism without Method” 68). Robert Brandom has amplified this entire line of thought as redescribing the concept experience as, not a datum in the process of learning as on the empiricist conception, but as learning itself: “the process of perception and performance, followed by further performance, exhibiting the iterative, adaptive, conditional-branching structure of a test-operate-test-exit loop” (Perspectives 7). This makes experience just another word for inquiry, as we experiment with our beliefs by acting in the world, and adjust our beliefs as the world responds. Both are searches, conscious or unconscious, for better beliefs.

What Emerson perceives is that free inquiry must have priority over the beliefs produced by the inquiry. And since inquiries are fundamentally pursued by individuals, even if in concert or constraint, freedom of inquiry implies the dramatic change to our relationship to groups I’ve called intellectual fellowship. As Channing pilloried the Calvinists, “We are astonished at the hardihood of those, who, with Christ’s warnings sounding in their ears, take on them the responsibility of making creeds for his church, and cast out professors of virtuous lives for imagined errors, for the guilt of thinking for themselves” (“Unitarian” 98). We all inquire into truth with the amount of light we’ve been given, and so the aim of parish and preacher should be aiding each individual’s inquiry, not dictating it, directing it, nor authorizing it. It is the special mission of the preacher, though, to make sure the inquiry is on-going.
Emerson represented to at least some of his contemporaries an object for emulation—the virtue of self-reliant self-expression made manifest. This was deeply, however, an effort at self-knowledge—it was above all an inquiry. Jeffery Stout is not wrong when he says, “Emersonians . . . would rather quit the church than grant that some holder of church office or even a democratically organized congregation has the authority to administer the distinctions between saved and damned, saint and sinner, true and false prophet, scripture and apocrypha” (Democracy 20). But while true, we consistently underestimate the role of the community in Emerson’s vision of what a philosophical and religious life of self-examination might be. The threat of schisming is real, but schisms occur when there is a breakdown in fellowship. On Emerson’s view, this must be when self-reliance has not yet “worked a revolution in all the offices and relations of men” (“Self-Reliance” 45). Because if it had, when one spoke with éclat, there would no longer be a risk in becoming “a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account” (29). Rather, we’d be too liberal, too ready to treat all beliefs as secondary, to make people feel guilty for thinking for themselves.

Emerson’s famous remark about the committed person probably refers to the controversy surrounding the Divinity School Address, the most public event Emerson was to be involved in during his lifetime. And while it might have marked a shift in his mood and outlook, it’s hard not to think that he’d already worked out the essentials of his ideal stance by the time of it, and so understood on some level the difficulty he was envisioning we all face. Tolerance of divergent beliefs is a group project—it might seem on its face to be an individual virtue, and perhaps an easy virtue of simply being easy-going, but Emerson regularly tries to make us feel the force of how hard it is. “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in
solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (“Self-Reliance” 31).

This is why we need the great as models, constant encouragement, and constant disturbance. Belief asserts itself as true; we would act according to what is true; as we interact with others, our beliefs would thus assert themselves on others. It is easy to concede the issue to others; it is easy to cut others out of the picture; it is hard to do neither. During his career in the Unitarian Church, Emerson meditated in Sermon 134 on the “Truth of conversation” and the “Truth of character, which is the source of truth of conversation” (Complete 3: 260). Emerson held up “the example of Jesus Christ” as one with “unity of character, whose words went with his actions and so he spake as never man spake” (264). Emerson ends the sermon with “a practical application of its doctrine”:

Is there any more plain duty than this, that we ought to set out with the sublime purpose never to violate the truth? Is this not an object important enough to be worth some sacrifices? If a man would own a county, he must not spend for trifles. If a man aspires to speak the truth, if he would have every word he utters pass for entire fact he must not make compliments. It will cost you much consideration and some sacrifices. You must be careful when you dispute. Be careful with those whom you would please. It will cost you many self-denials and possibly some unjust reproaches to hold your tongue when a talker looks in your face for assent, or a flatterer expects his payment in praise. Let it cost something. It is worth all. (264).

But while we exert the independence of solitude in public, we cannot become so serene that we cease to examine the beliefs that would prompt our praise or dissent. If it’s easy to conform to others, it is also easy to be dogmatic. And that’s the true role of others in intellectual fellowship:
to nurture our aspirations and instincts, remind us that doubt is natural, feed our wonder with theirs, and provoke the sublime thoughts that subvert all dogma.

1 Miller famously said in his 1950 anthology, *The Transcendentalists*, “the Transcendental movement is most accurately to be defined as a religious demonstration” (8).

2 Hollinger’s most recent book, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (2017), tries to shift the more common story I repeated about evangelicalism’s effect on American politics and culture.

3 The revision, in fact, did begin fairly early in Hutchinson’s 1959 *The Transcendentalist Ministers*. See 4 where he calls Arianism the “nominal center of Unitarian dissent,” whereas their “practical source,” or “primary motivation,” was their Arminianism.

4 Wright gives a good description of oscillation between antinomianism and Arminianism as Calvinism became transplanted into colonial America in *Beginnings*, 15.

5 See Gary Dorrien’s discussion of Channing’s “Likeness to God,” 48-50. Dorrien is especially good in his chapters on Channing and Transcendentalism (Emerson, Parker) at giving clear accounts of continuities and differences between the ancestor and his descendants.

6 I would note that the interpretation of Channing’s ratio to Emerson that I develop here, following Dorrien (48-50), was first proposed by Elizabeth Peabody. Dorrien, in good scholarly fashion, cites a passage from “Likeness to God” that is the same passage Peabody cites to Channing in order to elicit his reaction, that Emersonians (though not Emerson, as I implied) “fall into a kind of ego-theism.” (Peabody locates the conversation with Channing to about the last year of his life.) Peabody also prefigures and complements the interpretation of Emerson I offer in the final section of this chapter when she says, “[Channing] was the direct inheritor of the religion of the Independents, of which Roger Williams’s protest was the earliest blossom, and the Unitarian protest a later fruit” (29). In Peabody’s interpretation, the antinomian Williams “found[ed] the first community in Christendom . . . that separated Church and State” (28). This makes the liberalism Channing had in common with Emerson central in the same way I take it as a premise to interpret Emerson’s philosophy. (See Ahlstrom on Williams’s founding of Rhode Island: “From the beginning the colony had separated church and state and offered freedom of conscience to all, with the result that it became a sanctuary for Baptists, Quakers, and other independent spirits, including those who wished freedom from any kind of religious obligation. Rhode Island was thus unique in New England, though its history was hardly less informed by the Puritan spirit than was that of its imperious and more authoritarian neighbors” (Religious History 108).)

7 See Conrad Edick Wright’s preface to *Unitarianism, 1805-1865* on the “new historiographical era” when Earl Morse Wilbur’s emphasis on continental Arianism was eclipsed by a native Arminianism in the work of C. Conrad Wright, Ahlstrom, and Howe.

8 See Miller, “From Edwards” 199 for his citations of the Divinity School Address. The drift of Miller’s argument is that Transcendentalism was similar to the Great Awakening as people realized they needed a pious, spiritual rejuvenation that they weren’t getting before. However, as Howe especially argued, this is misleading as well, insofar as the Unitarians were quite concerned about the feeling of piety, and as desirous as their orthodox brethren for a widespread spiritual awakening. See Howe’s foundational discussion of “self-cultural” in Unitarian moral philosophy, *Unitarian Conscience* 106-120, which has been extended in Robinson’s work on
Unitarianism and Emerson. Howe’s discussion of self-culture occurs at the point at which he aims to correct our impressions about Unitarian piety.

Ahlstrom likes to attribute this prediction; see for example Religious History 402 and American Reformation 3. But as widely cited as it is, Stuart doesn’t appear to have used William Wilberforce’s famous tag, though it functions as a signpost in the times. For example, in an 1835 letter to Emerson, Carlyle says, “To speak with perhaps ill-bred candour, I like as well to fancy you not preaching to Unitarians, a Gospel after their heart. I will say farther that you are the only man I ever met with of that persuasion whom I could unobstructedly like. The others that I have seen were all a kind of half-way-house characters, who, I thought, should, if they had not wanted courage, have ended in Unbelief; in ‘faint possible Theism,’ which I like considerably worse than Atheism. Such, I could not but feel, deserve the fate they find here; the bat-fate: to be killed among the rats as a bird, among the birds as a rat” (Slater 113). “Half-way house to infidelity” gets bound up with Stuart because he essentially and forcefully makes that point about the Unitarians’ use of German biblical criticism at the end of his 1819 response to Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity” (see Letters 157) and Channing does use the phrase in his 1819 “Objections to Unitarian Christianity Considered” (see Works 5: 404). Further, Stuart reprints his open letters to Channing in 1846 and attaches a postscript that emphasizes how the example of Theodore Parker, especially, makes “plain and evident to all attentive observers . . . as to what fruits he is to expect from such beginnings as those in Germany” (Miscellanies 192).

As historians of Unitarianism from Wright and Ahlstrom to Robinson have argued, Unitarianism as a “corpse-cold” Enlightenment religious tradition of “pale negations” doomed to be ground up by the nether and upper millstones of Calvinism and Transcendentalism is quite nearly a fiction created by Emerson himself. See Ahlstrom, American Reformation xiii and Hutchinson, Transcendentalist viii-ix. There’s no better evidence of this fiction, perhaps, than the rhetorical pattern of sprinkling in Emerson’s two most famous phrases, “corpse-cold Unitarianism” and “pale negations,” during pretty much every discussion of this time period. And though they are unavoidable when canvassing Emerson and Unitarianism, it is easy to forget they are not from the Divinity School Address because almost no one cites them—they’re so famous they’ve attained an almost apocryphal status, so accurate no one really cares where (and thus if) he really said them. They attained this status, it would appear, from Edward Emerson’s footnote to “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” in the Centenary Edition of Lectures and Biographical Sketches. In this now problematic essay, Emerson writes, “Luther would cut his hand off sooner than write theses against the pope if he suspected that he was bringing on with all his might the pale negations of Boston Unitarianism” (204). In the footnote, Emerson’s son writes without citation that “Mr. Emerson once used the expression ‘the corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street’” (552). He wrote this in 1846; see Journals 9: 381. On the status of “The Sovereignty of Ethics” in Emerson’s canon, see Collected Works 10: cxii-cxiv. Emerson used the line with “pale negations” in his lecture “Natural Religion,” first delivered in 1861 (see Later Lectures 2: 185).

See especially Hutchinson’s chapter in The Transcendentalist Ministers, “Ripley, Emerson, and the Miracles Question.”

Almost everyone refers to Conrad Wright as originating the phrase in his 1955 Beginnings of Unitarianism in America. However, Howe notes that “the expression was used earlier by others like Arthur C. McGiffert and Adolph von Harnack” (338n67). See McGiffert’s Protestant Thought Before Kant (1911), 189 and 250. McGiffert, of course, edited the first book of Emerson’s sermons in 1938, Young Emerson Speaks, and uses the phrase to describe the
Unitarian position Emerson still maintains about miracles in his sermons, before the rejection of the Divinity School Address (see xxviii-xxix). However, Emerson’s friend, the Transcendentalist and comparative religionist James Freeman Clarke, might have been the first to use the phrase in this way in a review-essay in The Christian Examiner in 1850, “Furness’s History of Jesus.”

13 Though Reid and the Scottish Common Sense school are often pinpointed as the biggest philosophical influence on Unitarian thought, Locke remained a central influence on them for originating supernatural rationalism in his The Reasonableness of Christianity; see Howe, Unitarian 87-88.

14 Here’s another instance of Channing’s subtle difference from Emerson, both raising the specter of similarity and sympathy, while also somewhat precisely confirming the distance: In “Likeness to God,” Channing says, “Men, as by a natural inspiration, have agreed to speak of conscience as the voice of God, as the Divinity within us” (234). As—we’ve all agreed to partake in this trope about conscience, whereas Emerson wants to complete the identification. It is true that Channing also says, “God, then, does not sustain a figurative resemblance to man. It is the resemblance of a parent to a child, the likeness of a kindred nature” (“Likeness” 233). And Emerson, we are likely to say now, recognizes that everything he says is also trope. What they want from their tropes often seems similar; what they’re willing to say to get it, however, might be where to pinpoint their difference.

15 In his 1838 review of the Address, Theophilus Parsons quotes this line and says Emerson “thus preaches a doctrine which leads man to worship his own nature and himself” (38)—the threat of antinomianism.

16 Elisabeth Hurth observes that, “After the ‘Divinity School Address,’ the miracles controversy witnessed a subtle shift of argument from an emphasis on subjective religious truth to the historical reliability of the biblical narratives” (47). From the perspective advanced here, this was a return to normalcy in the face of the truly radical stance.

17 Indeed, Hutchinson suggests that Emerson’s reformist language like breathing “the breath of new life . . . through the forms already existing” (“Address” 92) in Unitarianism is precisely what made the controversy explode: “Reforming energies were not to be siphoned off harmlessly into a new and eccentric religious sect, but were to be applied to the radical remaking of Unitarianism” (Hutchinson, Transcendentalist 65). As much could be said about Channing’s reformist stance toward orthodox Congregationalists, who really rather wanted their hidden liberals gone from the fold. There’s something further to be said, though, about Emerson and this debate, since most historians agree that the trail of liberal theology goes into Emerson’s Divinity School Address, but not through it. Rather, as Hurth suggested (see note above), the trail curls back to Ripley and Parker (see Dorrien as well). I can’t help but think this is primarily because Ripley and Parker remained Unitarian ministers; though that is often the stated reason by historians for the historical trajectory of liberal theological thinking, they do not often reflect on its insufficiency as an account of the conceptual shape of it. Or to put it another way, the genealogy of liberal theology can’t stop at those who continue to go to church if its recognized that the line of thought that led people there led some past the pulpit and out the back door. This line would take more seriously the internal propulsion of liberal theology as it goes into Emerson’s Divinity School Address and on to William James’ “The Will to Believe” and John Dewey’s A Common Faith. The latter are called philosophy, but this simply has the effect of distorting the intellectual evolution of the 19th century.
See Brown, *Rise* 10-26 for Buckminster’s short but influential role in beginning American uptake of the German higher criticism. Buckminster was here writing for Emerson’s father’s *The Monthly Anthology*, a significant organ for that generation’s liberal views.

See Lessing’s “The Education of the Human Race,” collected in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, along with Chadwick’s introduction for Lessing’s role in Germany (especially in his posthumous dissemination of Reimarus’s initial instigations in studying the historical Jesus). Brown cites Edward Everett’s encounter with Lessing’s theological writings as crystallizing his problem with the Unitarian program of defense via supernatural rationalism, and thus precipitating his retreat from the field of battle. The problem lay in Lessing’s aphorism: “Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason” (Lessing 53; see Brown, *Rise* 41). What Lessing called “the ugly, broad ditch” (55) between contingent truths and necessary truths is what drove Kant’s Copernican revolution in epistemology, which continues to set the stage for much philosophical reflection. It hinges on the fact that once something is predicated on historical articulation, it will always fall short of demonstrative certainty because always bound up with the pedestrian uncertainties of being in a time and place. So, for example, at issue for Lessing and the Unitarians was the status of miracles: “The problem is that reports of fulfilled prophecies are not fulfilled prophecies; that reports of miracles are not miracles” (Lessing 52). There’s no way, people like Lessing and Everett began to realize, to get God-like authority to cross into the human realm because once there it is susceptible to the problem of our finitude and fallibility and all that entails. All one has are *testimonies* to the occurrence of miracles, and worse, *claims* to being inspired by God. Chadwick points out in a footnote that Ernst Cassirer, in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, “interprets *The Education of the Human Race* as Lessing’s filling-in of the ditch which he could not cross . . . This is to exaggerate and to overestimate him” (Lessing 37n4). That might be true of Lessing, but Cassirer’s insight is that “The Education” is a bridge to Hegel’s solution to Kant’s problem by suggesting “a new synthesis of the historical and the rational. The historical is no longer opposed to the rational; it is rather the way to the realization of the rational and the real, indeed the only possible place of its fulfillment” (Cassirer 194). See my next note regarding progressive revelation and philosophical historicism.

See Stephen Benin’s study of the history of this idea, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought*: “Accommodation began its lengthy, distinguished, and checkered career in the theological arena, appearing prolifically in both Christian and Jewish religious traditions. It remained confined to the theological realm until the early modern conquest of the sacred by the secular, when it then was put to new uses” (xv). Benin ends his book with a survey of Enlightenment figures that confronted the problem of the concept of *revelation* in the face of an anthropological view of humanity. Benin suggests that the deistic-style dismissal by Enlightenment *philosophes* as Voltaire and Paine exposes “a fatal flaw in their system: They lacked the historical imagination that had been present in Western thought since Maimonides” (201). This makes the contours of the birth of philosophical historicism more interesting than just pointing at Hegel and his milieu. It suggests that Vico, Lessing, and Herder, in the generation before Hegel, expressed a historicist premise from the end of a dialectical history in theology. Likewise, Emerson may have been working from far more historicist premises than we’ve often felt comfortable granting him. (For example, Ahlstrom: “Emerson was no more concerned with history than with tradition. The historicism of the age made no impact on him” (*Religious History* 604).)
Brown goes so far as to give the chapters effectively accurate titles like, “A New Weapon: Joseph Stevens Buckminster and the Beginnings of American Biblical Criticism,” “Charge and Counter-Charge: Channing’s Baltimore Sermon,” and “Liberal Entrenchment: Andrews Norton: 1820-1847.” Richardson suggested in the mid-90s that, while Brown’s book is yet the best, we still need a fuller understanding of early biblical criticism in America as well as its relationship to the international scene (see Richardson, Emerson 592n5). Hurth’s work, Between Faith and Unbelief (2007), goes some ways toward repairing that deficit.

Historians have a habit of explaining the typical Unitarian’s conviction in their own rightness to the social conditions surrounding them. To cap his discussion of Francis Bowen’s confrontation with Kant, Howe begins, “Bowen’s attempted refutation of Kantianism fell considerably short of adequacy; for the most part he simply criticized its ‘moral tendency’” (80). So, Howe then asks, “How are we to account for the preference which the Harvard Unitarians showed for common sense philosophy and natural theology over the more sophisticated doctrines of Hume and Kant?” This displays the general conviction that those of the Scottish School after Hume are not serious participants in modern philosophy, a conviction still largely shared by contemporary anglophone philosophers who still teach their courses to go from Hume to Kant and then directly to the end of the 19th century. (For example, Wolterstorff said in 2001, “Reid has almost disappeared from the canon used for teaching modern philosophy in the universities of the West” (ix); see the rest of his preface on Reid’s place in philosophical historiography.) This is to say that Howe is in good company, for intellectual history has to be told from some point of view regarding what is alive and dead. I don’t wish to impugn his persuasive social explanation. However, it can obscure the philosophical commonality between Kant and Reid (though perhaps not Hume): they treated “reason” as a certifying faculty that could play a foundational role of some kind in our knowledge-practices. See my reading of Bowen in Chapter 1, which shows how Bowen could come to think of Kant as licensing the truth-defying, obscurantist mist-making of Emerson’s prose. It’s quite possible that, as Howe says, “If Harvard Unitarianism was remarkably optimistic, it may have been so because it was the religion of a fortunate group of people” (81). It’s quite possible that, as critics of pragmatism have explained, it’s a philosophy made for, in Santayana’s words, America’s “ruling passion,” “the love of business” (“Tradition and Practice” 117). But social explanations might not exhaust philosophical significance.

The great historian of Christianity, Jaroslav Pelikan, in the face of Lovejoy’s attempt to put the historiographical category of “Romanticism” to rest, says in Jesus Through the Centuries, “For our present purposes we may characterize as ‘Romantic’ the effort of various nineteenth-century writers and thinkers to go beyond the quest of the Historical Jesus to a Jesus who—(to use René Wellek’s formula) by identifying subject and object and by reconciling man and nature, consciousness and unconsciousness—could be called the Poet of the Spirit” (194).

M. H. Abrams’s Natural Supernaturalism is the major study of this motif in primarily English and German Romanticism. Carlyle’s slogan that Abrams uses catches exactly Emerson’s riposte to Unitarian supernatural rationalism.

This is the first subtitle to the third chapter of Democracy in America, “Social State of the Anglo-Americans.”

William Henry Channing recognized and venerated this in Emerson. In his review of “The American Scholar,” he said, “All men have genius, if they will be true to the inward voice” (29). This same line of thought comes out in Emerson’s criticism of “historical Christianity” as an “eastern monarchy of a Christianity” from whose “early catechetical instruction” we will find
“virtue and truth foreclosed and monopolized” ("Address" 82). And compare Emerson in 1834: “Democracy/Freedom has its root in the Sacred truth that every man hath in him the divine Reason or that though few men since the creation of the world live according to the dictates of Reason, yet all men are created capable of so doing. That is the equality & the only equality of all men. To this truth we look when we say, ‘Reverence thyself. Be true to thyself’” (Journals 4: 357).

27 This marks the central failure of Norton’s response to Emerson. Norton’s anger and dogmatism is noted by every commentator, but great passion isn’t a universal flaw, and Emerson was accused of dogmatism just as often. Neither one of those has a direct bearing on Emerson’s conceptual position, or Norton’s perception of it, and holding Norton’s vehement response against him because it seemed unseemly feels petty at this historical distance. Norton’s failure, like many, is to not consider Emerson worth thinking through. One of Norton’s moments of ridicule was to wonder if Emerson’s audience “had not some suspicion of inconsistency, when a new Teacher was talked of, after it had been declared to them, that religious truth ‘is an intuition,’ and ‘cannot be received at second hand’” (Norton 35). I’ve here given an interpretation that suggests he was being consistent, which suggests the question: In what way should we take his claims about not caring of consistency? This is the question of the next chapter.

28 Santayana inherits this naturalizing line of thought when he says, “Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry” (Interpretations v).

29 The attitudes that gave substance to the “liberal” in New England religious liberalism were quite variegated. A major one that could produce endless ironies is a general aversion to public displays of contention (see, e.g., Wright, Beginnings 238f). So, for example, in both Channing and Emerson we find a disposition to avoid doctrinal quarreling—yet Emerson nearly defines the poet-preacher, his own role, as a provocateur. And for Channing’s part we get the spectacle of him essentially initiating a doctrinal fight with “Unitarian Christianity,” but then backing out of it because, as he would say later to Norton, “so great is my desire to purify controversy from personalities that I incline to let [Moses Stuart] off as easily as consists with self respect” (qtd. in Brown, Rise 69). Yet, as Brown unearths in a letter of 1819, it was probably Channing that urged Norton into the fight with Stuart—and this after Channing had opposed Norton’s becoming the first Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature because he was too divisive! (See Brown, Rise 30-31; Dorrien 36.)

30 Phyllis Cole has made this especially vivid in her work on Mary Moody Emerson, especially in Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism. Cole has been a powerful force in broadening our recovery of those contexts in the American 19th century that women were able to perform in, given the nature of past masculinist circumscriptions, and one of these is the home. And given Emerson’s own premises, what could be more important than the conversations we have every day with the people closest to us? This presents some difficulties, given certain dearths of archival evidence to preserve them, but it should not stop us from reconstructing what we can. And what seems clear from Cole’s and others’ work is that William Emerson, Ralph Waldo’s liberal minister father, was never going to be the provocative force of education that Mary Moody Emerson was able to become because of William’s premature death. Richard Rorty has said that one of the fundamental services that humanities professors provide is modeling the life of an intellectual by “teach[ing] the books which have moved them, excited them, changed their lives—rather than having to teach a syllabus handed down by a committee”
This is what the record of aunt and nephew’s correspondence gives us a glimpse of. As Buell says, Mary Moody Emerson “was [Ralph Waldo’s] nearest-at-hand model of what he later claimed to be the defining trait of the scholar or ‘Man Thinking’: intellectual vitality as self-sustaining lived experience” (Emerson 19).

With “corpse-cold Unitarianism” and “pale negations,” this is another unavoidable piece of near-apocrypha. When an origin is suggested at all, some give it to Emerson and most to Carlyle, but it seems likely, as some others have suggested, to have been simply floating around the Cambridge community. Emerson, two months after delivering the Address, called Norton “the old tyrant of the Cambridge Parnassus” (Journals 7: 63). Carlyle, in a letter of February 1839, says that “A certain Mr Coollidge [sic] . . . left a newspaper fragment, containing ‘the Socinian Pope’s denunciation of Emerson’” (Slater 214). It’s unclear but Carlyle seems to be citing the aperçu of Coolidge who left what is likely Norton’s initial August 27, 1838 Daily Advertiser reaction to the Divinity School Address. Robert D. Habich, in his entry for Norton in the Biographical Dictionary of Transcendentalism, says that Theodore Parker called him “Pope Andrews” (186).

It’s significant that in Emerson’s reply to Henry Ware, Jr.’s immediate letter after the delivery of the Divinity School Address, Emerson twice crosses out “offend”: “What you say about the Discourse at Divinity College is just what I might expect from your truth & charity combined with your known opinions. ‘I am not a stock or a stone’ as one said in the old time, & could not but feel pain in saying some things in that place & presence where I supposed they might meet dissent — and I may say, dear friends & benefactors of mine. Yet, as my conviction is perfect in the substantial truth of the doctrine, and is not very new, you will see at once that it must appear to me very important that it be spoken out, & I thought I would not pay the nobleness of my friends so mean a compliment as to suppress any opposition to their supposed views out of fear of offence” (Letters 2: 148-150; I’ve used the Journals method of showing cancellations and insertions). By altering the first two occasions of “offense,” Emerson creates a stronger antithesis with the third, suggesting that while dissent can be hard, and rightly cause feelings, we should not act from fear of the offense that some might take at it. Compare Emerson’s Sermon 134, discussed below.

This, of course, happened in England as well and should be traced to Locke and latitudinarianism. The Puritans were distinctly not latitudinarians when they fled England, and Wright points to the “importation from England of the doctrine of toleration” (Beginnings 224) as one factor of the evolution of Unitarianism out of liberal Congregationalism.

Typical of this viewpoint is the chapter on religion in Habits of the Heart, which deploys Ernst Troeltsch’s tripartite division of religious types into church, sect, and mysticism, the latter being interchangeable with religious individualism. Emerson is one of the major emblems in the book for religious individualism. The insight of the typology is that in the sect-type, deployed in the book to American religious history, “the individual believer has a certain priority over the church in that the experience of grace is temporally prior to admission to membership.” Since guarding the gate is prioritized, “collective discipline in the sect can be quite strong. The sectarian church sees itself as the gathered elect and focusses on the purity of those within as opposed to the sinfulness of those without” (244). The empirical question for Emerson’s posture, as I will develop it below, would be whether the church as a voluntary association can survive in a robust form once one rejects all forms of purity-police, embracing instead the priority of the individual in the radical way the mysticism-type does.
See Wright’s “Institutional Reconstruction in the Unitarian Controversy” for a number of practices that created the context for the liberal dispute with the orthodox Calvinists, esp. 14-17, as well as a description of some acrimonious splits in parish over ending pulpit exchange.

Though equally a common expression then, Emerson’s use of “I confess” in this context is resonant given its technical use in post-Reformation theology as a near-synonym for creed, as in the Augsburg Confession (for Lutherans) or the Westminster Confession (for Anglicans).

This, I take it, is the significance of Emerson saying to Ware, “I shall read what you & other good men write as I have always done[,] glad when you speak my thought & skipping the page that has nothing for me” (Letters 2: 167). This can appear disturbingly like taking any affirmation of one’s position and simply disregarding any and all opposition. I don’t think this is really what Emerson means. While Emerson does take from others what suits him, what authors “have” for Emerson are forms of provocation. One form of provocation is the discovery of “our own rejected thoughts” coming “back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (“Self-Reliance” 27). The possibility of a text “speaking my thought” is not finding within it what one already believes, but finding what one now believes in it, for having read it. The text provokes us into becoming who we are.

The chronology compiled in the Complete Sermons shows a slowdown in preaching in 1838 before the Address is given, principally because “Emerson had broken off his commitment to serve as a supply preacher for the church in East Lexington” (Robinson, Apostle 134; see Letters 2: 113), though Emerson still preaches a handful of times after it.

Wright can be said to have established Frost’s relationship to the Divinity School Address in 1958 in “Emerson, Barzillai Frost, and the Divinity School Address.” When Wright asserts the opacity of the situation to Emerson, he is probably following Whicher in part: “There is some evidence that the Divinity School Address in 1838 was involved emotionally more than he knew with this personal sense of mission [to persuade others ‘to listen to their interior convictions’ (Journals 4: 346)]” (73).

Wright cites a passage from Emerson’s journal of July 8 and says, “as the day for the delivery of the address drew near, Emerson was able to persuade himself that he was speaking ‘simple truth without any bias, any foreign interest in the matter’” (Wright, Three 27; Journals 7: 41). The implication Wright seems to draw is that Emerson ballooned a limited personal reaction into a cultural diagnosis. Compare Wright’s description of Emerson leaving the ministry: “This decision was not an easy one for him to make. It involved the abandonment of the clerical tradition he had inherited; more painful, it amounted to an admission that the profession of the ministry made demands on him that he was unwilling or unable to meet. But he could not handle the situation in such a frank and undisguised form. Instead, he sought to justify himself by arguing that the church was tottering to its fall, almost all life extinct. In short, the blame for his failure as a minister lay not with himself but the institutions of organized religion, which he declared could no longer command respect” (Three 25). One can respect Wright’s defensiveness over the Unitarian church (Wright was himself a Unitarian and long-time faculty member of Harvard Divinity School), which should be understood in the context of Emersonians and even their critic, Perry Miller, constantly painting the Unitarians as stodgy bad guys to Emerson’s self-reliant heroism. However, there doesn’t seem to be anything inconsistent between Emerson having a personal axe to grind, or perhaps having some countertransference, and there being truth to his diagnosis, especially as it relates to a broader philosophical difference between Emerson and established forms of institutional religion in the early 19th century. After all, Emerson’s own argument in the Divinity School Address is that a preacher should bring their
own life into their preaching—and the Address gives us a very clear example of one form of this. From this perspective, Emerson isn’t suggesting that one necessarily needs to become a memoirist. Rather, one transforms one’s personal experiences into assertions about the world, amplifying what seems true for you into what could be true of others.

41 See especially Robinson’s *Apostle of Culture* for an extensive interpretation of the arc of Emerson’s career from preacher to lecturer to essayist.

42 When you add up Channing’s arguments, against doctrine, creed, and for liberal diversity, it’s hard not to sympathize with Moses Stuart’s response to this passage in 1819: “Allowing that I and those with whom I act are sincere in our belief, you yourself would say, that we should be justly chargeable with the greatest inconsistency, did we not feel strong desires to resist the innovations that are attempted to be made, in many important points of our theology. Permit me to add, that real charity may sometimes attribute strong feelings and a deep interest on this subject, to ardent benevolence towards those whom we think to be in a dangerous condition, rather than to party zeal, blind credulity and ignorance, or an exterminating and injurious spirit” (*Letters* 164-165). This applies forcefully the conundrum for liberals regarding belief I posed earlier as the Unitarian dilemma, which might be abstractly put: Since beliefs have consequences for behavior, how would you have us argue if we sincerely fear a change of behavior you too would deplore?

43 See Brown, *Rise* 68-70 for Channing’s maneuvering of Norton into principle combatant against Moses Stuart. Brown’s book as a whole is still indispensable to understanding the birth of Unitarianism because of its narrow focus on the uptake of German higher criticism.

44 This is how Howe can say that “within the Harvard Unitarian system of values, no more important or practical project could have been undertaken” (*Unitarian* 82) than Norton’s *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* (1837-44), despite its consignment to the dustbin of history. Once Norton persuasively shifted the ground of debate from biblical interpretation to logical necessity, he would eventually have to write the multivolume work in order establish the Gospels as trustworthy reporters of Jesus’s miracles, miracles needed to establish Jesus as the all-time most important vessel of God’s message.

45 See Emerson’s letter to Ware of December 30, 1828. A month after Emerson was approached about replacing Ware at Second Church (with Ware moving to a Harvard appointment), Ware apparently sent a note to Emerson criticizing his sermons. “I have affected generally,” Emerson responded, “a mode of illustration rather bolder than the usage of our preaching warrants, on the principle that our religion is nothing limited or partial, but of universal application, & is interested in all that interests man. I can readily suppose I have erred in the way you mention, of failing to add to my positions the authority of scripture quotation . . .” (*Letters* 1: 257). See also his letter to Ware of July 1, 1829. On Emerson’s career as a preacher, in addition to Robinson’s *Apostle*, see his introduction to *The Complete Sermons* in the first volume and Mott’s “The Strains of Eloquence”: *Emerson and His Sermons*. See especially Mott’s second chapter, on “The Unitarian Problem of Vocation,” which situates Emerson’s own problems in the more broadly felt difficulties New England ministers faced as ministers given their views.

46 This and some other pieces from the beginning of the journal passage I’ve cited find their way into “Literary Ethics.”

47 O. W. Firkins’s transumption of the “half-way house to infidelity” trope is relevant here: “Emerson’s interest in reform, or rather in renovation, was sincere and far-reaching—too far-reaching to be readily inflamed by specific causes and occasions. His hunger was not greedy precisely because it was insatiable. Of two travellers, one, refusing to stop at the half-way house,
pushes on to the large town which is his destination: he may stand for the average radical. The other, for whom the large town is itself a half-way house, whose destination is on the verge of the continent, stops contentedly at the first good lodging-place; he may stand for Emerson. Both differ sharply from the man who stays at home” (169-170). David Bromwich comments that this quality makes Emerson “a possible, though difficult, ally for a radical” (“Literary Radicalism” 146).

48 James defines his thesis in “The Will to Believe” as: “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth” (464, italics James’s). “Passional” is a bit of a barbarism, but for whatever reason, as James recognized, we don’t have a good parallel for “intellectual” that can perform the same conceptual role. Richard Rorty has argued in “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance” that James’s tactics in “The Will to Believe,” specifically the notion of a “passional nature,” concede too much to the cognitivist, someone who is a rationalist about belief like Norton. I cannot argue the issue here, but my claims in this chapter about Emerson imply a revision of the arc that goes from Emerson to James to Rorty.

49 Morton White, one of the few American philosophers through the middle of the 20th century to try and tell a story about American philosophy, is a good example of what happens when we trade at the edges of Emerson’s writing. This passage from the end of his Science and Sentiment in America is emblematic:

The denigration of Locke’s view of reason and of science was continued in the early nineteenth century by the Transcendentalists, who thought that all men are endowed with the mystical insight that Edwards attributed to the saints alone, and that men of sentiment and passion have access to important truth which those who are merely learned and logical cannot perceive. . . . In this spirit, Emerson encouraged the cultivation of what he called an original relation to the universe, celebrated nature as against artifice, harped on the value of self-reliance, attacked bookishness and argumentation, and regarded concentration on the past and its forms as a reactionary defense of the Establishment. Emerson was not gifted in technical philosophy, but he used it to great rhetorical effect in defense of his moral and literary attitudes. In his writings we find a typically Romantic combination of anti-intellectualism and anti-urbanism defended by an appeal to Coleridge’s version of Kant. The most conspicuous element in Emerson’s borrowed philosophical armor was Coleridge’s distinction between the Reason and the Understanding. Emerson held that the Reason can see truth that the empirical Understanding cannot see . . . (292)

Of the many things happening in this passage, the most conspicuous is White’s fixing upon the Reason/Understanding distinction. It plays a minimal role in Emerson’s thought; it appears in the work regularly in the late 1830s, but begins to disappear in the 1840s. But even more important is White’s trope of “armor”—if I’m right, Emerson rather was attempting to be naked when facing others.

50 See again, for example, Channing’s paean to liberalness at the close of “Unitarian Christianity,” which implies that religious worshippers are inquirers: “We are accustomed to think much of the difficulties attending religious inquiries; difficulties springing from the slow development of our minds, from the power of early impressions, from the state of society, from
human authority, from the general neglect of the reasoning powers, from the want of just principles of criticism and of important helps in interpreting Scripture, and from various other causes” (85). One of the continuing merits of Hutchinson’s pioneering book is that it continually returns to “the broader question of the limits of free inquiry and free expression” (Transcendentalist 20) as it played out in the Unitarian response to orthodox Calvinism, and then their response to the Transcendentalists.

Stout’s target is an entire tradition. His main objects are Whitman and Dewey in considering what the tradition has said about character and the virtues, in particular piety “because this has been central to the broader debate over religion, ethics, and political community” (Democracy 20) Emerson is only lightly sketched, which makes sense given Stout’s conclusion about the upshot of this tradition: “Any divine being who expects acts of piety, while prohibiting acts of idolatry, had better be prepared to tolerate the thinking—the employment of concepts, the making of judgments, the use of imagination—that is involved on our part in deciding which beings, if any, are worthy of worship. This means that one is, at least implicitly, employing one’s own standards of worth. Self-reliant piety seeks to take responsibility for this commitment by making it explicit, poetically or philosophically, in the form of a claim—as something for which reasons can be requested” (31). The Emerson I’ve presented, one committed to both community and self-reliance but skeptical of defending beliefs by argument, still resists this final assimilation. In the next chapter, I turn to working out a picture of what this final resistance is.
Chapter 3

O Circular Philosopher: Emerson’s Alternative Philosophical Project

Systems.

I need hardly say to any one acquainted with my thoughts that I have no System. When I was quite young I fancied that by keeping a Manuscript Journal by me, over whose pages I wrote a list of the great topics of human study, as, Religion, Poetry, Politics, Love, &c in the course of a few years I should be able to complete a sort of Encyclopaedia containing the net value of all the definitions at which the world had yet arrived. But at the end of a couple of years my Cabinet Cyclopaedia though much enlarged was no nearer to a completeness than on its first day. Nay somehow the whole plan of it needed alteration nor did the following months promise any speedier term to it than the foregoing. At last I discovered that my curve was a parabola whose arcs would never meet, and came to acquiesce in the perception that although no diligence can rebuild the Universe in a model by the best accumulation or disposition of details, yet does the World reproduce itself in miniature in every event that transpires, so that all the laws of nature may be read in the smallest fact. So that the truth speaker may dismiss all solicitude as to the proportion & congruency of the aggregate of his thoughts so long as he is a faithful reporter of particular impressions.

——Emerson, Journal E, 1839

In the first two chapters, I took up one of the oldest problems of Emerson criticism: in the title of Henry Nash Smith’s famous essay, “Emerson’s Problem of Vocation” (1939). The
vocation problem is partly a biographical problem of finding a suitable explanation of Emerson’s turn toward, then away from, the ministry and his subsequent struggle to find both a suitable career path and form for his thinking. However, the other problem of vocation that has attended Emerson criticism since roughly his death has been, in what manner do we take his work? To what discipline, or human practice, was he contributing to or performing in? At the time his major work began to appear, it wasn’t too controversial to take him to be contributing to philosophy; 100 years later, it wasn’t too controversial to say he wasn’t.

The shift that occurred in philosophy, and our apprehension of thought generally, might be less called a shift toward system-building and more the withering away of old forms and goals of philosophy. One way to appreciate this shift is to see how constant criticism of the unsystematic quality of Emerson’s writing is. So, whereas in the middle of the 19th century Emerson’s unsystematic, gnomic style created a difficulty that earnest readers wished to overcome, in the middle of the 20th century that style made it obvious he wasn’t actually doing philosophy, or at least was doing it badly and so wasn’t worth bothering with. In Chapter One, I have suggested that Emerson was pushed aside in philosophy departments because he was too unprofessionalizable, and this because his aim wasn’t to create a portable commodity like arguments. Further, we could see in A. O. Lovejoy the establishing of a hope to progressively accumulate results—results that ultimately could all be fitted together into a system. So even if philosophy became more piecemeal in its analytic dispensation, the goal was still always systematic coherence.

Emerson’s rising star in the post-Theory Revolution milieu of American English departments was in part due to the sense that he worked from an alternative vision of what philosophy could do. This alternative self-image offered an interpretive center of gravity for his
thought but without the attendant bugbears of systematic metaphysics. However, his reception has been overinfluenced by the quasi-skeptical visions of the poststructuralists, who like Derrida view the goal of philosophical work to be the undoing of philosophical work. Their work is predicated on a diagnosis of theoretical philosophy as inevitably committed to metaphysical theses of plenitude and epistemological theses of certainty, comprehensiveness, and unification. After making that diagnosis, and becoming doubtful of philosophy’s aspirations but not of its inevitability, the only thing available to do is to constantly pop the bubble of its hopes. This thus gives you a practical program—philosophy becomes the practice of exploding its own theoretical pretensions. In other words, it becomes necessarily self-undermining and that self-undermining becomes a worthy goal and virtue because one can’t but help have the pretensions. This practical philosophy essentially treats philosophy as a spiritual exercise in overcoming for oneself the dream of questing for absolute certainty. But what if one simply avoided becoming seduced by the dream?

Against that picture of Emerson as a skeptical Pyrrhonist regarding the dream of philosophy, there is an alternative picture of Emerson pioneered by Cornel West’s The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (1989). On West’s reading, Emerson is the trunk of an American family tree that extends, at its furthest reaches, to Willard Van Orman Quine and Richard Rorty’s “neopragmatism,” a term coined by Morton White to mark the resurgence of pragmatist philosophical themes and positions in the analytic dispensation of American philosophy.¹ West’s genealogy emphasizes a narrative of philosophical intellectuals, most but not all self-identifying as pragmatist, that have avoided the traditional theoretical dreams embedded in metaphysics and epistemology in order to focus on the practical and ethical side of things. This tradition’s relationship to “philosophical tradition” is epitomized by Rorty’s
remark that West includes as an epigraph: “Pragmatists keep trying to find ways of making anti-
philosophical points in nonphilosophical language” (Consequences xiv).

West’s genealogy, however, was already swimming against the strong tide of
deconstructionism. On top of that, the resurrection of Emerson as a pragmatist occurred in the
midst of the increasing influence of Stanley Cavell and Richard Poirier, fellow-travelers of
deconstruction. To a large extent, this has been very productive. Most especially, Poirier’s
Poetry and Pragmatism (1992) has helped to establish a tradition of reading pragmatism and its
philosophical figures in typically literary traditions. So not only has there been an uptick in
reading Emerson into quasi-philosophical canons, but also in reading James and Dewey into
literary canons. Poirier gives us a tradition that goes from Emerson to William James to Robert
Frost, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens; Jonathan Levin expands the list to include George
Santayana and Henry James; Joan Richardson and Andrea Knutson both add Jonathan Edwards
to the Emerson-James(s) sequence. The direction of all of this work has been to emphasize the
experience of language in the process of thought.

In this chapter, I will offer an alternative interpretation of Emerson that leads away from
the deconstructionist emphasis, but still forefronts his obvious antagonism to philosophical
tradition, and at the same time builds on the constructive possibilities inherent in the Poirier
tradition of appropriating pragmatism. What is right about deconstruction-like readings is that
Emerson does seem to look skeptically at certain theoretical pretensions, and he almost certainly
is doing something different than offering a system. What we need, though, if I am right that
deconstructive readings are in some sense reductions, is an alternative sense of Emerson’s
philosophical project as it relates to his mode of philosophy, and as his project and mode relate
to what has become traditional philosophical attitudes. It’s not enough to dismiss critics of
Emerson, historical or contemporary, as simply hostile, as inflamed by what Theodore Parker called in 1850, a “private personal hatred”—“The spite we have heard expressed against him, by men of the common morality, would strike a stranger with amazement” (228). Even if they were so enflamed, Emerson’s own position demands that we find what is serious and significant in those private, personal reactions to him. The philosophical point of a philosopher can only be constructed against the background of other philosophers. So, to better situate Emerson in the “conversation of Western philosophy” I will isolate two attitudes Emerson displays toward that tradition that most antagonize it, the attitudes that seem anathema to the work of philosophy: Emerson’s cavalier attitude toward remaining consistent and his insouciance about being clear in explaining what he means. Taking these two attitudes together, in the first half of this chapter, we can reconstruct the center of gravity in Emerson’s stance when facing that tradition, and especially modern philosophy’s own most recognized antagonist, the skeptic. Far from being a devil to be rejected or embraced, Emerson’s own relationship to skepticism reveals a deeper avoidance of the search for an absolute certainty in favor of the ongoing ups and downs of inquiry into ourselves.

This stance will put us in position to understand the import of Cavell’s early description of Emerson as presenting an “epistemology of moods” (“Thinking” 11). Two central motifs in the work inspired by Poirier and Cavell that also reflect major, surrounding intellectual trends is an emphasis on the affective dimension of thought (emotions, feelings, passions, attitudes, etc.) and the amorphous, nebulous part that style plays in thinking. Style might not be reducible to form, but what we see in all this work is an attempt to triangulate in different ways the three axes of form, content, and affect as they confront the material conditions of language (phonal, graphical, cultural, historical). The main innovation in this chapter to our picture of Emerson
will be to develop Emerson’s concept of mood as it functions in his noetic economy. For Emerson, our forms of knowledge and lines of thought should be traced back to the moods and attitudes we find ourselves in as we face the world—including texts, others and our own. The central idea in Emerson is not that we universalize one attitude toward the world over another, as can be suggested by the work of Poirier and Cavell, but that we attempt to give each mood its due. In some moods, we will want to be aversive and ironic; in other moods, we will want to be sincere and straightforward. And even more, moods should be actively rotated to see every aspect you expect as well as those that are unexpected. Emerson’s writing is a program of philosophical honesty, an attempt to collect and find stimulus in each new impression the world makes on you. The difficulty here is always found in the risk of such honesty, as we say things that hurt, are inconsistent, don’t make sense, appear whimsical, unjustifiable, and for all we know are all of these things.

1. Inconsistency, Sincerity, and the Gnomic

West’s evasion paradigm receives its impetus from Rorty’s work of the 1970s. During this period, Rorty honed a rhetorical maneuver of encapsulation and transcendence: 1) take a philosophical debate about a philosophical problem, 2) show how the combatants share a crucial premise, 3) reject the premise, 4) redescribe the problem as unproblematic, and 5) shift to higher ground to reveal what real problems there are. It’s generally agreed that Rorty was far better at the first four stages than the last. More often than not, with no small help from his rhetorical flourishes, Rorty’s interlocutors took him to be rejecting philosophy in toto. By the 1980s, Rorty was meditating actively on how one could reject premises of philosophical discourse that looked to many to be definitive of philosophical activity while at the same time remaining a philosopher, engaged in something that was philosophy. For example, in his introduction to
Consequences of Pragmatism (1982), Rorty begins, “The essays in this book are attempts to draw the consequences from a pragmatist theory of truth. This theory says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about” (xiii). And there lies the paradox—pragmatists, for Rorty, wish to unbind us from our philosophical interests by promulgating something that appears philosophically interesting, i.e. a theory.

One maneuver that Rorty sometimes takes in defending himself from end-of-philosophy charges is to define philosophy as something very wide, so wide that one couldn’t help but do it. This was a tact William James took when he defined philosophy as “our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means” (Pragmatism 9). Rorty often took it by citing Wilfrid Sellars’ definition of philosophy: “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars, “Philosophy” 7). However, as Rorty points out, “In this sense, Blake is as much a philosopher as Fichte, Henry Adams more a philosopher than Frege” (Consequences xv). And if one goes back to philosophy’s etymological roots in “the love of wisdom,” it would make your therapist, guru, or grandmother as philosophical as the figures intellectual historians dig up—one can find wisdom anywhere. The trouble with wide definitions of philosophy is if it’s too easy for everyone to be doing it, then it loses any distinctive quality as an activity. But if the definition is too narrow, it’s too easy to evade philosophy—just do something else.

None of these are bad stances in and of themselves, but when we turn to Emerson it still can seem like he wants to do something more traditional. And we still have a tendency to think of “philosopher” as an honorific, for people that thought deeper than most about what they thought about. Any avoidance of philosophical tradition cannot be so evasive as not to engage with that tradition, for then one will doubt it’s a philosophical position one is encountering. At
Rorty’s mode of bridging the gap between orthodox and heretic philosophers was to conceptualize tradition as a *conversation*—texts opt into traditions by involving themselves in the family romance created as the tradition propagates itself. And just like every other family gathering, they have to be treated as talking to each other. Even if they aren’t, the silence is as meaningful and unpackable as anything else.

The problem with Emerson is that while at times he seems to actively engage with philosophical tradition, no one is quite sure how seriously to take it. When Emerson uses philosophical tropes like “being,” “becoming,” “impression,” “Reason,” “idealism,” “monism,” we begin to look for an expected pattern, but the pattern is hard to discern. Emerson disrupts our ease with the terms because, unlike Rorty’s motto that West uses, he *does* use apparently philosophical language but doesn’t seem to draw the same consequences from using them—for example, that one cannot be both a monist and a dualist, but must ultimately choose one or the other. Is Emerson a Platonist, a living tradition in philosophical inquiry, and should we apply Emerson that way in such debates? Should we draw Emerson into a debate with Kant about the relationship between reason and understanding, or even Coleridge? Should we treat Emerson as a phenomenalist because he aligns himself with Berkeley and that’s one way we update Berkeley’s idealism?

What’s more is that Emerson seems to *revel* in this difficulty. “I need hardly say to any one acquainted with my thoughts that I have no System” (*Journals* 7: 302). That might just mean he doesn’t write in the genre of system-building that Kant and Spinoza wrote in, but it might also mean there are no systematic relationships between any of his thoughts. And worse, Emerson will say “with consistency a great soul simply has nothing to do” (“Self-Reliance” 33).
Call this Emerson’s *thesis of inconsistency*. When Emerson says, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines” (“Self-Reliance” 33), he seems to be taking a shot at *everyone*. But what does this shot at philosophers mean? What are its philosophical implications, consequences? Emerson is difficult in this way, in the first place, because of an abiding *gnomic* element in his writing—we aren’t always quite sure what he means to say. And if we can’t be quite sure what he means to say, we can’t be quite sure what philosophical consequences to assign to him for saying what he does. We are puzzled by Emerson because he *seems* to be drawing from philosophical tradition; we are annoyed because he doesn’t seem to care what consequences should be drawn were this the case; we are driven to anger by the threat of the thesis of inconsistency. That thesis threatens to apologize for any falsity he may happen to utter. As he says in “Circles,” we risk that “our crimes may be lively stones out of which we shall construct the temple of the true God” (“Circles” 188).

Philosophers, especially, want people to take responsibility for their ideas, but how do you hold someone responsible who says, “[A] Nemesis presides over all intellectual works. We have yet to learn, that the thing uttered in words is not therefore affirmed” (“Spiritual Laws” 88-89)?

Isn’t not standing behind one’s words a kind of insincerity?

It is not a *logical* problem that philosophers are most concerned with; it is an *ethical* problem. The full paragraph in “Self-Reliance” where Emerson comes close to calling philosophers “foolish” and “little” shows Emerson to have a similar concern:

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it
contradict every thing you said to-day. — ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’
— Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates,
and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and
wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. (33-34)
The paragraph drives toward the place of the gnomic in Emerson’s thought, and especially in the
context of conversational exchange. The consistency Emerson is concerned with is the norm
created by previous action. This causes us to respond to yesterday rather than today. But the
great exemplars, here, could hardly be confused with the unethical, with the insincere who like a
sophist will say whatever they can to get what they want. Three of Emerson’s list were famously
persecuted during their lifetimes, two sentenced to death. However, a separation of the self from
the self’s words exposes itself—it’s easy not to notice the “you” drop out in favor of the
metonymy “tomorrow” in “speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words.” It’s the separation of
the self from the self’s words that attenuate the attribution of responsibility for those words, and
can still cause us to be skittish about Emerson’s position.

The gnomic element in Emerson’s writing causes it to be difficult to understand, but on
the surface, such difficulty in immediate apprehension is no different than the difficulty
engendered by a technical tract. Technical expertise puzzles the uninitiated as much as an
obscure poem might. And when Emerson says, “To be great is to be misunderstood,” every
nonconformist revolutionary attempting to change the paradigms of the accepted and learned will
recognize themselves. Gnomic difficulty is not itself anathema to traditional philosophy, but it is
threatening if treated as inherent. It is genuinely alarming if treated as insurmountable. This is
the alarm that all mysticisms raise to traditional philosophy. Emerson is alarming because he
seems to be saying that greatness will ever slip through the grasp of understanding. With this,
philosophy has had a longstanding détente going back to the Plato that produced Plotinus (rather than the one that produced Aristotle). But when Emerson binds together the misunderstanding due to nonconformity with a conversational nonchalance, he threatens the continuity of tradition, as if in response to another espying a contradiction in the mass of your difficulty, you just shrugged your shoulders and said, “Well, the great are misunderstood.” This doesn’t seem like a principled mysticism that follows from a position that asserts the ineffability of truth, but a whimsical response designed to let one off the hook and shut down the conversation.

This is a real threat, especially if one’s goal is to take part in a conversation. The ferocity with which a philosopher meets the threat of irrationality might be compared to what Emerson says in an actual confrontation with his thinking. The moment is Richard Monckton Milnes’s 1840 review of Emerson, “American Philosophy.—Emerson’s Works.”12 It constitutes what might be the first attempt to canonize an Emersonian philosophical program. Milnes would become a close acquaintance of Emerson’s, but Emerson was introduced to him by Carlyle as “a beautiful little Tory dilettante poet and politician” when Carlyle wrote to Emerson about Emerson’s rising prestige “on this side of the water” (Slater 223). Milnes calls “the Philosophy of Mr Emerson” an “idealistic Pantheism” (69) and this becomes part of the vocabulary of Milnes’s criticism. Milnes is notable for completely sidestepping theological questions, most significant of which is the association of pantheism with atheism, and which still embroiled the name “Transcendentalism” in the wake of Emerson’s 1838 Divinity School Address. Milnes does not concern himself with questions about God’s personality and unbelief, but rather whether “this indiscriminate self-reliance” that underlies Emerson’s pantheism should really be “generally adopted as the sole regulating principle of life” (70). “If man, then,” Milnes asks, “were to be all in all himself, if he did not feel himself (and why should not his first impulse so
to do be also a higher instinct?) a link in that mystical chain of interdependence, . . . how are we secure that any subtlety of distinction will keep the working of his self-trust from practical arrogance, of his self-possession from simple selfishness?” (70-71). “What a battle field [sic] for enthusiasms would the world become, did men once believe that they are not speaking, but spoken from!” Milnes exclaims. “What a range for every fancy-fuddled and passion-puzzled man to wander through, proclaiming his own Messias-ship, and abjuring all other divinity!” (71). To efface away a humanly speaker and replace it with a divine spark we are to place our trust in is to eliminate the source of checks upon that self-trust produced by the sometimes warranted voices of others.

Milnes begins his critical section on self-reliance by saying, “The first look of such a system as Mr Emerson’s has assuredly much that is attractive for assertors of the democratic principle” (69) and ends it with “Let not Mr Emerson complain that we misrepresent him and his doctrines; if matters of this kind are so stated as to be easily misrepresented, the representation is of itself so far defective, whatever the theory itself may be” (71). Likewise, in his unsigned 1839 review of “Literary Ethics,” Orestes Brownson says that Emerson “hardly ever has a leading thought, to which all the parts of his discourse are subordinate, which is clearly stated, systematically drawn out, and logically enforced” (Review of An Oration 4). Both Milnes and Brownson use “system” as a trope for “comprehensive and coherent view” and both are frustrated in searching for it, though differently disposed in which direction to take their frustration. What is revealing is Emerson’s response to Milnes:

These essays never looked for any notice beyond the narrow precincts of the community for which they were written, and I hoped before this time to have set them aside by some more adequate statements on the great questions which engage at present
all thinking men. I know they stand in need of great correction, and yet will you forgive me if I say that I hope to win your assent to bolder and broader generalisations than these which have struck you as viciously partial? I have never been able to announce my faith with fulness [sic], and perhaps never shall be; but are we not continually, as our eyes open, shamed out of the limitations we have conceded? It is of no importance to me, even though I have not (if I have not) a glimpse of the means by which better relations are to be established in society and a higher education attained, if I can see that all means lie in the power of that which affirms the need of reform. Of course I have no expectation of any good to result from social arguments, which are only mirrors and reverberations of a few individuals. The hope of man resides in the private heart, and what it can achieve by translating into sense. And this hope, in our reasonable moments, is always immense, and refuses to be diminished by any deduction of experience; inasmuch as our experience is always dishonest, unequal, whilst the idea is always total, accusing and inexorable to our excuses. (Reid, Life 241). 

Milnes has asked what we can balance against self-reliance to keep it from being indiscriminate and making life a “battle field for enthusiasms”; Emerson concedes it is partial, but that it is only part of a fuller vision, one limited by our concessions. It is a vision of better social relations, but argument won’t bring it about, only the private heart’s translation. Hope for this translation is continually assaulted by our continued inability to affect the translation, and this tells us to reduce our hopes to face the reality of our experience honestly, but it is this inclination toward pessimism that is insincere for it is the affirmation of the need for reform that is the power to affect it. And what it is to be reasonable is defined as the moment hope is given its proper weight.
As we can see with Milnes, questions of metaphysics and epistemology were still tied closely in the 19th century to questions of morality and politics. Perhaps toying with a metaphysical monism and pantheism wouldn’t get you called an atheist, and thus immoral human being, like Spinoza, but they weren’t far off from that. Emerson replies to Milnes that he’s not sure if he can “announce his faith with fullness.” As Leo Strauss has suggested of philosophers with radical ideas about life, they often have had to cloak their true meaning in subtleties for fear of persecution, creating an esoteric text. But there’s an additional problem that Emerson would have felt acutely as well: What if his true meaning is cloaked from himself, too? What if he is still hampered by limitation as he tries to remove the blank from his own eye? Is a poet required to see everything in his own poem clearly?

Emerson’s response highlights three different problems with gnomic difficulties: 1) society might not be ready for the writer’s idea; 2) the writer might not be ready for the idea; 3) the idea itself might not be ready. “Readiness” must be understood in terms of partiality and fullness-to-be-seen. (1) seems easy to grasp, but it is (2) and (3) that are central to understanding Emerson. (2) is a Platonic conception, that “the idea” stands outside of us and can “shame” us “out of the limitations we have conceded” to an unready society. Emerson needs (2) so that it is not others that shame us—a shame that seems suspicious to Emerson’s radical self-reliance. Why do we need (3), though, to understand Emerson? A Platonic idea shaming us would be enough to explain our partialities, our failures. But Emerson also wants to say that the poet creates these ideas that exist outside of ourselves, shaming us. We need to create the thing to shame ourselves. Emerson might need “great correction,” but he thinks the real solution lies in a “bolder and broader generalization,” something beyond what he’s already said, or perhaps beyond what he already understands in what he’s said. When Emerson says, “I have never been
able to announce my faith with fulness, and perhaps never shall be,” it might be easy to read this in terms of (1), but it obscures Emerson’s emphasis on “the power of that which affirms,” “this hope” that “is always immense.” If it was simply a matter of an audience being ready for an idea, saying hope is the most important thing to bring about change would seem decidedly weak—as if there was nothing else one could do to prepare an actual audience. Emerson’s project of instilling confidence in us only makes sense if it is our weakness in creating the idea to shame ourselves. But the readiness must be twofold: Are we ready to glimpse the idea, and have we readied the idea enough to be glimpsed?

2. Whim, Explanation, and the Primacy of the Practical

I began with Emerson’s theme of inconsistency in order to underscore an aspect of Emerson’s polemic against philosophical tradition. We have to risk inconsistency and obscurity in order to articulate ideas that are an honest reflection of our present thinking, the thought of today as opposed to yesterday. Philosophers, in this view, are constantly keeping clear that which falls outside of our present thought that is consistent with yesterday, rather than letting the present unfold the future. If inconsistency is an opening salvo, then what I will call his thesis of whim moves us closer to the heart of what is so disturbing about Emerson’s work from the perspective of philosophical tradition. To begin with, though, it is important to reemphasize that the thesis of inconsistency in “Self-Reliance” is tied in a certain way to action in the world, and not simply as a thesis about semantic or conceptual relations. Inconsistency comes up, not as a theoretical response to our ability to know the world as it does for the ancient skeptic, but as a practical response to our ability to act in the world. Similarly, unlike Nicholas Rescher and Robert Brandom’s attempt to understand the metaphysical and epistemological significance of inconsistency in The Logic of Inconsistency, Robert Nozick’s central discussions of
inconsistency in his *Philosophical Explanations* are in the context of understanding ethical motivation—Why should the “immoral man” find the charge of inconsistency motivating? Why not just say, “To tell you the truth, if I had to make the choice, I would give up being consistent” (408)?

Likewise, Bernard Williams cites Nozick’s pungent example of the immoral man and says, “It is not obvious what a justification of the ethical life should try to do, or why we should need such a thing” (*Ethics* 23).

Both stances raise the question of what philosophy is for, what kind of *doing* philosophy is. “Speak what you think now in hard words,” Emerson says, “and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. — ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ — Is it so bad then to be misunderstood?” (“Self-Reliance” 33-34). It’s the impingement on our action of *saying* that motivates Emerson’s thesis of inconsistency and links it directly to the problem of his gnomic text.

In order to underscore a second aspect of his polemic and evasion of philosophical tradition, I will turn briefly to the problem of treating Emerson as a monist and a dualist. Whether he is a monist or dualist is perhaps the most obvious place that Emerson runs afoul of commonplace strictures about coherence and consistency on an obviously philosophical question. Monism is the position in metaphysics that asserts there is only one substance; dualism asserts that there are two substances, each irreducible to the other. “A believer in Unity, a seer of Unity, I yet behold two” (*Journals* 5: 337). Emerson said this in a journal passage of 1837, a year after *Nature* was published, and Stephen E. Whicher claimed in 1953 that it “epitomizes his intellectual position” (32). This has licensed us to think that Emerson was self-conscious about what Whicher called “a baffling monistic dualism, or dualistic monism” (31). But why is this baffling? Why does it puzzle the philosopher to oscillate between the two positions?
West’s evasion scheme and narrative to interpret pragmatism from Emerson to Rorty centers on the idea that pragmatists wish to evade the post-Kantian epistemological paradigm for philosophical thought. The post-Kantian tradition, as Rorty has it, is focused on explaining how knowledge is possible—What needs to be so that such a thing as “knowing” can even happen? This is a shift from previous philosophical tradition which can be seen as focused on explaining how things are, of adding to what we know and putting us in a better position to know them. The pre-Socratic phusiologoi, like Thales and Heraclitus, thought we needed to explain how such a diversity of appearances were possible if they were also unified, and so sought to reduce the appearances down to a single, real substance (e.g., water or fire). Pluralists like Empedocles thought, no, we should actually admit a diversity of phusis. What they had in common was what Gregory Vlastos dubbed the “Greek discovery of the cosmos.” They set in motion, for philosophical tradition, a search for order in what we see around us, and discovery of this order would help us move from doxa to epistēmē, opinion to knowledge. “Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek for security,” Dewey wrote. “He has sought to attain it in two ways. One of them began with an attempt to propitiate the powers which environ him and determine his destiny. . . . The other course is to invent arts and by their means turn the powers of nature to account; man constructs a fortress out of the very conditions and forces which threaten him” (Quest 3). If the pluralist-minded Aristotle set the route for the sciences and other subjects that study individuated stuffs, then the route to modern philosophy was set by Plato’s desire to move “beyond hypothesis” (Republic 510b-511c). If Aristotle was motivated to make hypotheses to explain how better to deal with rocks, animals, planets, and society (“The planets move in circles because they are not made of one of the four known elements,” “animals copulate because the male provides form to the female’s embryological matter,” “if you want to
live the good life, then you should develop the *polis*”), then Plato was more motivated by what Dewey called the Quest for Certainty—the urge to provide a foundation for our hypotheses, one that stopped the potential infinite regress of explanations for the premises in our thinking, a foundation that for Plato moved us closer to divinity.

If one views the history of Western philosophy as motivated by a Platonic search for foundations—a view common to Dewey and Heidegger—then we have a context with which to situate one of Emerson’s most striking pronouncements that bears on issues of reasoning and thinking. If one sees the history of philosophy as dominated by the effort to explain, then we can find Emerson’s differing center of gravity in his “we cannot spend the day in explanation” (“Self-Reliance” 30). This important assertion in “Self-Reliance” is the only thing that justifies and defends Emerson’s “Whim,” his choice to remove himself from public associations to retire to private solitude. The short, aphoristic passage comes somewhat out of nowhere as Emerson expatiates on the topic of trusting oneself and the inability to tell whether one’s impulses are good or bad (“if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil”). As he suggests that “our goodness must have some edge to it,” and that a “doctrine of hatred” must be sometimes balanced against a “doctrine of love,” we are suddenly thrust into confrontation with the people who are closest to us: “I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation” (“Self-Reliance” 30). (Notice how the confrontational “I shun” precedes the explanatory clause of why he shuns, as if underscoring the impatience with explanation.) Emerson’s preemptive “Whim” is his explanation to others. It doesn’t cover the harshness of his action, but exposes the bottom of the infinite regress as surely as any Cartesian skeptic. It also exposes the possibility that the work of genius might never be
ready, that even if one hears the call of genius clearly, the product created behind the door might not pan out, thus appearing to observers as if the whole retreat were whimsical.\textsuperscript{31} If pressed for reasons for his retreat from public, he can ultimately only say Whim; when astonished outrage follows (as I think is implied, making “whim” a kind of litotes to match the subsequent hyperbole of “Are they my poor” that has so vexed Emerson’s readers), he can only simply express his attitude that he hopes it is more than whim and assert, like a door closing the conversation, that in any event we can’t spend the day explaining ourselves.

Why does Emerson assert “a baffling monistic dualism, or dualistic monism,” and not even care to explain which baffling oxymoron his stance is? We must be driven to simply say: \textit{Because he doesn’t care about that kind of explanation}. He doesn’t care to explain whether he is a seer of Unity or beholds two, or even how he can be both, because his aim isn’t explanation. That is not what his genius called him to do.\textsuperscript{32} Some, like Charles Feidelson, Jr., have thrown up their hands, but say that, while he might have given up on philosophy, Emerson was still productive for literature.\textsuperscript{33} The gambit made here is that we need a more precise sense of how Emerson conceived of his alternative picture and practice of philosophy. We should view Emerson as indicating the kinds of conversation he will continue, and one conversation he wishes to avoid seems traditionally \textit{philosophical}: conversation obsessed with root explanations for our actions. ‘How do you know sitting in your study and writing is the best thing you can do with your time?’—‘I don’t. I only know that my genius has called me. Call it the devil, call it hatred, but I can only hope that in the end it isn’t these.’ We can call “genius,” “devil,” and “hatred” “philosophical” answers because there’s no way to refute the assertion of them as true cause of one’s actions.\textsuperscript{34}
Call this line of thought on explanation Emerson’s *thesis of whim*. To understand why Emerson countenances inconsistency in a radical way, we must see it against the backdrop of the infinite regress of explanation that reveals itself as the primary problem of philosophy that takes Plato’s Quest for Certainty as definitive. If one is constantly plagued by Blake’s Idiot Questioner, then one will never get anything done. The depth of Emerson’s commitment to the un-Platonic primacy of the practical over the theoretical is shown in the thesis of whim—eventually one must simply stop explaining and act. The potential complexity here lies in Emerson’s recognition that *thinking* is an action. So it is *one* kind of thought-action that Emerson considers pointless, but not all of them. Compare on this score “Circles”: “Each new step we take in thought reconciles twenty seemingly discordant facts, as expressions of one law. . . . By going one step farther back in thought, discordant opinions are reconciled, by being seen to be two extremes of one principle, and we can never go so far back as to preclude a still higher vision” (“Circles” 183). Here the infinite regress is embraced, but the principle we can discern behind these two inconsistent stances is moving *forward*—drawing new *consequences*.

But again, one might cite “the boy” of “Self-Reliance”:

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. (“Self-Reliance” 29)
And again, the pattern here is the withholding of today’s “hard words” by thinking of how tomorrow might judge you. Emerson looks full in the face the consequence of his thesis of inconsistency—it is irresponsible. And it’s an irresponsibility we too often risk only if we “are sure of a dinner,” if it puts nothing at risk. “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (“Self-Reliance” 31). The thesis of whim marks Emerson’s acceptance of uncertainty for the sake of acting. There should be no theoretical limitation to our actions. This is, likewise, why the boy does not cumber himself “about interests.” Maybe the boy will lose his dinner—but he doesn’t act like it. Calculating interests frames one’s future according to the past, as if one will never have new interests. And this is further how Emerson looks at all philosophical theories of motivation. They attempt to reduce us, to reduce our actions to antecedently known causes, to explain away our actions and thoughts as being due to, as a materialist might say, “a stomach evidence” (Emerson, “Montaigne” 99). 38

Emerson isn’t primarily concerned with thought, but with “Man Thinking” (“American Scholar” 53)—it is the action that interests him, the transitions from thought to thought, stance to stance. However, we can still discern the pattern of thought below that thinking. Emerson’s theoretical philosophy, the area in which are inscribed the kinds of positions he takes regarding concepts, metaphysics, epistemology, etc., is circumscribed by his practical philosophy, the area of positions that commit him to relationships between conceptual positions and actions, activities, and practices. 39 It is this context that helps us to understand his relationship to reasoning and systematicity. Even if we concede Emerson’s accidental and contingent inability to sustain long chains of inference, that says little about the conceptual position he wished to
occupy with regard to the place and worth of those long chains.\textsuperscript{49} The claim is that we will misunderstood Emerson’s position if we simply say he rejects them, for after all how could one think without any thoughts? Being interested in the action requires use of the conceptual content of assertions. All Emerson should be understood as being disinterested in is a comprehensive coherence that is then taken as a sign of soundness and certainty of reasoning that \textit{dictates} to all further thinking. Comprehensive scope, coherence of ideas, soundness of reasoning, certainty of belief—\textit{none} of these by themselves are suspicious. It is \textit{authority} that Emerson is deeply suspicious of—any authority that usurps one’s own individual judgment in the moment of judging. So deep is his suspicion of authority, we will find, that it fractures each person’s self—but this produces the condition that helps us understand inconsistency.

3. \textit{Circular Philosophy: Hume, Skepticism, and Mood}

The theses of inconsistency and whim are deep attacks on traditional philosophy as it has evolved in the schools, from medieval Schoolmen to modern philosophy departments. Inconsistency flouts a search for systematic coherence that seems a corollary of having a coherent self; whim authorizes simply walking away from others who want justification for one’s thoughts and actions. They are both inward and outward facing. If we understand these theses as tips of the spear into the side of traditional philosophy, then what would a philosophical stance look like that took them seriously? If they are polemics against philosophy, then what does the solution look like? What should be the consequences of these theses on life if they alter our philosophical perspective?

The picture I’ve tried to develop is of these theses as being driven by their practical edge. The licensing of inconsistency is tied to a need for difficulty that risks misunderstanding, as well as the need to speak truths about the world that are tied to moments of experience, whatever their
tie to one’s previous experiences or spoken truths. Inconsistency for Emerson is the outgrowth of a radical antiauthoritarianism, where even one’s own past should not be given authority over one’s current judgments. “The boy,” in Emerson’s vocabulary, “gives an independent, genuine verdict,” “looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by.” It is “the man” that is “clapped into jail by his consciousness,” “a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds” (“Self-Reliance” 29). Whim is the recognition that it is possible that all of these genuine truths that pass by may not in the end prove capable of being woven into a coherent self or “higher” truth, that the partiality of any one of them may never be finally overcome by glimpsing the wider vista they open. But what we require of the philosopher is honest assessment of what passes by nevertheless. This makes philosophy, as Nina Baym put it with a nod to Melville, “the art of always telling the truth” (415).

These theses threaten not just philosophy, but personal identity. Threats to personal identity are deeply felt in modern philosophy. In Descartes’ attempt to push medieval scholasticism to the side, he moved behind “God” as an explanatory device to the individual self alone, in isolation, to find an infinite-regress defeating foundation for any further theory, thesis, or program. In the process, he turned ancient skepticism into a method to find that foundation, doubting everything until he arrived at an Archimedean point. To develop his account in the *Meditations*, however, Descartes presents skepticism as a real existential crisis, not simply a professional nit to unpick: “So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday’s meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top” (16). Richard Bernstein has called this theme in modern philosophy “the Cartesian Anxiety”—built into “a journey of the soul,”
“the terrifying quality of the journey is reflected in the allusions [in Descartes’ *Meditations*] to madness, darkness, the dread of waking from a self-deceptive dream world, . . . the anxiety of imagining that I may be nothing more than a plaything of an all-powerful evil demon” (17).

Hume displays the same anxiety at the end of the first book of his *Treatise of Human Nature*:

The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and being to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty. (*Treatise* 268-69)

Hume, of course, takes this to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire train of thought, of the philosophical assumptions that led inevitably to this point, and says famously: “I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther” (269). However, Hume’s skeptical arguments against, especially, the very idea of causation were so convincing that real existential anxiety spread even further from the Cartesian standpoint of the individual alone facing down the world, since now there was no hint of protecting religious faith from it as there had been in Descartes.
Hume’s impact on Emerson in his youth is well-documented by his biographers. As Robert Richardson puts it, “To a great extent Emerson’s life and work . . . constitutes a refutation of Hume” (Emerson 31). The central problem in Hume that Emerson confronted was his performance of skepticism in the assault on causation, but for Emerson this was not an epistemological problem that frayed our ability to explain the world, to trace effects back to originary causes. For Emerson, Hume’s skeptical attack destroyed the possibility of us acting as original, creative agents in the world. Emerson was clearly not mollified by Hume’s assurance that “the great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life” (Enquiries 158-59). In a letter of 1823 to his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, in which he refers to Hume as the “Scotch Goliath,” Emerson says, “Now though every one is daily referred to his own feelings as a triumphant confutation of the glozed lies of this Deciever [sic], yet, it assuredly would make us feel safer & prouder, to have our victorious answer set down in impregnable propositions” (Letters 1: 138).

As one can witness in his trend toward the thesis of inconsistency, hope for such impregnability is eventually abandoned by Emerson. However, the feelings supplied by encounters with writers and their ideas like Hume continue. In his earlier 1821 Bowdoin Prize submission, “The Present State of Ethical Philosophy,” Emerson’s language is charged with emotion. He says Hume wraps morality and knowledge in “gloomy uncertainty,” reducing them to “idle dreams and fantasies,” and though it is an “outrage upon the feelings of human nature,” if it is true, “mankind will be content to be deceived,” for “who would desire to be awaked from the sublime deception?” And though Reid opposes Hume’s “pernicious ingenuity,” his “reasonings . . . have not been made with such complete success as to remove the terror which attached to the name of Hume” (67-69). While today we might read such writing in an
undergrad as “colorful” amplification for dramatic effect (bordering on the bathetic), Emerson’s journals and letters record a different story—an ongoing internal struggle with the tensions of skepticism. And Emerson’s own struggle merely reflects the very real crisis that people like Hume, and later Darwin, presented Christian religious communities. Mary Moody Emerson held an ongoing dialogue with Emerson in the 1820s, at one point worrying that he’d become “so imbued with [Hume’s] manner of thinking, that you cannot shake him off” (*Selected Letters* 241).

If we step back and survey Emerson’s career, what we can see is a gradual transformation of skepticism from the terror-inducing foe of the modern philosopher, as it appears in Descartes and Hume and Emerson’s Unitarian teachers, to the attitude Emerson found embodied by Montaigne:

> This, then, is the right ground of the skeptic,—this of consideration, of selfcontaining, not at all of unbelief, not at all of universal doubting, doubting even that he doubts; least of all, of scoffing, and profligate jeering at all that is stable and good. These are no more his moods, than are those of religion and philosophy. He is the Considerer, the prudent . . . (“Montaigne” 90-91).

In the early 1820s, Emerson’s imagination was caught by the struggle with Hume over the ground of his faith, but by the late 1820s Montaigne had begun to replace him as infidel of choice. “Great believers,” Emerson says in “Montaigne,” “are always reckoned infidels, impracticable, fantastic, atheistic, and really men of no account” (102). This exact sentiment is echoed 15 years earlier, in an 1835 journal entry that marks the earliest explicit intimation of his *Essays*: 
There is hardly a surer way to incur the censure of infidelity & irreligion than sincere faith and an entire devotion. . . . The manner in which religion is most positively affirmed by men of the world is barefaced skepticism.

When I write a book on spiritual things I think I will advertise the reader that I am a very wicked man, & that consistency is nowise to be expected of me.

When will you mend Montaigne? When will you take the hint of nature? Where are your Essays? (Journals 5: 40)

I do not think it is a mistake that thoughts about skepticism, Montaigne, inconsistency, and the possibility that wickedness is the true cause of his behavior coalesce at this moment. These were the central concerns related to “spiritual things” that led him to suggest, in “Montaigne,” that “The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility” (91).

Several commentators have located in Montaigne a different road for modern philosophy, one essentially not taken. However, Montaigne’s “wise skepticism” (“Montaigne” 89) that lends itself to a style that projects honesty about all things, even the oscillations and inconsistencies in oneself uncovered through sharp self-examination, is the endpoint in Emerson’s own transition from a schoolboy philosopher, soaked in the battles of Unitarianism, to provocateur of individualism that made him, as Lawrence Buell has said, “the first public intellectual in the history of the United States” (Emerson 1). Emerson’s conceptual path to Montaigne can be focused by considering his implicit response to Hume. Descartes’ response to skepticism was to turn it on its head and use it as the weapon for its defeat, a universal doubting so thorough the doubt dissolves leaving a foundation of certainty. Hume more radically accepts the power of argumentative reason to produce doubt in our “heated” mind,
turning Descartes’ discovery of certainty into fool’s gold. Emerson’s solution to this problem of the existential threat of skepticism is to agree with Hume that “reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds” (*Treatise* 269) and to accept even more radically the oscillation in mood that produces Hume’s willingness, “in that splenetic humour” (269), to follow the consequences of doubt and his willingness, in another mood, to “resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy” (269). As Emerson records in 1831, “In my study my faith is perfect. It breaks, scatters, becomes confounded in converse with men. Hume doubted in his study & believed in the world” (*Journals* 3: 314). Emerson did not want to bottle skepticism, tame it. If Hume’s skepticism is one created in the carefully controlled confines of the study, then Emerson’s is the more dangerous existential doubt of a true reckoning of alternative viewpoints. It is hard to be “the great man . . . who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (“Self-Reliance” 31). Emerson, though, wanted to capture the potential power of these oscillations of mood that skepticism, among other things, sets in motion. Hume stands as a figure of unsurmountable argumentative power in Emerson’s early imagination. Emerson’s response is essentially to concede the issue—reason cannot create propositions impregnable to doubt. What we need, however, are not just more honest assessments of the breaks and scattering, as in Montaigne. Emerson comes to believe that power resides in the breaks.

The transition in Emerson’s thought from his earliest phase imbibing Unitarian doctrine to his later phase as freelance writer is this idea that breaking, fluidity, volatility, transitioning are where power resides. They are encapsulated in a formulation we might call his *thesis of transition*: “Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim” (“Self-Reliance” 40).
This thesis is one motivation behind his nearly flip attitude to inconsistency and explanation, to simply walking away from ideas and people. There have been philosophers before him that have held similar views about breaking our forms of understanding and reason, or how argument can seem besides the point to what is truly powerful, gleaned from intuition, vision, sentiment, a “moral sense,” or any of the myriad forms that Emerson clothed himself from time to time. It is this eclectic poaching that produced for a time a sense that he needed to be reduced back to his sources. As Eleanor Tilton said in 1973, “It is apparently required that he be associated with someone else: a Plotinus-Montaigne, a Franklin with wings, a new-model Jonathan Edwards” (79). This is why the dynamics of the conversation Emerson is to take part in are so important to finding Emerson’s voice in it. If we begin with the power of doubt, and the power of reason and the understanding to create doubt, then we can begin to respect the sincerity of his mood-swings as against the placid image of an unfailing optimism. For whatever intuition and vision produces, it can be doubted. Emerson comes to envision power as existing between these states of faith produced by a fresh intuition—whatever an intuition is, it will be a replacement for an earlier one. And further, we can bring into focus why and how Emerson began to harness change and transition in various intentional designs in his writing.

One famous symbol for this design is “Circles”—not one circle, but many. Emerson begins that essay with a reduction of the image to its essential form: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end” (179). This is perspectivism par excellence, the view that what we view are views. The eye, in Emerson, has been a metonymy for the self since Nature’s “I become a transparent eye-ball” (10). The self is a circle, and hence a view; that self forms a circle around itself (“the horizon which it forms”). But what is the primary figure here—the circle, or the circle that
doubles, first to second? If one’s self is both viewer and viewed, then the sequential movement represents a viewing of oneself. As eye, the self appears not to be able to view itself. This is the Humean nightmare of the dissolution of identity that is a consequence of his skepticism: “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other. . . . I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception” (Treatise 252, italics Hume’s). There is no self outside of the perceptions it has. This is also consistently the charge of solipsism against idealism—one can’t get outside one’s own head.

Emerson’s figure of the eye/horizon, however, suggests an avoidance of the skeptical problem of other minds and the external world. Emerson represents this figure of the self in two different moods later in the paired essays “The Poet” and “Experience.” In the former, Emerson says, “The Universe is the externization of the soul” (“The Poet” 9). The self externalizes itself, thus making perceptions coextensive with objects (avoiding the skeptical problem of whether perceptions really represent their objects, or Berkeley’s idealistic move of just rejecting the need for objects) while also making the self viewable. If the self is nothing more than its perceptions and beliefs, then what else would one need for a process of self-examination? Yet, on the other hand, in “Experience” Emerson takes up the despairing side of this inseparability of ourselves from our perceptions when he says, “Temperament also enters fully into the system of illusions, and shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see” (31). From this quasi-solipsistic view, we are unwittingly trapped in our perceptions. The doubleness of Emerson’s first circle image, which quickly multiplies into infinity and a kind of curved nothingness in his citation of Augustine’s description of “the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere” (“Circles” 179), serves to make it possible to view oneself by
essentially taking up the perspective of one’s horizon, and looking back—a central demand for
the process of self-examination. It is, in some manner, an othering of one’s self. The pun
between “eye” and “I” is an Emerson commonplace that makes the reduction of self to
perspective swift, but it also creates the specter of solipsism.\textsuperscript{51} It is the horizon that
circumscribes this fear, puts it in its place and under a watchful eye.\textsuperscript{52}

The essay’s first movement is a celebration of the promise and power of the idea that
“around every circle another can be drawn” (“Circles” 179). Emerson is sure to stop at points
and boost our confidence: “the heart refuses to be imprisoned” (181); “There is no outside, no
enclosing wall, no circumference to us” (181); “Men walk as prophecies of the next age” (181).
However, built into this paean is the darker side of the “circular or compensatory character of
every human action” (179), for the circle “symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the
flying Perfect . . . at once the inspirer and condemner of every success” (179). Riven through the
account to inspire hope for change is the underside of condemnation: “The new continents are
built out of the ruins of an old planet” (180); “New arts destroy the old” (180); “You admire this
tower of granite. . . . The hand that built, can topple it down much faster” (180). Change is
difficult between the old and new: “Every several result is threatened and judged by that which
follows. Every one seems to be contradicted by the new; it is only limited by the new. The new
statement is always hated by the old, and, to those dwelling in the old, comes like an abyss of
skepticism” (181).

The first movement of the essay comes to a kind of close with a short paragraph that aims
to still us in our struggle: “Fear not the new generalization. Does the fact look crass and
material, threatening to degrade thy theory of spirit? Resist it not; it goes to refine and raise thy
theory of matter just as much” (181-82). This has the calming influence of that placid image of
optimism about outcomes that Emerson’s reputation has struggled under. “Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense” (27)—this earlier assertion in “Self-Reliance” has the tendency to read like the hand of providence. “Circles”s response to this calming of fear, however, is to turn to the idea of self at work behind the changes, beginning: “There are no fixtures to men . . .” (182). Against the calm comes a lack of stability. This next paragraph is another boost of optimism, but echoing “Self-Reliance”s understanding of genius as inherently a discrepancy between people: “Every man supposes himself not to be fully understood. . . . The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel, was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable. That is, every man believes that he has a greater possibility” (“Circles” 182). The difference between “Self-Reliance” and this passage, however, is that “To be great is to be misunderstood” (“Self-Reliance” 34) came in the context of a response to others. Here the language seems designed to allow self-reflexivity—do we even fully understand ourselves?

Before Emerson continues on with this “continual effort to raise himself above himself” (“Circles” 182) that is implicit here, though, Emerson interposes a paragraph that, from one angle, seems out of nowhere. From our angle, with skepticism’s deep impact on our idea of self and the essay’s drive to focus on the self and its dual character of inspiration and condemnation, it takes us naturally to our own opacity to ourselves:

Our moods do not believe in each other. To-day, I am full of thoughts, and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world: but, yesterday, I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many
continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall. (182)

Call this a “scene of anxiety”—just like Descartes and Hume’s scenes depicting the philosophical fears their respective philosophical stances are designed to grapple with, so too does this scene depict a personal encounter with our motivation for philosophy. Likewise, these scenes are designed to carry implicitly their solution. Descartes’ fear of a whirlpool with no bottom is designed to make us want a solid foundation to stand on. Hume’s scene is such a grotesque parody of the Cartesian situation, so heated as to wonder not only where he is but what, that it feels natural for us to laugh it off with him. Emerson’s scene is of a writer, inspired today but in such despair the next as to not even recognize himself. If Descartes’ scene, however, implies an imperative to the philosopher to double down on reason’s capacity to solve the problem, Hume and Emerson’s scenes are more ambiguous. Hume’s laughter might dispel the inflation but not necessarily the fears created by his powerful reasoning. Indeed, the course of philosophy initially pivoted away from Hume rather than his producing any disciples.53 Annette Baier argues, however, that the design of Hume’s writing is intended to relinquish the dialectic of thought that makes up Book One of the Treatise’s “reductio ad absurdum of Cartesian intellect” (21) for that of the passions. “From this point on,” Baier says of Hume’s scene of anxiety, “the moves are dictated by feeling, are swings in moods, not zigzags of argument” (20).

Emerson’s scene of anxiety is a focused attempt to isolate the power of mood over our process of thinking and inhabitation of the world. Both Emerson and Hume’s scenes imply a solution of achieving an equilibrium in these moods. While Emerson’s scene begins with the implication of many moods, Emerson reveals himself to be especially concerned with two: hope
and despair. As a romantic topos, Emerson’s scene records an urge to remain inspired. However, as a motivation for philosophy, it records an indissoluble oscillation in perspective. The topos cannot simply be about exhaustion for we must remember that Emerson’s dialectical terms are inspiration and condemnation. “Vast ebb of a vast flow” is a red herring insofar as the center of the scene remains at the beginning and not its famous ending. What are bound together are fullness and emptiness as they relate to both production and perception of production. Sometimes you can produce; sometimes you can’t; sometimes you don’t like what you produced yesterday; sometimes you produce today in a direction that yesterday seemed vacuous. Emerson’s inclusion of reading as well as writing makes it clear that there is no protection against the oscillations of mood that make us out to be a divine creator one day and a mere weed in the world the next. The only thing that Emerson cannot doubt is that there will be another mood around the corner. Rather than a romantic topos, this is a Humean topos and Emerson’s writing in “Circles” likewise creates swings in mood, from celebratory promise of power to certain condemnation with each turn of the wheel, reaching their apex in the dynamic parity of god and weed at the close of the scene. Rather than counter-arguments, Emerson deals in counter-moods.

From this angle, Emerson is the continuation of a philosophical counter-tradition to what Derrida called the dominant logocentrism of Western philosophy, a tradition beholden to the Quest for Certainty. Hume’s slogan “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (Treatise 415) is an important signpost in this counter-tradition that makes the affective resources of humanity primary over its reasoning capacities. William James’s assertion in “The Will to Believe” is Hume’s descendent: “Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must,
decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds” (464, italics James’s). Too often, however, we focus on Emerson’s use of the Scottish Common Sense school’s notions of “moral sentiment” or “moral sense” to frame the philosophical implications of Emerson’s turn away from reason. 54 This is a mistake insofar as it causes us to focus exclusively on the relationship between those notions and what Emerson means by “intuition” and “instinct.” 55 This then causes us to reduce his epistemology to a search for intuition, thought of as a special access to reality. However, the only reason one would want a special access to reality is to correct our regular, common access. Thus, a concept like intuition more often than not just prompts us to reproduce the Quest for Certainty. And further, it leaves out of account Emerson’s concept of mood and how it operates in articulating Emerson’s sense of the affective dimension across essays like “Circles,” “Experience,” and “Montaigne.”

When Emerson implicitly lets go of his dream for impregnable propositions, he is letting go of the entire premise of foundationalist epistemology, the hope for an indubitable belief that will halt the infinite regress of explanation and justification. 56 So rather than looking for the flex of an assured authority in a particular situation, we will look to what is used to circumscribe authority, and thus pave the way for a dynamics wherein there is never any final authority. It is this role that the concept of mood fills. If we begin with mood and look to Hume rather than his Scottish enemies, we get a picture of “reason is slave to the passions” that reinforces the theses on inconsistency and whim. Hume’s slogan suggests a Copernican revolution in how we perceive the relationship between our affective states and our thought. Emerson’s radical formula, “Our moods do not believe in each other,” follows in this revolution. I would like to call this Emerson’s thesis of moods. Emerson takes it as simply given that our moods change, so
much so that in the midst of a powerful mood, one might simply disbelieve that there’s any other mood to be had. And in fact, Emerson’s formulation pictures a Cartesian nightmare—it treats moods as *persons*, not believing in each other, as if we find ourselves in bodies shared by other people who leave evidence of their presence in our journals.\(^{57}\)

Emerson, however, isn’t bothered by Cartesian problems of whether there really are other minds, whether there’s an external world, or how our personal identity can hang together with such radical reduction of ourselves to our fleeting impressions. Hume famously described the mind as “a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations” (*Treatise* 253).\(^{58}\) In “Experience,” Emerson says, “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (30). In the Humean picture, “impressions” and “perceptions” are just a mess of contiguous bits floating “around our mind,” except that the idea of a mind as a container (or even theatre) still seems to imply a linking element that Hume wants to deny—like Hume’s rejection of causation, Hume would rather identify the cavalcade of impressions *with* the mind, rather than the mind *having* them. Kant, again, rides to the rescue to save us from Hume’s assault on what seems the intuition our language announces to us about the mind being a unifying element, container, or theatre. For Kant, *judgment* structures our perceptual world and the ongoing activity of synthesizing our disparate judgments produces a unified self, what he calls a “synthetic unity of apperception.”\(^{59}\)

Emerson effectively positions himself between Hume and Kant. Mood, not a synthesizing self, is what functions for Emerson as that which unity coheres around, the “many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue.” The self as a “unity” of these different
world-presenting moods Emerson calls *temperament*: “Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung” (30). The drift of the thesis of moods, if taken seriously, suggests that all coherent belief structures repose on a mood—that mood precedes thought.60 Cavell cites “Circles”—“The simplest words,—we do not know what they mean, except when we love and aspire” (“Circles” 189)—and says, “Whatever states these words are meant to name, this remark says, not that the states are the effects of words, but rather that they are their causes, or conditions of understanding words” (“The Philosopher” 56).61 A change of mood can cause inconsistency in the self to appear, even though from one’s current mood, one might sincerely profess the truth and coherence of one’s judgment upon the world. The world is blue today, and red tomorrow, and it is only our memory and the watchful eye of “the sympathy or hatred of hundreds” (“Self-Reliance” 29) that tells us otherwise.

Emerson needs moods to interpose between our perceptions or judgments of the world, on the one hand, and the synthetic activity of creating a unified self, on the other, because he distrusts the production of unity.62 Despite Emerson’s monistic tendencies, his being a “seer of unity,” this note of distrust appears at the very beginning of his official career, in *Nature*:

> It is not so pertinent to man to know all the individuals of the animal kingdom, as it is to know whence and whereto is this tyrannizing unity in his constitution, which evermore separates and classifies things, endeavoring to reduce the most diverse to one form. When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superposition of the strata, than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity. (39-40)

What Emerson fears is reducing the world to what we can see, stopping ourselves from emitting the weird, obscure judgment because it doesn’t fit. Mood gives Emerson a way of recording
these shifts in perspective that we shouldn’t stop from recording.\(^6\) We must not stop ourselves from “giv[ing] an independent, genuine verdict . . . on such people and facts as pass by” (“Self-Reliance” 29). Indeed, in the despairing mood of “Experience,” the verdict that “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads” appears in a section on illusion: “Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion” (30). That “iron wire on which the beads are strung”? As we saw earlier, that’s just one more illusion, too: “Temperament also enters fully into the system of illusions and shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see” (31). If the string of temperament is all one needs to have a self, any unity of self one feels must be reduced back to mood in order to check oneself from tyrannizing all future moods. Independent, honest judgment mustn’t be checked, though, for this would only circumscribe the world to whatever moods can be fit together consistently, thus jettisoning from our description of the world these seemingly outlier moods. Such rejection is to limit the world’s impact upon us; it is to blind ourselves to the full range of human life; it falsifies the scale of existence. We cannot simply color the world with what won’t clash. This might be “philosophy in a careless manner,” but it is the risk we must take to eliminate our partialities.\(^6\)

This is the hardest part to understand in Emerson’s view: our partialities eliminate our partialities. The double view of partialities and limitations is implied by the thesis of moods and follows in the train of the eye/horizon, inspiration/condemnation, and hope/despair doubles I’ve already shown in “Circles.” Such doubling of views upon a single thing is central to his “law of compensation,” which in “Power” has a glittering, tautological bearing: “nothing is got for nothing” (“Power” 29). Once again it favors the transition, the movement, the change of state:
Nothing risked, nothing gained. Hope for nothing, despair nothing. Emerson, in this view, is the anti-Stoic.

Sharon Cameron has taught us to read “Experience” in the light of “not a question of logic but rather a question of the elegiac” (56). Forefronting mood allows us to see the relationships between truth and reality, questions of logic, reasoning, and metaphysics, and our emotional state that Emerson draws in the essay. The question of something real captures us in an early, elegiac moment of tremendous force: “There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth” (“Experience” 29). If idealism is a kind of dream whose bubble every realist wants nothing more than to pop, then in our darkest moods we can sympathize with the plummeting despair that consoles itself with the thought that, when it breaks open on the sharp rocks, at least that will be real. But Emerson constructs his grief to be of such depth that it has numbed him (“What opium is instilled into all disaster!” (“Experience” 28)), and his lament is that even grief’s promise of destroyed dreams presenting us with hard reality is shown to be one more evanescent illusion. It is now, after this famous reckoning with Waldo’s death and “the most unhandsome part of our condition” (29), that the essay treats moods in general as illusions. And, the essay shiftily suggests, even if we lose what is external, like a “beautiful estate” (29), we do have that “iron wire” inside of ourselves, right? Nope—temperament, the constant part of ourselves, is just one more illusion as well (albeit a different kind).

What is outside is illusory; what is inside is illusory. How shall we find reality? Or, as the essay’s famous opening has it: “Where do we find ourselves?” (27). The endless stair has by this time been replaced by an endless train of moods. And now Emerson provides the solution:
The secret of the illusoriness is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: *Pero si muove*. When, at night, I look at the moon and stars, I seem stationary, and they to hurry. Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious. (32)

The secret to understanding illusion lies in the *necessity* of a constant change of moods. (And notice how objects, thoughts, and moods are all made interchangeable for the point of the passage.) We don’t need *fewer* moods, we need *more*. “Cause and effect are two sides of one fact” (186), Emerson says in “Circles.” Each mood is a spur further, each down to an up, each up down. To eliminate mood would be to cease one’s onward transition, which would be to give up on the hope to transcend our current partialities and limitations.

Accepting the succession of moods Emerson marks as a Copernican revolution when he alludes to Galileo’s apocryphal grumble after recanting his heliocentrism: And yet, the earth moves. We can *seem* stationary, and we associate reality with it, but health and sanity really require quite the opposite. Philosophical tradition has taught us to think of our emotions as peripheral to thought, but it is rather that our thought revolves around our mood. And yet, our moods move. The solution, here though, is to not deny it in our theory or practice. We must, Emerson says in “Circles,” learn the skill of negotiating it: “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens” (179).
This is what it means to have an epistemology of moods. It is a technical position at the level of thought and theory, much as heliocentrism was a scientific revolution, but it is also a technical performance in creating and negotiating the wave of movement. Mood functions as a mutable stability in Emerson’s metaphysics, as it were, though it’s better to conceive it as performing a role in his noetic economy.65 It has been too easy, however, to focus on the mutability, fluidity, and flux implied by his thesis of transition: “Power ceases in the instant of repose” (“Self-Reliance” 40). There is a risk in apotheosizing change for the sake of change. If we take flatfootedly the idea that it is only through transition we feel power, then power is easy enough to feel—just keep changing. However, what is our criterion for recognizing change? How does one know it is real change one is feeling, and not simply a repetition? If one has a low bar for personal doubt, then one may well feel change and equate it with actual change—whether or not one is actually conforming with all of one’s past behaviors (or of others). Emerson countenances such a collapse in his whimsical image of “do[ing] something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle” (“Circles” 190). And this is why skepticism is so important to an accounting of Emerson’s philosophical project. Emerson’s deep attraction to skepticism is in part a measure of his desire to be right, that it is true change and thus power that one is finding. In “Montaigne,” Emerson provides another version of his thesis of whim’s rejection of final causes:

Are the opinions of a man on right and wrong, on fate and causation, at the mercy of a broken sleep, or an indigestion? Is his belief in God and Duty no deeper than a stomach evidence? And what guaranty for the permanence of his opinions? I like not the French celerity, a new church and state once a week. This is the second negation; and I shall let
it pass for what it will. As far as it asserts rotation of states of mind, I suppose it suggests
its own remedy, namely, in the record of larger periods. (99)

Emerson balks at the materialist assertion of thought and mood being reduced to physiology, but
he has no answer. It simply seems like a conversation one has to walk away from. He doesn’t
like an extreme speed of change, but so long as there is transition we might be able to record the
larger patterns to discern right from wrong, good from bad, even true change from repetition. Is
it a new circle? One will only be able to tell by working from what seems like a new arc. If you
find yourself in the same place, then it wasn’t.

The central equilibrium in the circulation of moods is between hope and doubt—one hopes it is
genius and power, and so long as one feels hope, one continues the work on the path of one’s
present aim. Doubt sets in as a curve on one’s aim (say, to the right), a turn back on whether the
aim is truly transitional, truly the shooting of a gulf. The great monster to Emerson is despair,
and so like Hume, one must shake back into a hopeful attitude, reminding oneself that perhaps,
in the end, it is merely whim or the devil, but only through one’s work will anyone, even oneself,
know you: “But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce
yourself” (“Self-Reliance” 32). The continued curve produced in one’s aim by such shifts of
doubt might, if one stood back, look like a circle if one finally reaches the end in view. And if
the work plumbs the depths of each mood, it might add up to something seen and understood
from all angles. But the possibility of true closure, an understanding that undersigns final
certainty, a parabolic arc that finally met itself, would make such a “circular philosopher”
(“Circles” 188) feel once again doubtful, skittish at feeling certain, provoking one onto a new
path in the hope of finding a bold arc so wide the new circle might encompass the previous, now-
seen-to-be partial, limited, and misunderstood circle. Acknowledging limitation and partiality
and exploring them is an acceptance of doubt and skepticism, but it is the necessary pause in one’s fight to launch into bolder and broader generalizations.

1 See White’s Toward Reunion in Philosophy (1956). This book had a major effect on two important figures in the philosophical renaissance of Emerson: Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell. Coming at the moment that Quine was writing his most explicitly pragmatist work (notably “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951) and the fountainhead of pragmatic philosophy of language, Word and Object (1960)), White’s book makes many of the same points Rorty would begin his career making about, e.g., the pragmatism in common between Peirce, Wittgenstein, and Rudolph Carnap. Additionally, though Cavell would come to view pragmatism skeptically (as applied to Emerson, at least), Cavell’s earliest work was an attempt to extend the pragmatist tradition in ethics, no doubt under the influence of his teachers at Harvard, including White. (See Cavell’s “Logical Empiricism and Pragmatism in Ethics” and “Moral Theory, Ethical Judgments and Empiricism” (both co-authored with Alexander Sesonske) as well as Conditions 13-15 and White, Toward vii.)

2 I give evidence of Poirier’s symmetry with deconstructionism in Chapter 1. Cavell’s comes out in his notion of “aversive thinking” (see note 7 below). In 1986, David Van Leer noted the similarity with Poirier’s A World Elsewhere and adds Jonathan Bishop and Barbara Packer to those running similar paths (see Van Leer 215n42).

3 In what follows, I will leave aside several intramural conflicts, one being how to define pragmatism itself. Two other important conflicts I will suppress is Cavell’s dissent about whether Emerson should be considered a pragmatist, as well as Poirier and Cavell’s mutual skepticism about the suitability of Rorty’s philosophy for an Emersonian stance. Though some thinkers in our late times view all jockeying about “isms” pointless, I take it some is necessary to be clear about the stakes. Robert Westbrook makes a good case that definitional squabble is sewn into the fabric of pragmatism in “The Pragmatist Family Romance.” On a number of the live issues facing the appropriation of pragmatism (and Emerson), see the essays collected in The Revival of Pragmatism, especially those by Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Cavell, James T. Kloppenberg, Poirier, Louis Menand, David Bromwich, and Stanley Fish.

4 In addition to Levin’s The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism (1999), Richardson’s A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein (2007), and Knutson’s American Spaces of Conversion: The Conductive Imaginaries of Edwards, Emerson, and James (2011), see also Russell B. Goodman’s American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition (1990), Mark Bauerlein’s The Pragmatic Mind: Explorations in the Psychology of Belief (1997), James M. Albrecht’s Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatic Tradition from Emerson to Ellison (2012), Paul Grimstad’s Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses (2013), and Richardson’s Pragmatism and American Experience (2014). David M. Robinson’s Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work (1993) is excellent on many pragmatist themes in Emerson, but as Robinson says, his book isn’t about the tradition of pragmatism (3). Because of my emphasis on the distinct traditions of scholarship between English and philosophy departments, and the relative dearth of material on Emerson from philosophers, it’s worth noting Morton White’s book, Science and Sentiment in America: Philosophical Thought from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey (1972), and John J.
McDermott’s “Spires of Influence: The Importance of Emerson for Classical American Philosophy” (1980). White’s book writes Emerson into a relatively familiar canon of American philosophers, and was published with a companion anthology of primary readings, Documents in the History of American Philosophy: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey (1972). But whereas White began his career at Quine’s Harvard, and produced respected work that attempted to bridge the older pragmatism with the newer forces of analytic philosophy (before he then spun off into an idiosyncratic direction after leaving Harvard), McDermott is noted for being one of a handful of staunch scholars of pragmatism in the time before Rorty helped put it back on the philosophical map.

5 It’s worth noting that one of the major roads not taken in American philosophy is the “process philosophy” of Alfred North Whitehead. Nicholas Rescher usefully traces affiliations with Heraclitus, Hegel, the classical pragmatists, and Bergson in his Process Metaphysics (1996). Richardson uses Whitehead as an important philosophical anchor in A Natural History of Pragmatism (cf. 6-13). Rorty wrote his dissertation on Whitehead under the Whiteheadian Paul Weiss (after having studied earlier with another, Charles Hartshorne), and several of his early pieces display those direct influences.

6 I have similar qualms about Cavell’s thought that American philosophy’s reaction to Emerson is a “repression,” and the repetition of “condescension” by critics of Emerson’s critics. A behind-the-back psychological motive at that level of abstraction might unlock keys to rapprochement, but it also has severe limitations for carrying on a conversation. Likewise, saying we “condescend” to Emerson’s thought sometimes seems like a talisman to ward off all criticism of Emerson’s thought, as if condescension were not sometimes an understandable conversational attitude.

7 Poirier’s definition of Emerson’s pragmatism as “linguistic skepticism” tends to paint Emerson as only “saying by unsaying” (Poetry 38), which tends to take our eye off the possibilities (and perhaps necessities) of saying. Though Poirier is a powerful and agile reader, Cavell is perhaps more careful not to reduce Emerson to what he similarly calls “aversive thinking”—so careful that his occasional polemics against contemporary forms of philosophy (especially his effort to specify why he doesn’t wish to regard Emerson as any kind of pragmatist) have a tendency to reduce Emerson to his unreducibility. For example: “A fixed picture of Emerson’s difficulty helps settle for, I would say, a more settled Emerson (who claims for himself that he would unsettle all things, meaning first, all settlers) than I perceive to be necessary” (“Thinking” 7). If this were necessarily true, it would get in the way of another metaphor Cavell takes from Emerson: founding. Cavell displays the agility I think Emerson requires of his readers, but he too often withholds it from others.

8 This began in particular with the publication of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, though the rhetorical posture began in the essays he published in the 1970s that were collected in Consequences of Pragmatism. He says in the introduction of Mirror of Nature that he hopes to “undermine the reader’s confidence . . . in ‘philosophy’ as it has been conceived since Kant” (7), and though “philosophy” invariably appears in such a context with scare-quotes and with the “as it has been conceived since Kant” qualification, it’s not too difficult to wonder which direction Rorty really leans. He ends the book saying quite clearly, “there is no danger of philosophy’s ‘coming to an end’” (394), but he didn’t help himself much by attempting to clarify his position about what kind of philosophy might end in the introduction to Consequences by distinguishing between “philosophy” and “Philosophy” (see xiii-xvii and xxxvii-xliv).

9 See note 22 below for Rorty on this point.
West doesn’t register this point in his book because he attempts to follow through on the Rortyan idea of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment. (West 5)

Such a stance enables West to suggest we’d more plausibly relate Emerson to “the European explosions (both intellectual and social) that produced Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, and Friedrich Nietzsche” (11), but it leaves his discussion of Quine, Nelson Goodman, and Wilfrid Sellars fairly disconnected from the rest of the book, since it’s very difficult to read them as cultural commentators unless one reads them in a very specific philosophical conversation.

The point here is simply that Rorty’s redescription of “philosophy as cultural politics,” as he described it in his last collection of essays, requires us to take a more radical stance than simply moving the footnotes-to-Plato conversation to the side (as useful as that is). It requires us to see all the conversations we might differentiate as having plausible “philosophical” (i.e. cultural-political) ramifications in their particularities with an eye to those larger, wider, more long-term effects on the course of a culture. As Rorty says, channeling Dewey, “the history of philosophy is best seen as a series of efforts to modify people’s sense of who they are, what matters to them, what is most important” (Cultural Politics ix). One doesn’t need a Ph.D. from a philosophy department to be able to do that, but if such a Ph.D. does successfully modify our sense of what is most important (say, a Karl Marx), then it might help in order to understand some of the particularities of how that Ph.D. fit them together and why (say, what Marx meant by “science”). And, on the other hand, some efforts might be usefully seen against the background of conversations they didn’t originate from and might be transported into.

Emerson goes on: “It must affirm itself, or no forms of logic or of oath can give it evidence. The sentence must also contain its own apology for being spoken.” In context, Emerson is castigating public orations, including those on the lecture circuit he took part in, for “not communicat[ing] their own character and experience to the company,” but instead being “an escapade, a non-committal, an apology, a gag, and not a communication, not a speech, not a man” (“Spiritual Laws” 88). The mix here is interesting, for on the one hand Emerson is sick of orators being noncommittal, but on the other, one can’t place the commitment upon the speaker. He’s careful not to here, and it syncs with what he famously says in “Self-Reliance”: “the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with eclat, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this” (29). So even if Emerson isn’t speaking on behalf of the wishy-washy, he is still saying something disturbing about where responsibility is to be placed for ideas, claims, and consequences.

In Chapter 2, I treated an earlier major confrontation, Emerson’s exchange with Henry Ware, Jr. The exchange with Milnes effectively carries the discourse of antinomianism a step further, beyond the confines of a theological vocabulary (and moral universe).

Milnes’s criticism of Emerson and self-reliance is actually very similar to Orestes Brownson’s in his reviews of the Divinity School Address. We should detect, however, a deep divide between the platforms upon which the criticisms occur. Brownson’s moral philosophy exists in
a conceptual space Jerome B. Schneewind has dubbed the “Divine Corporation”—for those in its sphere, moral philosophy is centrally the tracing of our moral concepts to explain their operation in an externally and divinely ordered world (see Schneewind, “Divine”). So, for example, Brownson lays great emphasis upon the moral concept of obligation, effectively arguing that without an external, “supreme lawgiver,” there can be “no sense of obligation,” and hence no “moral sense” because what we “ought to do” is tied to what we are “morally bound” to do (see “Mr. Emerson’s Address” 42-43). Brownson’s mode is to question how our concepts, and hence moral lives, would work should the role of God as an external force drop out. Milnes wonders how our moral and social lives would work, but the role of God in the question drops out. Schneewind has argued that the move away from the model of the Divine Corporation marks the distinctively modern shift from a conception of “morality as obedience” to “morality as self-governance” (Invention 4). This is the move, in Schneewind’s phrase, “toward the world on its own.”

We can mark the difference in the debate around the Divinity School Address in attitudes toward pantheism. Pantheism in the history of Christian thought has always been heretical, and associated with atheism. After Spinoza, though, it began to operate in philosophy as an expression of holism—the interdependence of things. (For a good expression of this, see Kurt Weinberg’s discussion of the “pantheism controversy” in late 18th-century Germany that centered on whether Gotthold Lessing was a Spinozist or not.) While Milnes has no qualms in accepting Emerson as a pantheist, Brownson dismisses “the Idealist [i.e. the first expression of modern holism], the Pantheist, or the Atheist” in Emerson (Review of DSA 41). Brownson appears more judicious than Andrews Norton’s dismissive rejection of Emerson in the latter’s review of the Divinity School Address (“The words God, Religion, Christianity, have a definite meaning, well understood. . . . We well know how shamefully they have been abused in modern times by infidels and pantheists” (Norton 35)), but both see theology as bound up intimately with morality as the Divine Corporation model entails, while the rejection of the model implies their divorce. While bound up, imputations of atheism carry a moral point; when divorced, they have only a theological point. Emerson’s own shift can be marked by two journal passages. In 1827, a year after he began preaching, he recorded: “To believe too much is dangerous because it is the near neighbor of unbelief. Pantheism leads to Atheism” (Journals 3:76). In 1835, three years after resigning from Second Church in Boston, he writes, “It is by magnifying God, that men become Pantheists; it is by piously personifying him, that they become idolaters” (Journals 5:38). (It is interesting to note, however, that while nearly the whole entry where this occurs has Emerson’s vertical use mark struck through it, almost all of it but the remark about pantheism is used in lectures he was giving. For good context on Emerson’s relationship to the conservative Unitarian establishment, particularly Norton, see Joel Myerson’s discussion of the Transcendentalist Club, New England 23-30, particularly the club’s meeting on the topic of pantheism, 28-29.)


15 Joseph Slater says that Emerson’s letter to Milnes is more “Emersonian” than his description of his response to Carlyle, but that’s not clear to me (and it certainly isn’t as funny): “I told [Milnes] that if I should print more he would find me worse than ever with my rash, unwhipped generalization. For my journals, which I dot here at home day by day, are full of disjointed dreams, audacities, unsystematic irresponsible lampoons of systems, and all manner of rambling reveries, the poor drupes and berries I find in my basket after endless and aimless rambles in
woods and pastures. I ask constantly of all men whether life may not be poetic as well as stupid?” (Slater 272).

For the 19th century, see my discussion of Bowen’s rejection of Darwin on the basis of its immorality of faith in Chapter 1, as well as my discussion of the problem liberal tolerance poses to earnest belief in Chapter 2. This was yet the problem faced by Rorty at the beginning of the 21st century, though here it becomes translated as the problem of evasion. Rorty felt this problem acutely. In the introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism, Rorty says, “pragmatists keep trying to find ways of making antiphilosophical points in nonphilosophical language. For they face a dilemma: if their language is too unphilosophical, too ‘literary,’ they will be accused of changing the subject; if it is too philosophical it will embody Platonic assumptions which will make it impossible for the pragmatist to state the conclusion he wants to reach” (xiv). But why want to be philosophical at all, then? Why not just change the subject, like “secularists who urge that research concerning the Nature, or the Will, of God does not get us anywhere” (xiv)? “Such secularists,” Rorty goes on, “are not saying that God does not exist, exactly; they feel unclear about what it would mean to affirm His existence, and thus about the point of denying it. Nor do they have some special, funny, heretical view about God. They just doubt that the vocabulary of theology is one we ought to be using.” Rorty’s answer is essentially that philosophical debates do still hook up in vague ways to important cultural questions (though significantly less pressing than the analogous religious debates), and so it is still worth it for some people to have the expertise to engage in them, if not on their own terms, then some ever-adjacent terms. This is why Rorty’s last collection of essays was entitled Philosophy as Cultural Politics. (See especially the first essay, “Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God.”)

When Milnes works his way from calling Emerson a pantheist (recall that Milnes was Catholic) to raising the interesting but much more earthly concern about telling the difference between self-trust and egotism, one can witness a lengthening of the line between belief in God and immorality.

Rescher and Brand begin their book, The Logic of Inconsistency: “Since Aristotle’s day, virtually all logicians and logically concerned philosophers in the mainstream of the Western tradition have had a phobia of inconsistency” (1). Interesting about their book is that though it is in no small part a technical treatise in working out its thesis that inconsistency should not be treated as a nihilistic black hole, “an absolute and total epistemic disaster” (136), as Aristotle and most philosophers have treated it, they also make a point of citing Emerson as still being beyond the pale (see 45).

In his discussion of ethics, Robert Nozick says, “Consider now the immoral man who steals and kills, to his own benefit or for some cause he favors. Suppose we show that some X he holds or accepts or does commits him to behaving morally. He now must give up at least one of the following: (a) behaving immorally, (b) maintaining X, (c) being consistent about this matter in this respect. The immoral man tells us, ‘To tell you the truth, if I had to make the choice, I would give up being consistent’” (408). Nozick also notes, in a sociological comment, “Philosophers are people with very strong motivations to avoid inconsistency. Perhaps this motivation is strengthened by philosophical training and activity—presumably, skill in avoiding inconsistency is increased—but I suspect that the major difference in this respect between philosophers and others is accounted for by selective entry into the group of philosophers. It is only (but not all) those people who already have especially strong motivation to avoid inconsistency that are attracted to philosophy as a subject” (407).
As a matter of philosophical account-keeping, I should point out that Nozick and Williams are by no means pragmatists, though they both mark interesting trends away from epistemologically-centered philosophy. Williams, on the one hand, still believes we can have an epistemological foundation, an “absolute conception of the world” (cf. *Ethics* 111, 139), though only for our *theoretical* philosophy, the side of our philosophy that faces science and facts. But when it comes to ethics, the side that faces practices and values, he is as Nietzschean as James, Dewey, and Rorty in thinking that reason is relative to tradition and there are no knock-down arguments backed by self-evident, irrefutable premises—the kind Plato looked for in the “land beyond hypotheses.” Nozick, for his part, is more like his Harvard colleague, Stanley Cavell—too strange and idiosyncratic to want to identify (or be identified) with a school or movement. His stance in *Philosophical Explanations*, though, has many features that pragmatists would find admirable, most especially his polemic against argument as “coercive philosophy” (4-8) and his sense of “philosophical explanations,” which are more in the line of James and Santayana, treating philosophies as artwork.

22 See, for example, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

Thought is only *philosophical* if, like Kant’s, it looks for causes of, rather than merely reasons for, claims to empirical knowledge, and if the resulting causal account is compatible with anything which psychological inquiry might come up with. Philosophical thinking of the sort which finds this duality [of concepts and intuitions] inescapable is supposed to do more than just tell us that normally we have knowledge when we have justified true belief, referring us to common sense and common practice for details about what counts as justification. It is supposed to explain *how knowledge is possible*, and to do that in some a priori way which both goes beyond common sense and yet avoids any need to mess about with neurons, or rats, or questionnaires.

Given these somewhat exiguous requirements and no knowledge of the history of philosophy we might well be puzzled about just what was wanted and about where to begin. Such puzzlement can only be alleviated by getting the hang of terms like “Being versus Becoming,” “sense versus intellect,” “clear versus confused perceptions,” “simple versus complex ideas,” “ideas and impressions,” “concepts and intuitions.” We will thereby get into the epistemological language-game, and the professional form of life called “philosophy.” (151-152, italics Rorty’s)

23 The claim that for the Greeks ontology or metaphysics preceded epistemology, and that the modern turn gave precedence to epistemology, is a narrative shift riven through *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. However, as Michael Williams points out, it is distinctly at odds with another claim in the book, that the epistemological project was in some sense *invented* with Descartes and the seventeenth century (see Williams “Epistemology” 191-195). Or, another way of looking at it is institutionally, and saying with Rorty that “When Descartes and Hobbes denounced ‘the philosophy of the schools’ they did not think of themselves as substituting a new and better kind of philosophy—a better theory of knowledge, or a better metaphysics, or a better ethics. Such distinctions among ‘fields of philosophy’ were not yet drawn” (*Mirror* 131). In Rorty’s recantation to Williams, he confesses:

If I were writing *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* now, I would do my best to avoid the words “metaphysics” and “epistemology.” I would try to tell the story entirely by reference to dominant metaphors and images and not by reference to distinctions between disciplines. For using the names of purported disciplines buys in on exactly the understanding of the history of philosophy that I was trying to reject: the history of
philosophy as a series of attempts to deal with familiar sets of problems—some ethical, some epistemological, some metaphysical. (“Response” 214)

While I think this would be a laudable experiment in intellectual history, it also can tend toward one of two opposed mistakes: 1) pure source-hunting and 2) thinking that metaphors determine conceptual position in some rigid way. Source-hunting isn’t a philosophical mistake—God knows how important it is for scholars to do their work—but it would be a mistake to think that by itself it tells you something philosophical. One needs to locate images and metaphors in conceptual space, and only sometimes does where they came from and who they then go into matter in forming a tradition.

However, if one goes too far in the other direction, of linking metaphors to conceptual position, then one makes the mistake of thinking that one can’t, in fact, use a metaphor, image, or any other linguistic locution in any way one wants. For a Wittgensteinian like Rorty, use determines meaning, not the other way around. It’s for this reason that “project” is a useful word for talking about the history of philosophy—philosophers set themselves tasks they then devise tools to help them perform. They might see, for example, conceptual problems that they want to solve (in some manner). Metaphors and images only become interesting philosophically when they are tied to an intention to do something philosophical. (We can keep what counts as “philosophy” as vague as that to allow for different projects being intended as philosophical, even projects that wouldn’t be counted as such by other definitions of what counts as philosophy.) This kind of perspective no doubt makes a full intellectual history a much more complicated subject—having to juggle metaphors, projects, and institutions (at least)—but it’s the point of view Rorty did much to advance and defend.

24 “In English cosmos is a linguistic orphan, a noun without a parent verb. Not so in Greek which has the active, transitive verb, kosmeō: to set in order, to marshal, to arrange. . . . What we get in all of these cases [of, e.g., commanders arranging soldiers or cooks putting together a meal] is not just any sort of arranging, but one that strikes the eye or the mind as pleasingly fitting: as setting, or keeping, or putting back, things in their proper order” (Vlastos 3).

25 See Jeffery Stout’s discussion in The Flight from Authority of Descartes’ uptake of this problematic through the scholastics’ translation of the Greek contrast into opinio and scientia, 37-61.

26 For these three ideas, see Aristotle’s On the Heavens 268b-269b; Generation of Animals 729a; Politics 1252b. On the last, see Yack 53-54.

27 This isn’t to say that Aristotle was free of a need to have a foundation to avoid the infinite regress. This is precisely what he thinks his principle of non-contradiction provides philosophy, for “all men who are demonstrating anything refer back to this as an ultimate belief; for it is by nature the starting-point of all the other axioms as well” (Metaphysics 1005b32-34). He goes on to say, “Some, indeed, demand to have the law proved, but this is because they lack education; for it shows lack of education not to know of what we should require proof, and of what we should not. For it is quite impossible that everything should have a proof; the process would go on to infinity, so that even so there would be no proof” (1006a6-10). There are two lines in Journal Y (1845-1846) that I think express Emerson’s own endorsement of something like this picture of Aristotle and Plato. Emerson writes on one line, “Aristotle founding on the qualities of matter is the European skeptic,” and follows it on the line below with, “Plato the Believer” (Journals 9: 276). One relevant sense of “skepticism,” I think, can be found in an earlier version of the essay on Plato’s idea of a “too rapid unification” (“Plato” 30): “A too rapid Unity or unification & a too exclusive devotion to parts are the Scylla & Charybdis. A too rapid Unity:
Yes, for a wise Skepticism, a long secular patience that delays & still delays the premature summation, is rewarded with truth perhaps in another sphere & cycle. This rashness or partiality is one Vice; the other is confusion, or the misplacing the properties of the places or spheres of nature” (Journals 9: 304). While “truth perhaps in another sphere” articulates a different sentiment, “skepticism” as an attitude that resists conclusions, and thus extends the life of experimentation, is something bound up with the materialism of “the qualities of matter” that produces the European tradition of atheistic science. It’s Aristotle’s foundation that produces what is distinctively Europe, in Emerson’s vocabulary for his essay on Plato in Representative Men. Emerson may say that “Plato came thus to be Europe” (“Plato” 26) in the essay, but Plato is the synthesis of East and West, whereas Europe’s particular strength is articulated with “Metaphysics and natural philosophy expressed the genius of Europe” and thus by a line that didn’t make it into the essay: “Plato by his Eastern Education imported these tastes, & joined them to his native ones; but Europe was never his follower, but loved better the Whiggish Aristotle” (Journals 9: 287). I develop a reading of Emerson’s essay on Plato in Chapter 4.

The paragraph as a whole is, in fact, given over to dialectical confrontation with others, the exchange of reasons with a “valued adviser” (and “friend”), an “angry bigot,” and a “good man” (though “foolish philanthropist”). Unlike these three, though, where Emerson actually exchanges words with his interlocutor (enclosed by quotation marks, or including an “I tell thee”), I find it suggestive that when Emerson confronts those closest to him, he distances himself from the reply. The action we get is a wordless shun, and Whim is written down and left for, not spoken directly to, those he is shunning. That he would (rather than did) write the sign of Whim on the doorpost of his privacy, and that this action follows the shun in the passage, suggests to me a slight apologetic vibration in what is otherwise certainly an apology in its older sense of “defense” or “justification.” I think detecting the pathos here is appropriate when one considers that “wife and brother” are almost certainly his first wife Ellen and his brothers Edward and Charles, who all died before Emerson first wrote this passage on July 4, 1839, making this a kind of precursor to the appearance of Waldo in “Experience” (that Sharon Cameron has written so illuminatingly of in “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience.’”). (Comparing the passage on Journals 7: 224 I think heightens the self-consciousness of his final choices in writing the passage for the essay.) Cavell takes the writtenness of Whim to make this passage a “scene of writing” (“An Emerson Mood” 28), and further, “Self-Reliance” as a whole a “study of writing” (“The Philosopher” 54). While I take the former to be certainly true and the latter highly suggestive, it’s worth distinguishing between spoken conversation (of the three other scenes) and the written signpost. And a conversation is necessarily dialectical, which I mean in the broad sense of “two points of view being exchanged.” While I think Emerson sometimes wrote for himself, a mind conversing with itself, this scene helps to highlight the important difference between those two kinds of context when considering the activity of articulation—one sometimes has to face others and what they have to say to you. Genius receives a special dispensation here.

See Van Leer’s reading of this passage, 126-27. Van Leer reads “whim” in the context of a fight against nominalism (wherein “good and bad are but names” (“Self-Reliance” 30)), saying
that “however inadequate, ‘whim’ is a sufficient guard against nominalism” (Van Leer 127). I differ with Van Leer primarily in reading the passage as more deeply about the entire prospect of philosophy as explanation, while any debate about nominalism would be already within philosophy’s explanatory province. What drops out in Van Leer’s reading is the context of “whim” being written for people coming to the door the sign is written on.

Bernard Williams has put a name to the situation I think Emerson glimpsed: moral luck. In his important paper of the same name, Williams uses the example of “the creative artist who turns away from definite and pressing human claims on him in order to live a life in which, as he supposes, he can pursue his art” (Moral 22). Williams defends the idea that “in such a situation the only thing that will justify his choice will be success itself” (23). Thus, failure will leave the artist unjustified, turning actions that seemed cruel and whimsical at the time into actual cruelty and whimsy. All that protects the artist here is hard work and hope, though to get to the former, the artist certainly can’t spend all day justifying why he or she needs to get to work.

I would also say that Emerson didn’t care about a philosophical foundation. People like Robert D. Richardson, Jr. and David M. Robinson give good evidence that Emerson made foundationalist noises at various points. I’m thinking of, for example, Richardson’s essay “Liberal Platonism and Transcendentalism: Shaftesbury, Schleiermacher, Emerson,” which emphasizes the idea of plenitude in the Transcendentalists’ uptake of Platonism and leads Buell to say that it “puts in intellectual-historical context the ‘foundationalist’ aspect of Emerson’s thought that James, Dewey, and also Nietzsche . . . needed to counter or ignore in order to affiliate with him” (Emerson 362n20). And even more, there is Emerson’s response to the Jardin des Plantes in July 1833 that sent him off on an arc of thinking that culminates in part in his declaration that “We have no Theory of animated Nature. When we have, it will be itself the true Classification” (Journals 4:288-289; cf. Early 1: 83). Richardson remarks that Emerson “was interested in a kind of science that was not purely material or mechanical but would explain the living world” (Emerson 171). (See Robinson, “Emerson’s Natural Theology,” and also Robinson’s account of the lead-up to his visit to the Jardin des Plantes: “Clearly he saw the moral sense as a foundation for a theology based on nature’s design . . .” (“The Method of Nature” 76).)

I think Richardson and others can be right that Emerson did want an explanatory foundation, but if we don’t add “at least some of the time,” then it creates a conundrum—either Emerson was very bad at creating one, or irresponsible in doing it, or simply too flighty to be bothered to do what he professed to want to do. I think we have two options for making sense of what Emerson did in addition to what he said: 1) We can say that Emerson wanted a foundation, but believing in the division of intellectual labor as he did, he was okay with leaving that project up to others or 2) He wanted to have a foundation, but only some of the time—the other times he didn’t believe in the project at all. Since pragmatically I can’t tell the difference between the two for interpretation of Emerson’s philosophy—both require a development of this “other project” Emerson was up to—I fall back on my speculative diagnosis of Emerson’s heart, that he really didn’t actually care about having a foundation, or a comprehensive explanation of the living world, or a “true Classification.” This at least has the virtue of giving priority to what Emerson was good at. In the end, the difference between (1) and (2) is idle if one wants to set Emerson into the flow of philosophical conversation as it stretches to today.

Discussing such “dicta” as “every word becomes an exponent of nature” and “the mind does not create what it perceives, any more than the eye creates the rose” (from “Plato: New Readings” 46), Feidelson says, “as philosophy, these Emersonian dicta are often more naïve and
create more problems than the ‘difficulties of a naïve dualism’ against which his whole effort was directed. His theory has weight chiefly as a literary program, and his writings survive as literature” (121-122). Feidelson and Whicher’s books are still excellent introductions to thinking about Emerson as a philosopher, but they record preconceptions of what philosophy looks like that I’d argue are out of place. Feidelson’s approach to Emerson, for example, is a clear forerunner of Ellison’s *Emerson’s Romantic Style*; what he calls “symbolism” in that book is what Ellison talks about as the dawning of Emerson’s method of “interchangeable mythologies” (6). Ellison, however, in essence forgets about the philosophy in order to concentrate entirely on the literary program enacted, and while this moves us significantly forward in understanding the program, it leaves out something significant about Emerson.

34 See also the journal version of the Whim passage: “I would write on the lintels of the doorpost, Whim. Expect me not to show cause why I seek or why I shun company” (*Journals* 7: 224). This definition of a “philosophical” answer owes something to the debates of modern philosophy that Emerson would have been familiar with through Hume and the Common Sense school. Hume’s skepticism was a product of premises that, it turns out, separates the “philosophical” from the “scientific.” While this is obvious in Descartes, who thought *empirical evidence* was always possibly suspect until one *reasoned* all the way down to an unshakeable foundation, the diagnosis of the Common Sense school was that the surprising result of Locke’s empiricism was Hume’s deconstruction of empiricism by showing, e.g., that the cause/effect relationship needed for it wasn’t empirically verifiable. I discuss how this “heats” Hume’s brain more below. The Common Sense school’s attempt to get empiricism back on track was to say that the concept of “self-evidence” was the problem: the concept of evidence requires it to come from something else, an X to Y relationship. By creating an X to X relationship, Hume was able to apply his skeptical, circularity arguments. See Dugald Stewart’s comments in his *Dissertation* on “self-evidence” and the “fundamental laws of human belief” on 449 and 440, respectively. These passages, that Emerson would have read, suggest the Common Sense school’s position that it was looking to a “process of reasoning,” rather than evidence, to confirm ideas like cause and effect that leads philosophers from Descartes to Hume and Kant astray.

35 Rorty’s work has been obsessed with this problematic. See, e.g., his claim that Heidegger’s interpretation of the history of philosophy dovetails with the pragmatist’s by think[ing] of Plato as having built the need to overcome epistemological skepticism—the need to answer questions like ‘What is your evidence?’, ‘How do you know?’, ‘How can you be sure?’—into Western thinking. . . . Heidegger thinks of himself as having tracked down the assumption common to Plato, the skeptic, and the pragmatists—the assumption that truth has something to do with evidence, with being clear and convincing, with being in possession of *powerful, penetrating, deep* insights or arguments—insights or arguments which will put you in a commanding position vis-à-vis something or somebody else (or vis-à-vis your own old, bad, false self). (“Heidegger” 30-31, italics Rorty’s)

Where pragmatism disjoins with Heidegger is in thinking that “What is your evidence?” can be given a non-Platonic interpretation. Emerson’s affinity with Heidegger comes out in his near-total rejection of that notion of a “commanding position.” If pragmatism’s technical interpretation of thought comes out in its continued adherence to the idea of “expert communities,” then Emerson’s skepticism toward pragmatism comes out in his radical (democratic) individualism with regard to intellectual authority. The second section of Chapter 2 points in this direction.
From Milton:

Who creeps into State Government like a caterpillar to destroy
To cast off the idiot Questioner who is always questioning,
But never capable of answering; who sits with a sly grin
Silent plotting when to question, like a thief in a cave;
Who publishes doubt & calls it knowledge; whose Science is Despair,
Whose pretense to knowledge is Envy, whose whole Science is
To destroy the wisdom of ages to gratify ravenous Envy; (Blake 141).

In the “Introductory Lecture” of his series “Lectures on the Times” collected in Nature, Addresses, and Lectures, Emerson distinguishes between two types of inaction, one based on distrust and the other on a larger trust:

A new disease has fallen on the life of man. . . . Our forefathers walked in the world and went to their graves, tormented with the fear of Sin, and the terror of the Day of Judgment. These terrors have lost their force, and our torment is Unbelief, the Uncertainty as to what we ought to do; the distrust of the value of what we do, and the distrust that the Necessity (which we all at last believe in) is fair and beneficent. . . . Then there is what is called a too intellectual tendency. Can there be too much intellect? We have never met with any such excess. But the criticism, which is levelled at the laws and manners, ends in thought, without causing a new method of life. The genius of the day does not incline to a deed, but to a beholding. It is not that men do not wish to act; they pine to be employed, but are paralyzed by the uncertainty what they should do. . . . But have a little patience with this melancholy humor. Their unbelief arises out of a greater Belief; their inaction out of a scorn of inadequate action. By the side of these men, the hot agitators have a certain cheap and ridiculous air; they even look smaller than the others. Of the two, I own, I like the speculators best. (179-80)

Compare then Emerson on “the right ground of the skeptic,” who he calls “the Considerer,” in “Montaigne” 90-91.

In the journal passages around the time of the Whim passage, July 4 to 7, 1839, there’s evidence that the connection between action and thought were on Emerson’s mind. The end of the original Whim passage ends, “I have no duties so peremptory as my intellectual duties” (Journals 7: 224), which implies that his muse calls him to the action of thought (which can be stalled by obligations to others). And further, over the next several days he records thoughts prompted by the visit of Edward Palmer, the socialist reformer. On July 5, Emerson says, “He said he did not think it necessary for him to write any thing, for, he thought he could do every thing that came into his mind & so not need any record” (Journals 7: 224). On July 7, before turning to Palmer’s effect on him, he writes, “Do your thing & I shall know you” (Journals 7: 225), which becomes “[D]o your work, and I shall know you” (“Self-Reliance” 32). What seems clear is that while Palmer’s thing is to live a life like Diogenes the Cynic, Emerson’s thing incorporates the act of recording thoughts. (On Palmer’s earlier visit, and his renunciation of money, see Journals 7: 108.)

See my discussion of this passage in “Montaigne” below.

This orientation presages pragmatism, for example in Dewey’s charting of “the sharp division of theory and practice” (Quest 5). I develop the theory/practice theme in Chapter 4.

The popular passage in the journals for a long time regarding Emerson’s inability to reason well is from April 18, 1824, the year before he entered Harvard Divinity School: “I cannot dissemble that my abilities are below my ambition. . . . I have or had a strong imagination &
consequently a keen relish for the beauties of poetry. The exercise which the practice of composition gives to this faculty is the cause of my immoderate fondness for writing, which has swelled these pages to a voluminous extent. My reasoning faculty is proportionately weak . . .” (Journals 2:238).

Documented, though perhaps not well-explored. Whicher seems to be the first to place Hume at the center of Emerson’s growth as a thinker (see Whicher 10-13). Evelyn Barish gives the most thorough account of Hume’s influence on Emerson (Barish 99-115). See also Eleanor M. Tilton, “Mr. Emerson—of Boston.” David Van Leer’s Emerson’s Epistemology is still the most comprehensive accounting of Emerson’s philosophy qua philosophy and in his admirably comprehensive note on analyses of “Emerson’s known sources” (3) he doesn’t find any studies on Hume through 1986. (Van Leer unfortunately doesn’t include Tilton’s essay, published in 1973 in an easy-to-miss book collection.) John Michael’s Emerson and Skepticism (1988) gives an interesting account of Emerson’s relationship to Hume, 33-68, though his focus is more on the relationship between author and audience qua vocation: “From the first to the very last, [Hume and Montaigne] focused and shaped Emerson’s sense of the crucial problem in his own career, the problem of the author’s relation to his audience” (xii). Practical relationships to other people, I hope to have shown, have important philosophical consequences, but Michael’s focus often falls into what Michael Lopez has called the “Whicherian Paradigm”—reducing Emerson’s thought to his biography (see 243-46). (See note 49 below.) Van Leer’s first chapter, “Emerson as Philosopher,” gives a good account of the stance I try to take here between the biographical context of Emerson’s actual encounter with texts and the philosophical context of “the sustained romance of (and with) the literary figures we call ideas” (18).

This wasn’t the only problem posed by Hume that exercised Emerson’s imagination. Emerson also found Hume’s skeptical attack on miracles difficult to surmount, though as I suggest in the previous chapter, he effectively accepts it in the end. The previous chapter essentially argues the importance of Emerson’s struggle with Unitarian theology in determining his initial stance, though it seems to lead him out of its orbit. This chapter takes up a different philosophical thread that leads out of Hume, though it likewise risks the same problem for philosophy.

It’s interesting that in the 20th century, one of the standard, “textbook” problems of philosophy is “determinism versus free will.” The problem is caused by causation: In a world of cause and effect, how can we have a will free of the determining force of a previous cause to take responsibility for change in the world? For “determinism,” one denies original agency in the world in order to fully accept the law of cause and effect. For Emerson it’s the other way around: one cannot have agency without causation. To understand the divergence here would involve tracing out the epistemological line of interpreting the problem that found its way into textbooks as against the very different way of understanding the problem of Hume that Emerson represents.

She begins her letter with this interesting image: “This morning my dear Waldo I received yours—in w’h you seem the magician of nature and art[.] Your eastern blasts thrill the nerves—your castle towers—but rather too antient [sic] for the light of the present—and what does no honor to the genius of the place (w’h was capable of placing the idea of God) old Hume peeps out thro’ the grim lattices with his doubts—not respecting that impregnable fortress the existence of one’s thought and its Author . . .” (Selected Letters 241).

“Considerer” is essentially Emerson’s version of the Greek “skeptic,” which he cites earlier: “I am here to consider, σκέπτειν, to consider how it is” (“Montaigne” 89). Popkin points out that skeptikos in Greek originally meant “inquirers” (“Skepticism” 449).
Four interesting lines might be noted: 1) Alan Levine points to Judith Shklar’s *Ordinary Vices* as doing more than any other to bring back Montaigne into the mainstream of political philosophy (see Levine 17-21). Shklar’s book aims at a Copernican revolution by, rather than shaping our discourse around virtues and the Good, as in the Platonic tradition, shaping it around vices and a “*summum malum*” (*Ordinary* 8). Rorty follows this inversion in his influential *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* when he cites Shklar to define liberals as “people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do” (xv). 2) J. B. Schneewind has argued that modern moral philosophy needs a different through-line than the Descartes-to-Kant sequence, suggesting Montaigne as its beginning (see “Teaching the History of Moral Philosophy” and his anthology, *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*). 3) Stephen Toulmin argues in *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* that starting one’s story with Descartes tips the scales to theoretical philosophy over practical philosophy, and that starting with Montaigne gives a very different trajectory (see his first chapter, as well as 186-92, entitled “The Recovery of Practical Philosophy”). 4) Alexander Nehamas has located in Socrates and Plato the origins of a different model for philosophical reflection that he calls genres of “the art of living,” one that is “aestheticist” in thinking that “no single mode of life is best for all” and that to imitate them is to “develop [one’s] own art of living,” “different from one’s model” (10). Nehamas’s subjects for this genre are Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault, but he notes that a partial list might be expanded to include Pascal, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Thoreau, and Wittgenstein (4). My next chapter tries to fill in what Nehamas’s chapter on Emerson might have looked like. 

See David Jacobson’s “Vision’s Imperative: ‘Self-Reliance’ and the Command to See Things as They Are” for an attempt to bind the early and late Emerson by similarly “recognizing that Emerson’s skepticism does not function within the limits of the epistemological project that largely defines modern philosophical thought” (557). Jacobson’s talk of a “phenomenological capacity . . . to see truly” (558) bears resemblance to what I’m referring to as “honesty.” 

I have largely cited Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, his most powerful philosophical work, though Emerson was familiar with Hume’s essays and what we know as the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (and not to mention Hume’s history of England). The arguments about causation and skepticism between the two works, however, are very similar. 

This is a version of Ellison’s argument about Emerson’s maturation in the 1820s in *Emerson’s Romantic Style*. As Michael and Lopez point out, all acts of interpreting Emerson’s career are take Whicher’s *Freedom and Fate* as their starting point. Ellison takes off from Whicher’s persuasive separation of the light and the dark, the hopeful and the tragic, in Emerson’s writing, but notes that if one follows Whicher in saying that Emerson’s first decisive change in the 1820s was the apotheosis of the God within, then one “is left with the problem of explaining why fate, necessity, and skepticism surface in Emerson’s work later on” (5). Worse, to my mind, is how Whicher’s story of the movement of Emerson’s career from a supremely confident *Nature* to a deeply resigned *Conduct of Life* leaves unexplained those two persistent colorations and their thematic ties throughout his work. Thus, Michael’s revision aims to explain them through Emerson’s lifelong engagement with skepticism. Lopez in “The Conduct of Life: Emerson’s Anatomy of Power” comes close to calling all interpretations of Emerson’s evolution as a writer reductive, part of the “Whicherian Paradigm.” But while the worry is real enough, that one can’t treat the thought properly if one treats them as epiphenomena, surface perturbations of biographical facts, to be a scholar of Emerson—or any writer—is pretty much coincident with having a theory about personal development. Whether it’s the Jardins des Plantes (see Packer, *Emerson’s Fall* 41-48) or the death of Waldo (see Poirier’s dissent, *Renewal* 175-77) or his 1841
depression (see Robinson “The Method of Nature”) or the Fugitive Slave Law (see Gougeon), Emerson’s career somehow seems rife with glittering moments to locate shifts and changes.

50 On “moral sense,” see my note below on Merrell B. Davis. See also Van Leer’s interesting discussion of the rhetorical function of “moral sense” in Nature and the Divinity School Address, 88-90.

51 See, for example, Burke’s “I, Eye, Ay—Concerning Emerson’s Early Essay on ‘Nature,’ and the Machinery of Transcendence.”

52 Geoffrey Hartman says in his essay on this dialectic, “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness,” “Yet as soon as poetry is separated from imposed religious or communal ends it becomes as problematic as the individual himself. The question of how art is possible, though post-Romantic in its explicitness, has its origin here, for the artist is caught up in a serious paradox. His art is linked to the autonomous and individual; yet that same art, in the absence of an authoritative myth, must bear the entire weight of having to transcend or ritually limit these tendencies. No wonder the problem of the subjective, the isolated, the individual, grows particularly acute. Subjectivity—even solipsism—becomes the subject of poems which qua poetry seek to transmute it” (306). Poirier, in his chapter “Is There an I for an Eye?: The Visionary Possession of America” in A World Elsewhere, gives what is essentially the “American answer” to such an Old World Romantic bequest. Poirier begins from the position of Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” (from Nature) as archetype of the hero of American literature, “devolv[ing] . . . entirely to his vision” (World 50). “By nature, the eye is the freest, most gregarious, most omnivorous of organs; and because its freedom is at one with its nature it qualifies as the ‘best of artists’ in Emerson’s sense” (51). This is the Old World dream that leads to the Old World nightmare of self-consciousness, in Hartman’s terms. Poirier’s immediate transition encapsulates the Emersonian stance I’ve been developing in this chapter, by bluffly incorporating knowledge of others: “But in fact no artist is so free as an eyeball, no one can live or write, or, in Henry James Sr.’s definition of possible Artists, wait on table only with the eyes. Hence this question: how, from the images of a visionary or aesthetic relationship to the world, can we extrapolate the actions and dialogues, the involvements and relationships, that are the inescapable demand made by literature, notably fiction?” (51). Without wanting to argue some American exceptionality, there is something evocative about this as a myth of America that undergirds something definitive of Emerson and American pragmatism.

53 This was the view of Dugald Stewart, for example, that Emerson would have encountered. See Stewart’s Dissertation, 439-49, on the reaction to Hume’s skepticism and argument about causation, and especially his citation of Reid on 439 and his comment, “It is to this argument of Hume’s [against causation], according to Kant’s own acknowledgment, that we owe the Critique of Pure Reason; and to this we are also indebted for the far more luminous refutations of scepticism by Mr Hume’s own countryman [i.e. the Scottish Common Sense school]” (445).

54 Robin Grey’s “Enlightenment and Scottish Common Sense Philosophy,” in The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism, unfortunately has this tenor. “Their turn to Scottish Common Sense philosophy,” she says, “signaled the Transcendentalists’ desire not only for a less skeptical philosophy of human knowledge but also for an unequivocal explanation of moral conduct” (9). I am skeptical of blocky claims like this about the Transcendentalists’ reception of philosophy, and even more when they are about Emerson. For example, I’m not sure it’s ever a good idea to say Emerson “adopted” (9) anybody’s philosophy, implying a kind of wholesale quality. What’s more, I have been articulating grounds in this chapter for thinking that Emerson himself wanted nothing like an “unequivocal explanation of moral conduct.” Despite these reservations, I think
Grey is broadly right that the Transcendentalists, including Emerson, were interested in “the social dimensions of human nature, particularly upon morality” (9), which she thinks has been overshadowed by prior generations’ focus on their individualism.

The most important exemplar of this focus is Merrell B. Davis’s pioneering exploration of the influence of the Scottish Common Sense on Emerson, “Emerson’s ‘Reason’ and the Scottish Philosophers.” Davis convincingly establishes that Emerson’s later takeover of the Coleridgean Reason/Understanding distinction is layered on a distinction Emerson was already making between reasoning and Sentiment or Moral Sense (with similar, Platonic-y capitalization as he would follow Coleridge in with “Reason”). One central exhibit can help see what I have been arguing is an important development in Emerson’s philosophy. Emerson writes in his journal in 1822:

> This Sentiment which we bear within us, is so subtle and unearthly in its nature, so entirely distinct from all sense and matter, and thence so difficult to be examined, and withal so decisive and invariable in its dictates—that it clearly partakes of another world than this and looks forward to it in the end. It is further to be observed of it, that its dictates are never blind, are never capricious, but however they may seem to differ, are always discovered on a close and profound examination to point to a faultless and unattainable perfection. . . . This Sentiment differs from the affections of the heart and from the faculties of the mind. The affections are undiscriminating and capricious. The Moral Sense is not. The powers of the intellect are sometimes wakefull [sic] and sometimes dull, alive with interest to one subject, and dead to the charm of another. There are no ebbs and flows, no change, no contradiction in this [the Moral Sense].

(Journals 2: 49-50; qtd. Davis 212)

What I’ve called Emerson’s theses of inconsistency, whim, and moods are designed to show what has changed in Emerson’s philosophy when facing a passage like this. While Emerson’s rhetorical posture of talking about the “unattainable perfection” and of genius and the like as invariant and consistent across all times continues on in Emerson’s later work, the shift is that Emerson thinks they are always mediated by our humanly affective dimension. Emerson’s embrace of changeability and inconsistency as rhetorical stances marks his achieved belief that any kind of perfect certainty we might attain will be more a threat to future calls of genius, the Moral Sense, and Reason than a trustworthy accompaniment.

One might wonder about a number of other Emersonian locutions that sound suspiciously foundationalist—for example, his talk of “correspondence” between mind and matter, the spiritual and material (in Nature especially). But just as in my discussion of skepticism, the question one has to ask is what role they play in his thought. And the role, it seems to me, is never an end to conversation, to the possibility of change, like wielding a “fact” in an argument. Since Emerson always seems to countenance the open-endedness of inquiry, the role such metaphysical and epistemological language plays shouldn’t be thought of as foundationalist in this sense.

Compare this journal entry of 1835: “Every body leads two or three lives, has two or three consciousnesses which he nimbly alternates. Here am I daily lending my voice & that with heat often to opinions & practices opposite to my own. Here is M[ary].M[oody].E[merson]. always fighting in conversation against the very principles which have governed & govern her”

(Journals 5: 64).
Van Leer (170) and Buell (*Emerson* 234) have both suggested that Hume’s image in the *Treatise*, though there’s no evidence that Emerson would have read it, is an apt description of Emerson’s view of the mind.

See Brandom, *Reason*, 27-51 for an account of Kant’s train of thought about concepts, judgment, and the self as a synthetic unity of apperception.

Amy Kittelstrom says relevantly, allowing us to draw a genealogical line out from Emerson, “The relativism of Nietzsche was more like the way William James considered religious experience in terms of the varieties of human minds, each temperament requiring a different religious formulation” (305).

Cavell goes on to add, “While it may not be unprecedented for a philosopher to tell us that the words we use every day are imprecise or prompt illusions, it is not usual, even not normal in philosophy, to say that the way to their meaning lies through a change of heart” (“The Philosopher” 56).

See Anthony Cascarci’s “The Logic of Moods: An Essay on Emerson and Rousseau” for a different interpretation of Cavell’s “epistemology of moods” that also tries to philosophically locate the concept of moods. Cascarci, in a Kantian vocabulary, says moods in Emerson “function as a regulative principle of experience, locating for us its lawfulness or necessity; they do so in a moral, rather than a metaphysical sense, telling us not what we find experience to be but what we *must*, as a matter of duty, find it to be. Moods, in this philosophy of actual experience, are the bridges from the general, a priori ground of our relationship to the world—our undifferentiated interest in it—to the moral demands of existence in it” (227). I’ve been calling this moral demand “honesty.”

See Emerson’s early lecture, “Genius,” with language eventually incorporated into “Self-Reliance”: “In every work of genius, you recognize your own rejected thoughts. Here as in science the true chemist collects what every body else throws away. Our own thoughts come back to us in unexpected majesty” (*Early* 3: 77).

“The conduct of a man,” Hume says, “who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so over-whelm’d with doubts and scruples, as totally to reject it” (*Treatise* 273). The line of thought I’ve pursued here suggests that there is more commonality between Hume and Emerson in their philosophical stances than has been explored, e.g., by the excellent treatments of Barish and Michael. Part of this, however, might plausibly be due to our traditions of inheriting Hume, where emphasis has been on his epistemological conundrums. See Baier’s *A Progress of Sentiments* for an attempt to treat seriously the form of Hume’s *Treatise* in the production of his characteristic theses, especially her reading of the end of Book One as containing the important hinge with which to understand the kind of philosophy Hume wanted.

Apropos are Angus Fletcher’s comments about Montaigne:

> When Montaigne says that he “portrays passing,” he speaks for a whole culture. But where Montaigne is most intensely modern he goes one step further, and this I regard as close to a prophetic sensibility. He portrays passing and change, to be sure. But he then goes on to portray the way ideas of change are themselves changing.

> Here the idea of the present moment is seen not as fixed and eternal, but as subject to alteration over time. Montaigne anchored his thoughts to a strong idea of humanism and its self-discovery. He anchors the nullity of an always passing moment to the stability of a system of inherited values, which might be called “Plutarchan..."
humanism.” Such a vision marks his discourse with ideas of stability in change. (Colors 123)

A shift in Emerson can be seen across a similar axis, precisely as he digests Montaigne as a means to overcome his own Plutarchan inheritance. As Ronald A. Bosco says, following Edmund G. Berry, “Emerson first conceptualized ‘history’ according to the Plutarchan model which stipulates that history is a finite reality that can be measured, verified, and written about through reference to the lives of exemplary subjects” (“Somewhat Spherical” 68; see Berry 1-54). This stipulation is what Emerson comes to reject by replacing, ironically, a Plutarchan model with a Montaignean model of essaying. While Bosco shows the evolution clearly, he argues that by

Merging biography and history into an ideal discipline and making the end of that discipline the dissemination of examples of the operation of the universal mind in the world of men, Emerson extended the moral possibility and authority of both far beyond Plutarch. Not interested in an individual life as such, he used the individual life to illustrate mankind’s share in the world of spirit and to spur individuals in his audience to achieve higher levels of self through their consciousness of spirit. (85)

In my view, disseminating “examples of the operation of the universal mind” does not go far enough beyond Plutarch, and it’s only when we recognize them as not examples but simply more models that we can revise Bosco to “spur us to achieve higher levels of self through consciousness of our own spirit” and bring the thought into alignment with “There is no history: There is only Biography. The attempt to perpetuate, to fix a thought or principle, fails continually. You can only live for yourself . . . . The awkward imitation of it by your child or your disciple, is not a repetition of it, is not the same thing but another thing” (Journals 7: 202). I discuss discipleship and the Montaignean genre of writing about oneself through other objects in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Philosophical Exercitations: An Interpretation of Plato in Emerson’s Essay

You have finished Virgil. Before you undertake Cicero in the gross it may be better to read some one of his short and elegant essays as Somnium Scipionis or De Senectute or De officiis which I would strive to take up not so much as a lesson but as a work of taste to be set in comparison with the like effusions of Hume & Johnson. From a little acquaintance with this great man [Cicero] who occupies more space than any other Roman in the history of the human mind, you may deduce the chief distinctions between the modes of thinking in his times & in ours. A signal difference is the propensity of the moderns to enliven their narratives & reasonings with expressed inferences whilst the ancients leave the reader to draw his own.

——Emerson to Elizabeth Parsons, January 6, 1825

Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation,—the act of thought,—is instantly transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man. Henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit. Henceforward it is settled, 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 American Scholar,” 1837

There must be the Abyss, Nox, & Chaos out of which all come, & they must never be far off. Cut off the connexion between any of our works & this dread origin & the work is shallow & unsatisfying.

——Journal Y, 1845
The last chapter gave an account of one motif in Emerson’s theoretical philosophy, what Stanley Cavell has called Emerson’s “epistemology of moods.” In part through the influence of Continental poststructuralism, and partly through the influence of American pragmatism, the reception of Emerson as a philosopher, and American romanticism more generally, has emphasized the interaction between three dimensions of thought: the conceptual, the affective, and the formal. One of the features of Emerson that is so attractive to so many different kinds of philosophers—now, as a general feature in our intellectual landscape, but also historically, in the occasional effusions of figures as diverse as Carlyle, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Matthew Arnold, the James brothers, John Dewey, Kenneth Burke, Harold Bloom, Richard Poirier, and Cavell—is that Emerson treats all three as bound together, both at the level of practice and the level of thought. In the first chapter, I took up the institutional question of Emerson’s placement in the pantheon of great American philosophers in part to open a path for wondering why Emerson, and also many of the figures in that long list, are not considered philosophers, while others are. In the previous chapter, I took up the conceptual question of what Emerson’s philosophy would look like if we treated his as we treat other philosophers’. In this chapter, I take up the formal question of why Emerson’s philosophy looks the way it does. If the first chapter meditates on the question, “Emerson is studied in which department?” and the third on the question, “What does Emerson think?” then this chapter will meditate on: “Why does Emerson write this way?”

The question of Emerson’s style is, like the other questions, here refracted through the ultimate thematic of philosophy: “What is philosophy?” There is still a need to emphasize this thematic in Emerson’s work, and no better reason to think this the case than the focus of this chapter: Emerson’s essay on Plato. Despite the year-by-year rising consensus that Emerson is legitimately considered a philosopher, there are few readings of that essay. And not just from the
standpoint of an interest in philosophy—there is very little extended work on Emerson’s “Plato, or the Philosopher” and, as Rachel Cole noted in 2005, “Much of the relatively scant critical work on Representative Men has focused on Emerson’s ambivalence toward greatness in the context of American democracy and opportunity” (84n21).¹ For someone trained to treat the history of philosophy as an ongoing conversation—footnotes to Plato, as A. N. Whitehead said—it should be bizarre that there isn’t concerted work on assessing what Emerson said directly about and to Plato.

It is doubly bizarre considering the commonplace that Emerson is a Platonist. Everyone, everywhere nods in the direction of Emerson’s Platonism, but in the context of intellectual history motivated by philosophical interest, rather than plain source study, tradition-defining labels used loosely run the risk of obscuring from view what the philosophical import of taking part in a tradition is. Stuart Gerry Brown’s foundational study, “Emerson’s Platonism” (1945), merely cites one of Emerson’s less interesting hypings of Plato: “Out of Plato come all things that are still written and debated among men of thought” (“Plato” 23; qtd. Brown 325).² Edmund G. Berry’s comprehensive study of Emerson and Plutarch of 1961 contains hardly a reference to the essay, despite being in a lot of ways about Emerson’s Platonism.³ Pamela Schirmeister’s book on Emerson and his form of philosophy, Less Legible Meanings: The Quarrel Between Poetry and Philosophy (1999), even takes part of its title from Plato, but “Plato” receives limited attention.⁴ Arthur Versluis’s recent American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion (2014) has an entire chapter on “Platonic themes” in Emerson, but leapfrogs right over Representative Men. Only Roger Thompson has given comprehensive attention to both Plato and Emerson’s essay on Plato, though his focus is on the history of rhetoric. It is as if it has been silently agreed by some that Daniel Walker Howe is right in his remarkable judgment that “there
is practically nothing to distinguish [Emerson’s] treatment of Plato’s philosophy [in
*Representative Men*] from one that a Unitarian of the classical school might have written”
(“Platonic Quest” 208).⁵ For Emerson, who wished in many ways to be like no one else, this
would be quite the failure.

The surface of the essay, it must be said, presents a number of problems to a reader.
Especially as English-language Platonic scholarship came into its own in the 19th century,
Emerson’s mode of talking about Plato doesn’t seem very relatable.⁶ And as anglophone
philosophy in the 20th century comes to inherit Plato, it increasingly focuses on Plato’s
arguments.⁷ While Emerson seems appreciative of them and the force of dialectic generally, the
essay doesn’t seem to engage any particular argument. It’s a portrait, of a kind that literary
critics came to call at the beginning of the 20th century *impressionistic*. With such a picture of
Plato and philosophy, it is perhaps not surprising that, for many, Socrates stands out at the
expense of Plato, the greatest impression of the essay from *his* miniature. And given a certain
feeling that Emerson is staying on the surface of his subjects, and not burrowing below like a
critical scholar, it’s easy to see the essay on Plato as simply a function of a general problem of
*Representative Men*, viz. What are the portraits for? If the point of “great men” is to use them,
then it’s hard not to escape the idea that the essays—still called *lectures* in the book’s title—are
simply puff pieces, written to catch our interest in their subject and dispensable thereafter. And
given that, it’s not surprising that interest in the book has centered on Emerson’s theory of
greatness and/or biography, neither of which requires an effort to read any particular essay as it
appears in itself.⁸

Emerson’s engagement with Plato, however, doesn’t appear on the surface—or rather, the
tropes and figures that appear on the surface in fact create tunnels below where a conversation
with Plato is discernible. To dive below the surface, though, requires interpretive effort on the part of the reader—an effort that will be forestalled if one thinks with Howe that nothing interesting will be found. This chapter aims, then, to show what’s of interest by giving a partial reading of the essay on Plato via a reading of the figure of Plato in the essay. What we will find, by following the twists of Emerson’s activities as a writer, is that the content of the essay, its point about philosophy, mirrors some of the forms it employs. The central form I will exhibit is allusion—the uptake into Emerson’s text of other people’s texts, especially Plato, and their transformation into allegories for Emerson’s philosophical differences with others. For Emerson, good philosophical writing forces a reading encounter that forces the writing of an interpretation. In “Plato,” some of the content is contained in allusive interactions with Plato.

In the first section, I suggest that Emerson’s dual portrait of Plato and Socrates at the end of the essay makes explicit the content of a lifelong engagement in what Alexander Nehamas has described as philosophy as “the art of living.” Unlike system-building modes, philosophers of the art of living conceive of philosophy as first a practical activity of altering one’s life. Pierre Hadot has emphasized the role of “spiritual exercises” in ancient forms of this mode. Amongst ancient techniques of spiritual exercise like meditation or yoga or prayer, the practice of writing becomes central to modern forms of this art. Emerson’s vocation is structured by a mode of writing that he calls in the essay on Plato “philosophical exercitations.” These are interpretive exercises that could describe Emerson’s activity at any stage of his career. In “Plato,” they describe how Emerson engages with philosophical tradition by interpreting Plato. This is the principal point of Emerson’s essay: Plato fails at system-building and is, rather like Emerson, a producer of philosophical exercises that are themselves exceptionally fertile in producing interpretations of them. At the level of form, my reading of Emerson’s essay will illustrate how
Emerson dialogues with philosophical tradition via allusive interpretation, while at the level of content arguing that Emerson himself suggests this mode. At this formal level, I hope to illustrate how allusive interpretation creates a space for thinking between two texts, a space the reader fills. And, I will suggest, this form isn’t all that strange compared to what philosophers regularly do to articulate philosophical positions.

Following the first section I will extend my reading of Plato in Emerson’s essay on Plato—in part to see what it says. The genre of essay and its art of interpretation are called for when encountering something where there’s no predetermined point to the encounter. Thus, from the perspective of Emerson’s experimentalism, that there have been so few extended readings of an encounter with Emerson’s essay on Plato by itself suggests it for scrutiny. But in addition to placing interpretive exercise alongside system-building as philosophical forms, Emerson’s essay on Plato also indicates how the fertility of a piece of writing can be created: by making it opaque. The art of interpretation is the art of figuring out what’s going on because the surface is dark to us in some way. The art of poetry, for Emerson, is the art of creating textual opacities that are potential staging-points for interpretation. If one approaches something poetic as an experimentalist, applying the art of interpretation, one becomes open to not simply discovering what’s happening in a text but also to discovering what it is one wants from it—thus changing who one is because of the encounter. If the interpretation one produces is itself poetic, then a chain of interpretive encounters is created and extended, becoming a poetic tradition of philosophical exercise. This is what “Plato, or the Philosopher” does.

Two persistent drumbeats in this chapter are that Emerson becomes a philosopher by writing about his relationship to Plato and that his mode of writing marks a difference with Plato. I will try and show more generally, however, that Emerson’s philosophical position is at the least
unPlatonic, though I push him into anti-Platonic postures. This folds Emerson into a tradition of engaging Plato by inverting him, a tradition that the Emersonian Nietzsche stands in and Richard Rorty has canvassed extensively. For this tradition, a whole series of traditional Platonic dichotomies are reversed in priority, including the priority of theory to practice and reality to appearance, perhaps the two central dichotomies that allow philosophers to be king. The first section makes the theory/practice distinction central to reading Emerson’s essay, and the second long section shows that the role of Emerson’s sense of the poetic philosopher in the polis, the community, is at issue just as it is in Plato’s Republic. Where Emerson differs especially from Nietzsche and Nietzsche’s ephebe, Heidegger, is in his relationship to democracy. Nietzsche and Heidegger are infamously anti-democratic in their anti-Platonic philosophical work, a commonality they hold with Plato. I will have occasion to show how Emerson’s anti-Platonism earns him John Dewey’s title as “the Philosopher of Democracy,” “the one citizen of the New World fit to have his name uttered in the same breath with that of Plato” (“Ralph Waldo Emerson” 29). The special point I aim to make is that Emerson has a political philosophy bodied forth by his essay on Plato. The essay articulates Emerson’s thinking on three different levels of sociality that have become of interest to modern philosophers: 1) the political level that takes into account the responsibilities of a democratic citizen; 2) the communal level that takes into account how the poet needs some isolation but not total alienation; and 3) the personal level that takes into account how thinking can itself be usefully viewed as a social process. At the end of the chapter, I turn around to assess the significance of what Emerson does with the figure of Plato in his essay by focusing on the form. If the alternative to system-building is interpretive allusion, what can be said on behalf of doing it that way rather than explicit, position-staking, thesis-making systematic argument?
1. The Double Star Fable: Socrates and Philosophy as the Art of Living

Here is what happens in the essay on Plato:

Emerson begins by framing Plato as the seed from which all that is good in culture and learning and thought grew and from which every great writer came. Blending together hyperbolic metaphors, lists of names, disciplines, cultural traditions, Emerson vamps on greatness generally and moves into place a picture of philosophy as general and abstract, and notes that Plato should stand as representative philosopher because he is more than such a narrow picture: “clothed with the powers of a poet[,] . . . he chose to use the poetic gift to an ulterior purpose” (“Plato” 25). As Emerson begins to blend in Plato’s biography (while instinctively disowning the pertinence of biography), Plato as a symphony of influences comes to the fore. So while Emerson identifies Plato with Europe, and sets himself to explain how this happened, a significant portion of the essay is given over to “the religious writing of the East” (28). Plato is a synthesis of West and East, Europe and Asia, philosophy and poetry, unity and diversity, culture and nature, of a proliferating number of dualisms, like flipping a coin and each turn revealing a different face and tail, all of which Plato, the “balanced soul” (31), is said to synthesize. “Plato,” Emerson says, “turns incessantly the obverse and the reverse of the medal of Jove” (32). The final half of the essay settles into a balancing of Nature, Culture, and the Divine before turning finally to Plato’s last influence, that “plain old uncle,” Socrates (40). Unlike Plato who swims among abstractions and world-historical forces, we get a clear picture of Socrates as a person, moving about Athens, teasing and testing people, talking, debating, laughing, being a person—ugly, funny, combative, occasionally obnoxious, but always good. “So capacious of these contrasts,” Emerson says, “[t]he strange synthesis in the character of Socrates capped the synthesis in the mind of Plato” (42). Emerson then ends the essay in the manner Carlyle
criticized *Representative Men*—pointing out each subject’s defects.\(^\text{10}\) And we find that despite all of Plato’s ambition, and all of Emerson’s hyperbole, Plato failed in the task of philosophy—to define and distribute everything into its proper place in a system. If we find in the beginning of the essay that “[o]ut of Plato come all things that are still written and debated” (23), then we discover at the end that “the world passed through the mind of Plato” (43) is what Plato desired but failed to achieve. If we find that Plato, “like every great man, consumed his own times” (24), then we discover he fails in consuming the world: “the mouthful proves too large. Boa Constrictor has good will to eat it, but he is foiled. He falls abroad in the attempt, and biting gets strangled: the bitten world holds the biter fast by his own teeth” (43).

One reason Emerson’s essay on Plato has been relatively neglected in considering Emerson as a philosopher might be that, as Lawrence Buell says, “the portrait of Socrates steals the show” (*Emerson* 209).\(^\text{11}\) If we read as Emerson does, “for the lustres” (“Nominalist” 137), then a show-stopping performance might well cause us to only stop by *there* during repeat performances.\(^\text{12}\) The antithesis between Plato and Socrates is thus a good place to begin, especially as Emerson’s self-reflexive criticisms of Plato follow closely on its heels. For as Joel Porte says, “The fact that Emerson sketched a Plato who strongly resembles himself has frequently been noted by commentators” (316), and what’s more, it is “a fixed article of belief with Emerson that the prime function of history, and historical characters, was simply to provide us with representative fables, or models, for our evolving selves” (315).\(^\text{13}\) What kind of fable are we offered in the portrait of Plato and Socrates, and how might it instruct us in reading Emerson?

What is curious about Emerson’s portrait of “the double star” (“Plato” 39) of Socrates and Plato is the manner in which Plato the universalist, the metaphysical system-builder, and not Socrates the peripatetic ironist, becomes a clearer figural representation of Emerson. Porte
argues persuasively that Emerson’s characterization of Socrates, in fact, bears strong resemblance to Thoreau, comparing Emerson’s Socrates with his portrait of Thoreau in his eulogy to him (Porte 316-17). If we follow Porte’s lead, we can say the lining up of Plato to Emerson and Thoreau to Socrates “mirrored the complexities of their master/disciple relationship” (315), and we can go further in saying that it is metaleptic. A small tradition beginning with Angus Fletcher in his Allegory, followed famously by Harold Bloom, and skillfully explicated by John Hollander, has used metalepsis to name “a kind of meta-trope, or figure of linkage between figures” (Hollander, Figure 114). Metalepsis forces us into a position of double interpretation because “there will be one or more unstated middle terms which are leapt over, or alluded to, by the figure” (114). If Socrates and Plato are figurative for a master/disciple relationship, then the substitution of Emerson for the disciple (Plato) and Thoreau for the master (Socrates) is a metonymy, replacing the master-cause with the disciple-effect. However, it’s clear that philosophy for Emerson and Plato symbolizes a tendency of abstraction. Plato, it is announced in the first paragraph, is “this exhausting generalizer” (“Plato” 23) and in the next paragraph we read this chiasmic metonymy of representation: “Plato is philosophy, and philosophy Plato” (23). Plato gives primacy to theory and the realm of ideas over practice and the realm of life, calling the former reality and the latter the shadowy world of appearances. Socrates and Plato, then, can be read as already figurative for a relationship between acting in the world by dialoguing with others, and theorizing that action by writing made-up dialogues that enact a multi-view monologue called the dialectic.

What does this metaleptic portrait suggest? It is a commonplace in American criticism that Emerson called for an American literary figure that only others filled out. Prophet but not practitioner, the two most solid examples recognized even then were Thoreau and Whitman. In
the case of Thoreau, the causal reversal suggests that it was the existence of Thoreau’s self-reliant project at Walden Pond that caused Emerson to write what actually prompted Thoreau to pursue it, say “Self-Reliance.” A further, Platonic interpretation of prophecy is that the ideal form—the prophetic idea of what doesn’t yet exist—is what is real, and the actual instantiation is its reflection. “For,” as Emerson says at the beginning of “Plato,” “it is fair to credit the broadest generalizer with all the particulars deducible from his thesis” (23). Twisted in the scene, then, Walden Pond becomes the ideal that “Self-Reliance” reflected and theorized. This twist records Emerson’s sense that the theoretical is subordinate to the practical—that he is the disciple of the Sage of Walden, and perhaps precisely because the disciple’s terrain is more general and encompasses all of Concord. So despite the tactical concession to Plato that ideas are more real than actualities, the overall strategy is to assert practice’s superiority to theory.

I want to elaborate this fable by following out how Socrates further functions in the essay on Plato and in Emerson’s writing—for Socrates is not just a practitioner of the elenchus. Since Emerson’s college days, when he wrote “The Character of Socrates” for the Bowdoin Prize of 1820, Socrates recurs in Emerson’s journals as a figure for emulation. There is, however, mystery at the heart of Socrates. First there is the historical mystery: Emerson was familiar with both Xenophon and Plato’s sometimes conflicting portrayals of Socrates, as well as in later writers like Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, and Plutarch. And as Emerson says in “Plato,” “the historic facts [about Socrates] are lost in the light of Plato’s mind” (39). Indeed, in 1820, Emerson goes so far as to suggest that, so “uncommon and admirable” is Socrates, “It would seem that antiquity had endeavored to fable forth a being clothed with all the perfection which the purest and brightest imagination could conceive or combine” (Two Unpublished 4).
Socrates always functioned for Emerson as a representative fable, an allegorical model to be read through. Socrates also himself instructed through fable—in 1820 Emerson alludes to Plato’s *Phaedo* (61b), saying “there was no intellect whose leading feature more nearly resembled his own than Æsop, whose fables he undertook to versify” (*Two Unpublished* 16), and in 1850 Emerson says that Socrates was an “Æsop of the mob” (“Plato” 42). In Socrates’ efforts as a teacher, however, lie two other conditions that contribute to an irreducible mystery in his character. First is Socrates’ famed irony. In 1850, Emerson calls this his “hypocritical pretence of knowing nothing,” because for Emerson Socrates *does* know: “he always knew the way out [of the “horrible doubts and confusions” he led his interlocutors]; knew it, yet would not tell it” (“Plato” 41). How does Socrates know? Socrates says *he* doesn’t know, but Socrates’ daemon always seemed to know when it spoke to him. Socrates’ daemon appears in various dialogues as an inner voice that dispenses injunctions that Socrates learned to always follow. For an Emerson that would call the oracle of self-reliance the “aboriginal self,” such an idea was always attractive. In “Plato, or the Philosopher,” there is a hint that Socrates’s daemon, and hence Socrates, appears as a disruption to Plato’s theoretical goal of comprehensive knowing, of metaphysical system-building.

To see this at work, and as *doing* work in Emerson’s composition, we must first note that Emerson’s criticisms follow on the heels of the portrait of Socrates, almost as some sort of response. Despite Plato deserving “credit” for “all the particulars deducible from his thesis” (“Plato” 23), in the final analysis Emerson suggests he fails in his ambition. The second “defect of Plato in power” (42) is that “he has not a system” (43). The stunning thing about this criticism is not that it very obviously applies to Emerson, and is therefore charged with some sort of irony—irony increased when Emerson heightens the self-reference by extrapolating the problem
as one of interpretation and inconsistency, for “One man thinks [Plato] means this; and another, that; he has said one thing in one place, and the reverse of it in another place” (43)—but that the words were first in Socrates’ mouth.

Just before the main depiction of Socrates, while extrapolating Plato’s central message of balance between Culture, Nature, and the Divine, Emerson has occasion to cite what Socrates says in the *Theages* as an “example of the stress laid on nature” (“Plato” 37). As a modern editor puts it, “*Theages* tells the story of the first encounter between Socrates and the young Theages, who hoped to fulfill his political ambitions by learning whatever Socrates had to teach him. . . . *Theages* provides a vivid and distinctive account of what was unusual about Socrates: his divine inner voice and the magical effect he had on his students” (Hutchinson, *Plato* 627).

Emerson prefaces his close citation of Thomas Taylor’s translation by saying, “Socrates declares, that, if some have grown wise by associating with him, no thanks are due to him; but, simply, whilst they were with him, they grew wise, not because of him: he pretends not to know the way of it” (“Plato” 37). Emerson then gives a passage in which Socrates says his “Dæmon” sometimes instructs him not to associate with certain people, but that even if “he does not prevent me from conversing, [they] yet are not at all benefited by associating with me. Such, O Theages, is the association with me; for if it pleases the God, you will make great and rapid proficiency; you will not, if he does not please. Judge whether it is not safer to be instructed by some one of those who have power over the benefit or not, just as it may happen” (38).

Emerson then follows the citation with:

As if he [Socrates] had said, ‘I have no system. I cannot be answerable for you. You will be what you must. If there is love between us, inconceivably delicious and profitable will our intercourse be: if not, your time is lost, and you will only annoy me. I shall seem to
you stupid, and the reputation I have, false. Quite above us, beyond the will of you or me, is this secret affinity or repulsion laid. All my good is magnetic, and I educate, not by lessons, but by going about my business.’ (38)

Socrates, who never said anything in writing himself and so is always made to say things by his “biographers,” is made to say words in an interpretive gloss that strongly echo Emerson’s words in two directions: later in the essay as Emerson criticizes Plato and earlier in Emerson’s career as he describes himself and his philosophy. “I have no System,” Emerson says in Journal E in 1839 (Journals 7: 302); in the Divinity School Address he says in 1838, “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul” (80); in the 1841 “Self-Reliance,” “Character teaches above our wills” (34).

Socrates is the philosopher of practice, Plato of theory—both would willingly teach the mass of humanity and thus have “clapped copyright on the world” (“Plato” 43), but Plato’s effort to know how it is done by writing a system, a theory that plots out everything, is fated to fail. Socrates’s daemon represents a knowledge beyond what Plato can access, and even beyond its injunctions there is mystery.28 “Here is the world sound as a nut, perfect, not the smallest piece of chaos left, never a stitch nor an end, not a mark of haste, or botching, or second thought; but the theory of the world is a thing of shreds and patches” (43). How does this happen? How is it we fail at having a sound, perfectly ordered theory if the world seems perfect and ordered? That’s the conundrum that confronts Plato as he sets on his quixotic quest.29 Emerson’s response is that theory’s ambitions are simply not up to the task. “Plato would willingly have a Platonism, a known and accurate expression of the world . . . . Every atom shall have the Platonic tinge; every atom, every relation, or quality, you knew before, you shall know again, and find here, but now ordered; not nature, but art” (43). Everything, all of nature, shall “have passed through this
man as bread into his body, and become no longer bread, but body: so all this mammoth morsel has become Plato. . . . This is the ambition of Individualism. But the mouthful proves too large. Boa Constrictor has good will to eat it, but he is foiled. . . . There he perishes; Unconquered Nature lives on, and forgets him” (43). The cause here, through the fable of the double star, is Socrates; Plato is identified with Emerson’s invocation of “Culture,” Socrates with “Nature.”

It is Socrates’ daemon that exemplifies Nature’s unpredictable effect upon our practice, and thus Socratic instruction can never be consumed by Platonic theory, by the attempt to have a system. *Praxis* precedes *theoria*, but it can effectively live on within it in order to provoke us, just as Socrates lives on in Plato. For the consequence of this double star? “In view of eternal Nature, Plato turns out to be philosophical exercitations” (43). Plato would have written a philosophical system, but all he delivered were philosophical exercises. Theory is itself a kind of practice.

This interpretation of Plato and Socrates as representative fable might seem attenuated, but it is also fairly close in resembling Emerson’s interpretation of Socrates, prefaced “as if he had said . . .”. I have no prooftext to cite, but I think *interpretation* is what Emerson means by “philosophical exercitations.” “Exercitations” is a rare word; the OED records many related definitions revolving around training for the sake of improvement and exercise for the sake of display. In context, Emerson seems to mean some combination that is related to what we still sometimes call “literary exercises”—the production of a text to display one’s skill as well as improve it. To amplify his point about “philosophical exercitations,” Emerson returns to the point about Plato’s inconsistency: “He argues on this side, and on that. The acutest German, the lovingest disciple, could never tell what Platonism was: indeed admirable texts can be quoted on both sides of every great question from him” (43). Just when Plato is said to fail at his ambition
of system-building, and an alternative project is filled in, Emerson again heightens the self-reference.

Consider: Emerson’s central large-scale genre is the essay, a literary exercise in interpretation of one’s subject: “History,” “Art,” “The Over-Soul,” “The Poet,” “Politics,” “Fate,” “Power.” And in Representative Men, Emerson is at work offering interpretations of historical figures as fables for emulation. At the same time, though, Emerson’s genre is the Montaignean genre of writing about yourself by writing about your topic.31 And this includes, for Montaigne, the subgenre of writing about who you’ve read. So, despite Robert Richardson’s claim that Emerson “would read your poem or your novel, but not your opinion of someone else’s poem or novel, let alone your opinion of someone else’s opinion” (First We Read 10), Emerson certainly believed it was possible to comment on people you’ve read—it’s just a matter of finding the right way to write it.32 And further, it is within one of Montaigne’s most famous essays, “Of Physiognomy,” an essay that includes his most condensed collection of remarks about Socrates, that Montaigne says, “Books have served me not so much for instruction as for exercise” (795).33 This is what Emerson, I think, means by “philosophical exercitations,” and one form of this is in writing an interpretation of your subjects—be the subject figure, figure within a figure, or lines said or written by a figure. For it’s an interpretation that puts them to use, causes you to use them to produce your thoughts.34

The right way to write it begins for Emerson, importantly, in the genre of Montaigne—all essays are self-examinations that are self-creations, all writing in some way are fables of the author’s self being created. And further, this genre in certain hands can be distinctly philosophical—not only because we can treat any figure in a philosophical manner, nor only because philosophy can be thought of more broadly than just system-building, but because
figures and texts opt into traditions by engaging explicitly or implicitly with those traditions. “Plato, or the Philosopher” is Emerson’s version of philosophical self-canonization, his great moment of making explicit his relationship to philosophical tradition as one of participation.

The tradition Emerson specifically enters into is what Nehamas calls “the art of living.” “The philosophers of the art of living,” Nehamas says, “make the articulation of a mode of life their central topic: it is by reflecting on the problems of constructing a philosophical life that they construct the life their work constitutes. The body of work that reflects on the philosophical life is the very content of the life it composes” (Art 6). Thus, Nehamas adds, “The project of establishing a philosophical life is largely self-referential” (6). Or, as Emerson puts it, “Great geniuses have the shortest biographies. . . . They lived in their writing . . .” (“Plato” 25). The mode of life I’ve suggested Emerson articulates is one that binds together, after Montaigne, interpretation and self-interpretation.

One tradition of this philosophical art that Nehamas studies is held together by two further facets: 1) for “aestheticist” and “individualist” artists of the philosophical life like Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault, “no single mode of life is best for all” and “those who want to imitate them must develop their own art of living” (Nehamas, Art 10); and 2) Socrates becomes a prototype and object of reflection for these philosophers. While the first constitutes a necessary feature for this branch of practitioners, the second is a sheer contingent product of their respective struggles to make themselves over in their own image. For philosophers of self-creation like this, one’s self is what one molds, so whatever one finds there becomes the clay. And the fact of the matter is that Socrates and Plato are two of the largest figures in the tradition of writing we’ve come to call “philosophy”—if one becomes a philosopher, it is difficult to ignore them, to not find them in your DNA. “No wife, no children had he,” Emerson says of
Plato, “and the thinkers of all civilized nations are his posterity, and are tinged with his mind” ("Plato" 23). However, if one rejects Plato’s “universalist” mode of arguing that the philosophical life of his master Socrates was the only one worth living, then one will turn with greater fascination to the far more tentative and opaque Socrates, shrouded in historical mystery and his famed irony. This is what Nehamas’s three modern figures do and what we’ve seen Emerson’s Socrates imply in the *Theages*. As I’ve read him, Emerson’s Socrates stands for both the primacy of practice over theory and the irreducible mystery at the heart of nature that will always frustrate our attempts at final, definitive knowledge.

But isn’t *Plato* the figure who holds more fascination for Emerson? I think, largely, yes, because Plato was a writer. For whatever reason, and the reason never finally matters for a writer, Emerson cathected to the writings of the Platonists, from Plato and Proclus to Cudworth and Thomas Taylor. In their writings, he discovers “lustres,” scintillating passages that launch him to his own, “a mechanical help to the fancy and the imagination” (“Nominalist” 137). This is no small thing, and while Emerson admits how this seems a diminution when he glosses reading for the lustres with, “as if one should use a fine picture in a chromatic experiment, for its rich colors,” it should be clear that if one’s color palette comes from Platonic paintings, one’s studies and sketches will have their tinge. The depth of Emerson’s understanding of the problem lies in his recognition that one cannot simply avoid the influence by pretending to have no sources for one’s experiments, no models for one’s self and thought. “’Tis not Proclus,” Emerson says in that famous passage on lustres in “Nominalist and Realist,” “but a piece of nature and fate that I explore” (137). Not alone with oneself but *through* the products of greatness one can discover “the author’s author” (137) and thus find the well-spring of greatness for oneself.
I will try and show further below that one of Emerson’s central techniques for engaging and thinking through Plato and his quest for system is metaleptic. Hollander uses metalepsis “to name a figure of interpretive allusion” (Figure 133). The central feature of metalepsis as an allusive trope is that “[t]here will be one or more unstated, but associated or understood figures, transused by the trope, but which are to be reconstructed by interpretation” (140).37 The double star fable is one of these, especially as it considers Thoreau and discipleship—Emerson offering his homage while asserting very precisely his priority. Allusion becomes interpretive because when a trope replaces a trope, a chain of interpretation is engaged. In it’s simplest form, if Y is a trope for X, and Z tropes Y, then what Z means as a trope can only be gleaned by measuring the ratio between Z and Y as they relate to X. And as Hollander says, interpretive allusions are created when there is a “resonance of context” (118), one that, as Samuel Johnson said of Milton, “crowds the imagination.” If there’s a philosopher that crowds the imagination of philosophers, it is Plato. In the essay on Plato, what we can measure are Emerson’s interpretive allusions to Plato’s imagery and famous Platonic topoi. Emerson’s figures gain their meaning in part by their deviations from their originals; what they add up to is a powerful usurpation of Platonism.

2. Noxious Provocations: The Starry Night Allegory and the Old Man of the Wood

The first major Platonic topos that Emerson engages is “the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (see Republic 607b). The thesis of Representative Men is the separation of powers and roles into different persons. This is how Emerson announces the project in Journal W, 1845: “I have found a subject, On the use of great men . . . . But, in the first place, there should be a chapter on the distribution of the hand into fingers, or on the great value of these individuals as counterweights, checks on each other” (Journals 9: 188).38 There is here both a sense of complementary difference, as well as antagonism. Likewise in Taylor’s
translation of our famous Platonic lustre: “And let us tell it [a personified Poetry, on learning it is to be kicked out of the polis], lest it accuse us of a certain roughness, and rusticity, that there is an antient variance between philosophy and poetry; for such verses as these . . . and a thousand such like, are marks of an antient opposition between them” (Taylor 1: 459). “Variance” translates the Greek *diaphora*, and both the English and the Greek can be used to denote simple difference as well as disagreement. 39 Emerson, toward the beginning of the essay on Plato, cites a passage from the *Republic* to underscore how there are different parts to genius, and then says, “Every man who would do anything well, must come to it from a higher ground; a philosopher must be more than a philosopher. Plato is clothed with the powers of a poet; stands upon the highest place of the poet; and, (though I doubt he wanted the decisive gift of lyric expression,) mainly is not a poet, because he chose to use the poetic gift to an ulterior purpose” (“Plato” 25). 40 Poetry used in the service of philosophy maintains the *Republic*’s stance that poetry can enter the polis so long as it behaves. However, when we remember Emerson’s earlier metonymy of representation—“Plato is philosophy, and philosophy Plato” (23)—we get a curious double figure: if Plato is philosophy, and Plato is and must be more than a philosopher, then internal to philosophy is more than philosophy. Emerson’s metonymy actually contains the much more interesting synecdoche of philosophy’s great hubris: to contain the world in Idea, or a system. Plato, like any self-respecting philosophical system, though just one part of the world wishes to contain the whole of it in thought.

Plato’s metaphysical system is expressed in his “divided line.” At the bottom of the divided line is what appears to us, both representations of the world as well as the physical world itself. At the top are our ideas about the world, both our reasonings as we attempt to make sense of the world as well as, beyond them, the perfect Forms (from *eîdos, idéa*) that our reasonings
aim at. The first movement of Emerson’s essay closes with what we might recognize now as an academic problem that propels us forward: “How Plato came thus to be Europe and philosophy, and almost literature, is the problem for us to solve” (“Plato” 26). (Notice how literature is again beyond philosophy, as if Plato won control over philosophy’s armies, and directed them to victory on the battlefield of Europe’s mind, but final victory in the ancient quarrel yet eludes him.) Emerson’s explanation comes in the form of an inversion of Plato’s allegory of the sun, itself compounded by an echo of Plato’s analogy of city and soul in a scene of maturation that Emerson constructs. These allegorical allusions inflect Emerson’s sense that Culture, writ large, is to be deduced from Plato’s bequest, and thus flesh out how poetry is used to an ulterior purpose in philosophy.

Plato’s allegory of the sun—especially as it engages with his allegory of the cave—has come to seem definitive of the basic Platonic metaphysical stance. The latter allegory portrays us as chained in a cave and forced to view on the back wall the shadowy silhouette of objects created as they are held up to a fire behind us. This is life at the bottom of the divided line. If only we could get out of the cave to see these objects as they really are by the light of the sun outside! The world we experience is but the appearance of things; these myriad, insubstantial shadows are nothing compared to the reality of things seen by the light of the sun, which in Plato’s allegory corresponds to the Form of the Good at the top of the divided line. This is the picture that ensconces the central distinction for metaphysics to function as a science that produces knowledge: the appearance/reality distinction. For a tradition of critics, from Nietzsche to Heidegger to Rorty, it is this picture and distinction that makes it possible for philosophers to remove themselves from day-to-day life to focus on a work that makes them superior in their judgments on that life.
The cave provides an explanation of our incapacities, and the sun a hope and corrective to them. Emerson, however, replaces the cave with a forest in an allegory of maturation that in its course makes a fairly standard analogy in Enlightenment social philosophies between the development of civilizations and the development of an individual, and then follows it with his inversion of Plato’s sun. Here is the full passage:

This [Plato becoming Europe and philosophy] could not have happened without a sound, sincere and catholic man, able to honour at the same time the ideal, or laws of the mind, and Fate, or the order of nature. The first period of a nation as of an individual, is the period of unconscious strength. Children cry, and scream, and stamp with fury, unable to express their desires. As soon as they can speak and tell their want and the reason of it, they become gentle. In adult life, whilst the perceptions are obtuse, men and women talk vehemently and superlatively, blunder and quarrel: their manners are full of desperation, their speech is full of oaths. As soon as with culture things have cleared up a little, and they see them no longer in lumps and masses, but accurately distributed, they desist from that weak vehemence, and explain their meaning in detail. If the tongue had not been framed for articulation, man would still be a beast in the forest. The same weakness and want on a higher plane, occurs daily in the education of ardent young men and women. “Ah! you don’t understand me: I have never met with any one who comprehends me:” and they sigh and weep, write verses, and walk alone,—fault of power to express their precise meaning. In a month or two, through the favour of their good genius, they meet some one so related as to assist their volcanic estate, and, good communication being once established, they are thenceforward good citizens.—It is ever thus. The progress is to accuracy, to skill, to truth, from blind force.
There is a moment in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness, and have not yet become microscopic, so that man, at that instant, extends across the entire scale, and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of Night, converses by his eyes and brain with solar and stellar creation. That is the moment of adult health, the culmination of power.

(“Plato” 26-27)

“Immense forces of Night,” in the essay’s terms, is a figure for Nature as both monistic One and pluralistic variety. It is one of Emerson’s paradoxical union-of-impossibilities figures (see “Plato” 31). While there are many forces, they all look the same in the dark. This figure is also Emerson’s Gnostic image of the Divine and poetic power. We grow out of our brute force in two senses, and it’s no mistake we find our sensitive youth writing verse, alone, like an inarticulate beast in the forest.

Mature balance of unity and variety is a “ripeness,” and that power is ours when we are rooted in the world and our mind extends upward and outward through its gaze. It is such a powerful feeling that it seems as though the Cartesian distinction between res cogitans and res extensa is erased and we, “at that instant,” extend and expand to fill the space of the world, but it is our mind that exchanges a look with the Platonic image of the ideal, the Solar Form of the Good. However, if for Plato philosophy is articulated by an image of leaving the cave to go out into the clarity of the sun’s powerful light, then Emerson’s image of night is something different. Any clarity derived from the night’s sky would be from the pinpricks of light that are stars, found by narrowing our eyes to small, “microscopic” points. Mature power here is to avoid becoming overfocused and lost in those myriad points of light, and rather stay grounded in what is still a darkly powerful world.
In the scene of maturation in which the forest replaces the cave, unselfconsciousness, difficulty in expression, lack of reasons and understanding, unmoderated talk, inaccuracy, and imprecision are all aligned as part of the youth of civilization. In Journal Y, begun in 1845 when Emerson was first preparing the lectures of Representative Men, the allegory of maturation and the starry night allegory are divided by two short paragraphs that were cut away entirely. These help emphasize how important “microscopic” is as a trope for accuracy and precision that is opposed to the blurry, brute power of poetry and point us in the direction of connective tissue that can flesh out what Emerson intends for his philosophy.

The men of whom we are to speak are all uplifted to this elevation of civility.

Happy in this! happy the period in which this truly human force reaches its perfect extent, & has not yet gone over into fineness, and an excessive thought for surfaces.

There must be the Abyss, Nox, & Chaos out of which all come, & they must never be far off. Cut off the connexion between any of our works & this dread origin & the work is shallow & unsatisfying. That is the strength & excellence of the people, that they lean on this, & the mob is not quite so bad an argument as we are apt to represent it, for it has this divine side. (Journals 9: 325)

In the essay, the allegory of maturation’s conclusion of “progress to accuracy” touches off its complementary negative side in “microscopic.” In the journal, that role is played by “fineness.” The effect is the same: Emerson, like Plato, “turns incessantly the obverse and the reverse of the medal of Jove” (“Plato” 32), his central figure of the union of impossibilities.

“Fineness” in the journal echoes its appearance at the end of an early outline of the essay on Plato: “[Greek, pre-Socratic] philosophers were fast distributing & running into superfineness”
“distribution,” as into different boxes, being one of Emerson’s terms for analytical taxonomy and classification.49

The problem with precision seems to be this: we risk in excessive analysis a reduction of the thing into a superficial dust.50 Beneath the surface of our works—and certainly Emerson intends this as a commentary on writing—there must be, not just depth, but the bottomless depth of abyss. We are only satisfied with a work we cannot see to the bottom of—thus making it endlessly productive. Our productive capacities, then, lie in our talent, skill, and “power to express [our] precise meaning,” as he says in the scene of maturation. And Emerson does not ultimately divide precision away from the power of the poet. In a journal of 1847, he says, “The problem of the poet is to do the impossible in this wise[,] namely to unite the wildest freedom with the hardest precision” (Journals 10: 91). But we must have something to work on; to bring order to something, to bring it to light, it must first have been chaos and night. “The maker of a sentence,” Emerson says in a journal of 1834, “like the other artist launches out into the infinite & builds a road into Chaos & old Night & is followed by those who hear him with something of wild creative delight” (Journals 4: 363).51

This trio of terms, “Abyss,” “Chaos,” and the Latin “Nox” for night—all commonplace gnostic images, but also drawn from Milton’s Paradise Lost—form an underground passageway to Emerson’s essay on Montaigne in Representative Men. Both times the terms were cut away, but the trio first appears in Journal W in a passage used in “Montaigne” and often linked by critics to “Plato”: “The philosophy we want is one of fluxions & mobility” (Journals 9: 222). This famous passage is titled “Adaptiveness” in the journal, and is popular for critics making Emerson into a philosopher of flux, transition, in-betweenness. The essay “Montaigne” follows with the journal until “the soul of man must be the type of our Scheme, just as the body of man is
the type after which a dwelling house is built” (Journals 9: 223; “Montaigne” 91)—“type” being a Platonic term for “Form”—before continuing to the cut part: “The Universe & the individual perpetually act & react on each other. Thus all philosophy begins from Nox & Chaos, the Ground or Abyss which Schelling so celebrates. And in every man we require a bit of night, of chaos, of Abgrund, as the spring of a watch turns best on a diamond” (9: 223). The Night is impenetrable, like a diamond. Emerson’s experiment with the German Abgrund nicely echoes his alternate name for intuition, spontaneity, and the divine spark in the soul from “Self-Reliance”: “What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded?” (37). Transmuted into the vocabulary of expression, if our writing aims to reveal something of ourselves, the depth of our writing mirrors the remainder in ourselves always left behind. Moved further onto the page, then, the writing itself must have something impenetrable to it, if only a bit, for readers to turn on, to work upon.

Emerson’s scene of maturation and his inverted Platonic image of Nox summon and provide a counterpoint to “Self-Reliance” and its image of youth and misunderstanding. The scene in “Plato” is a story of an ascent to common communication. If we begin in “unconscious strength” where “children cry, and scream, and stamp with fury, unable to express their desires,” then “with culture things have cleared up a little” and we can “explain [our] meaning in detail” (“Plato” 26). Compare that to the veneration of youth in “Self-Reliance” that is a model for the self-reliant person: “What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior of children, babes and even brutes. . . . Bashful or bold, then, [the youth] will know how to make us seniors very unnecessary. . . . A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible[,] . . . He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests” (28-29). Even more, our genius’s desires are, if not unconscious, at least unknown,
and we call them “Whim,” our only defense because “we cannot spend the day in explanation” (30). “Ah! you don’t understand me,” the ardent young poets say while walking alone, unable “to express their precise meaning” (‘Plato” 27). Precision is precisely the problem, for “to be great is to be misunderstood” (‘Self-Reliance” 34).

How do these two, precision and power, clarity and opacity, soliform eye and a bit of Nox, come together? It’s important to see that Emerson’s imagery of night thoroughly frustrates certain Platonic goals and strategies. If the goal of philosophy is to attain a systematic representation of the world, mastered by dialectically eliminating falsehood until one can rise “beyond hypothesis” to the Realm of Forms (Republic 510b), then Emerson’s imagery doesn’t just suggest that this might be an ideal we never realize, but that whatever we call progress in our philosophical writing might be in proportion to its active avoidance.

Even more, Plato displays a deep animosity to democracy that is linked to the elitism embedded in his conception of philosophy as disciplined dialectic. In the analogy of the ship of state in Book 6 (488a-489a), Plato articulates a strong pessimism in the democratic polis ever being able to take true philosophy seriously in the state’s management. It’s in this analogy that Plato likens the demos to a somewhat deaf, somewhat blind, somewhat stupid owner of a ship that does whatever people who pander to him suggest—while the astronomers who actually know how to pilot a ship are ignored, laughed at, reviled, even persecuted. It is here especially that we can sense the different constellations Emerson is guided by. Emerson may be ambivalent about the multitude, but he has a faith in democracy equal to his faith that each has access to God within. It is for this reason John Dewey called Emerson “the Philosopher of Democracy,” “the one citizen of the New World fit to have his name uttered in the same breath with that of Plato” (“Ralph Waldo Emerson” 29). While Plato can find easy alliance between
the difficulty of philosophy and the notion that philosophers should be kings, Emerson’s belief in democracy, the aboriginal self, and the difficulty of greatness in general produces a more textured picture of the operations of philosophy in the history of culture and community.

I believe Emerson indicates three different ways in which clarity and opacity should be balanced in his scene of maturation that conform to three different levels of publicity and privacy.55 We need to first see that the ardent young poet in Emerson’s scene should be identified as the democratic ephebe. The Greek ephebe was a youth about to enter full citizenship in the Greek polis by undergoing military training. Just so does the “education of ardent young men and women” contain a poetic stage. Thus Emerson’s image is another modulation of Plato. Emerson’s citation of Plato to underscore the different parts of genius, discussed above as the thesis of Representative Men, is from Book 6 of the Republic in the middle of an analogy Socrates is drawing between the “firm habits of the mind” needed by the soldier for “dangers at war” and those by the philosopher “with reference to learning” (Taylor 1: 340). Exchanging the militaristic for the poetic, Emerson represents the poetic as a stage passed through: “good communication being once established, they are thenceforward good citizens” (“Plato” 27). The “good communication” needed is the correction of their “fault of power to express their precise meaning.”

However, for Emerson “good citizens” holds a double meaning, indeed another Platonic one. In the context of the scene of maturation, with the analogy between the nation and individual operative, Emerson does seem to be talking about being a citizen of a democracy. To be a good citizen in a democracy, able to hold public discourse with one’s fellows, one must have good communication, which requires a kind of clarity and precision of expression. But for Emerson, solitude must never be fully abandoned for society; rather they must be alternated
between. This is the political level of Emerson’s response and the first meaning of “citizen.” He recognizes that public politics is necessary; Emerson’s point is we must not think it is sufficient.56

The poetic might be in some sense a natural state of “brute youth” (“Plato” 27) that must be matured out of, but it is also very obviously an ideal state to be matured into. “We must exercise them,” Socrates says of youths hoping to be philosophers, “in various kinds of learning, whilst we consider whether their genius be capable of sustaining the greatest of disciplines, or whether it fails, as those who fail in the other things [e.g. the physical trials of the warrior]” (Taylor 1: 340). Plato suggests that the true philosopher combines the warrior and intellectual temperaments to face the greatest of intellectual disciplines. For Emerson, the philosopher is aimed at something intellectual, but the role of the warrior in Emerson’s scheme is the poet. It is poetry that forces us beyond “mere” intellectual philosophy.

Emerson means to create an image of ascent to being a good democratic citizen—though oscillating between society and solitude—but in another twist he also means to create an image of ascent to poetic power through the Platonic idea of friendship, a kind of solitude with others. Again, from the scene: “In a month or two, through the favour of their good genius, they meet some one so related as to assist their volcanic estate, and, good communication being once established, they are thenceforward good citizens” (“Plato” 27). Even if “citizen” has a political valence, the good communication here is with a friend, not the whole democratic polis.57 Indeed, this friend is the type of Socrates. “The favour of their good genius” is an allusion to Socrates’s daemon. “Genius” is one of the ways in which the Greek is occasionally translated, and in the “notebook” scholars call “Platoniana”—his assembled notes on Plato—there is an entry, “For the Daemon of Socrates, & the life of a philosopher,” that directs us to a specific
page in Taylor’s translation of Book 6. Here we find Socrates at the end of his expostulation on why philosophers are ignored for the navigation of the ship of state. “A very small number,” Socrates says at the top of the page, “now remains of those who worthily are conversant in philosophy . . .” (Taylor 1: 333). Why so few? Because the others are distracted, by money, fame, politics, whatever “tends to corrupt” the soul. Sometimes self-exile will keep the soul from corruption; sometimes “a mighty soul arises, who despising the honours of the state entirely neglects them . . .” (333). Sometimes they will be like Theages—the very same from our earlier discussion of Socrates’s daemon—for “the care of his health excluding him from politics makes him attentive to [philosophy] alone” (333). Or they will be like Socrates himself—though, he says, “as to my genius, it is not worth while to mention the dæmoniacal sign; for certainly it has happened heretofore to but one other, or to none at all” (333).

One of Socrates’ daemon’s functions, highlighted in the Theages, is to tell him who he should allow into his circle. Just so might an ardent young poet, walking alone in the woods surrounding Concord, meet a Thoreau. Again twisted in the scene, we find a democratization of Socrates’ daemon, available to any to find their Socratic midwife. While Plato, on the page Emerson refers to in the journal, seems to want to emphasize the singularity of Socrates, daemon and midwife in one, Emerson’s aboriginal self is equally found in all.58 “Daemon,” I should note, is also something of a union-of-impossibilities figure for Emerson, as well as Plato himself. Emerson’s use of “distribution” for analytical taxonomy is itself a conflation of two different functions we find in Plato. In Plato, distribution is closer to the function of the demiurge, his prime deity figure, creating the essences of things that the philosopher’s art of dialectic is meant to uncover. Emerson seems to recognize this, but thus quite intentionally calls Plato “the distributor” (“Plato” 27) and then cites Socrates’ implicit definition of the “dialectician” from the
Phaedrus: “He shall be as a god to me who can rightly divide and define” (27). So as Emerson distributes Socratic elements across his two figures in the scene of maturation, he also combines these two different elements, the daemonic and the dialectical, in his Plato. And here Emerson is simply following Plato’s lead. In the dangerous game of etymology, most now think that “daemon” derives from roots meaning “distribute” and “division,” both uses for “daemon” found in Homer. But Plato perhaps gave the first overt etymology of the word in the Cratylus, saying that Hesiod calls the guardians of humanity “daemon, because they were prudent and learned (δαήμονες)” (Taylor 5: 510). A convenient etymology for his master, Socrates, to say the least. That Emerson was unaware of this irony seems unlikely.

Citizenship in the scene is thus also the kind Plato seems to hold out to the philosopher frustrated with the pitfalls of the politics of the actual world. It is in an important sense communal, if not strictly political. At the end of Book 9, Plato returns to the problems for the philosopher in the polis he first brought up in Book 6, and here we can find a third, even more private relation for Emerson that articulates a balance between clarity and opacity. Socrates asks, “Shall not every one then, who possesses intellect, regulate his life in extending the whole of his powers hither, in the first place, honouring those disciplines which will render his soul of this kind, and despising all other things?” (Taylor 1: 437) Rather, the philosopher will look “to that polity within himself, and take care that nothing there be moved out of its place . . .” (437). At the end of this final speech of Book 9, after echoing the themes of Book 6’s discussion of the philosopher’s isolation, Glaucon says, “He will not then . . . be willing to act in polities, if he takes care of this [avoidance of corruption].”

Yes truly, said I [Socrates], in his own city, and greatly too. But not probably in his country, unless some divine fortune befall him.
I understand, said he. You mean in the city we have now established, which exists in our reasoning, since it is nowhere on earth, at least, as I imagine.

But in heaven, probably, there is a model of it, said I, for any one who inclines to contemplate it, and on contemplating to regulate himself accordingly; and it is of no consequence to him, whether it does exist anywhere, or shall ever exist here. He does the duties of this city alone, and of no other.

It is reasonable, said he. (Taylor 1: 437)

Emerson also records Plato’s answer in Platoniana. “All philosophers believe in some remote place where the dream is realized,” Emerson says. “Plato in some far East . . . . Swedenborg in Africa. Fourier in harmonic planets. But Plato wiselier, ‘which tho’ it be not our earth must have a pattern of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to behold it, & beholding, resolves to dwell there’” (Journals 10: 485).62

Stanley Cavell, our great philosophical reader of Emerson, reads the end of Book 9 of the Republic as “a standing gesture toward the reader, or overhearer, to enter into the discussion, to determine his or her own position with respect to what is said—asserting, puzzled, bullied, granting for the sake of argument, and so on” (Conditions 8). Cavell names one of his books after this finale in the Republic: Cities of Words. Emerson, too, in 1847, figures a private relation to books as a conversation, counterposed to actual people, and as a space that is a polis: “Conversation in society is always on a platform so low as to exclude the Saint & the Poet after they have made a few trials. Ah we must have some gift of transcending time also, as we do space, & collecting our club from a wider brotherhood. Crier[,] call Pythagoras, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Proclus, Plotinus, Spinoza, Confucius & Menu, Kepler, Friar Bacon” (Journals 10: 110). If Plato creates hearers, like Glaucon, that are fairly flat and acquiescent, then the actual
Socratic tradition of reading Emerson belongs to will not be. Like Socrates collaring an interlocutor in some public space, one will sometimes quite aggressively push and pull on one’s text to get the secrets it can offer. The friend in the scene of maturation, like Emerson’s friendship with Thoreau, need not be tranquil, and perhaps best not be. But all the world is at stake in the words being continued between reasonable friends assisting each other’s volcanic estate.

And this gets us closer to the heart of this most private relation Emerson is after in balancing clarity and opacity. In Emerson, the “pattern of [the city] laid up in heaven for him who wishes to behold it, & beholding, resolves to dwell there” is constituted, like Plato, by the distinction between the ideal and the actual, but it must be followed by the Emersonian thesis that the “ideal” is never understood. The ideal city we are to contemplate as a “model” is, Plato says, “nowhere on earth, at least, as I imagine.” We should assimilate this sense of “ideal,” this “dream” (in Emerson’s gloss), to Emerson’s sense of alienation—just as our “rejected thoughts” and genius can come back to us with “alienated majesty” (“Self-Reliance” 27), so is the ideal city an alienation of our best, aboriginal selves into the projected heavens. To contemplate the pattern in heaven and dwell there, then, is to come into a social relation with oneself and one’s words. To inject a bit of Nox into our work so that it is not shallow is to put oneself into a position of interpreting something strange, as much as any other reader. This is ultimately why it seems to Emerson “that one person wrote all the books,” as he says in the passage on reading for the lustres in “Nominalist and Realist” (137). It is not because the individuality of genius disappears into the mystical Oneness of Being; it is because the experience of meaningful, interpretive reading coincides with the experience of writing. “Here are things just hinted which not one reader in a hundred would take,” Emerson says in 1837, “but which lie so near to the
favorite walks of my imagination and to the facts of my experience that I read them with a surprise & delight as if I were finding very good things in a forgotten manuscript of my own” (Journals 5: 341).

This is what the imagery of Night, Chaos, and the Abyss amounts to: it is a provocation to produce more writing. “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul,” as he says in the Divinity School Address (80). The ideal city is projected out of ourselves to provoke us to fill in the details of the model—for the model is, in some sense, dark to us. We must give it form. The model is, as Plato says, a city made of words, which is to say our writing, though it be opaque. For Emerson one reads between the lines because the abyss between them is where truth lies—in a text’s ability to provoke our production of a reading of those lines. As Emerson says in “Spiritual Laws,” “The effect of any writing on the public mind is mathematically measurable by its depth of thought. How much water does it draw? If it awaken you to think, if it lift you from your feet with the great voice of eloquence, then the effect is to be wide, slow, permanent, over the minds of men; if the pages instruct you not, they will die like flies in the hour” (89).

Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder, and Plato’s choice of dialogue seems to codify this early stage of questions being posed and answers proposed. The tradition of system-building seems from this vantage the natural outgrowth of Plato’s Middle Dialogues, unlike the inconclusive early ones that are also called Plato’s Socratic dialogues. The middle-dialogue interlocutors display an earnestness at wanting more and more of Socrates’ answers, as if the flat-footed Glaucon and Phaedrus were stand-ins for Plato’s real attitude to Socrates’ irony—they kind of wish their master had some views of his own. The genre of system seems to
simply propose a series of answers, to fill in as many cracks as possible to let no doubt find a
place in the composure of one’s attitude to life.  

Emerson’s reply is that we are made of a variety of moods, and that to pretend otherwise
is to reduce our life. “Swedenborg’s system of the world,” Emerson says, “wants central
spontaneity; it is dynamic not vital, and lacks power to generate life. There is no individual in it.
The Universe is a gigantic crystal, all whose atoms and laminae lie in uninterrupted order, and
with unbroken unity, but cold and still. . . . The universe in his poem suffers under a magnetic
sleep, and only reflects the mind of the magnetizer. . . . All his figures speak one speech. All
his interlocutors Swedenborgize” (“Swedenborg” 74-5). Emerson’s theoretical and stylistic
response is to record the cracks in our unity of mind. His philosophy desires the effect of setting
a real dialogue in motion. “The more coherent & elaborate your system,” Emerson says in a
passage about Swedenborg in Journal Y, “the less I like it” (Journals 9: 302). Emerson doesn’t
like it because he can’t find himself alive in such a system.

“Finding yourself” in a text is not a matter of finding what you already think mirrored
accurately in the words you read; a text lives and breathes when we find something new to think
of its lines. Emerson doesn’t write a system because his mode is provocation. For Emerson,
“Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the
moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an
aim” (“Self-Reliance” 40). Readerly transitions are what are provoked by great writers, in
Emerson’s vernacular. Making the text difficult is a means of opening a space for the movement
of thought. To shift with seeming inconsistency between oracular statements requires the reader
to track back over the space between; to dart in a metaphor requires the reader to look back over
the gulf shot past in the pairing of two oddities with a copula; to trope in general requires a
tracing of the curve created by the turn of speech; to allude requires the reader to track back and forth between the texts. Allusion opens such a space by creating a dialogue between two texts in which the reader is required to understand both speaking parts to come to a conclusion about the whole. In Emerson’s noetic economy, allusion is the specific form of dialogue with the past wherein one records one’s relationship to a tradition. In all cases of difficulty, the effort of the writer must be matched by the effort of the reader in generating the power from those transitions.

An interpreter with merely philosophical exercise on their mind would stop there, but I feel compelled to say a final word about the relationship to philosophical tradition that is revealed by the mode of Plato’s appearance in Emerson’s essay. It is not enough for the philosophical theorist to see how Emerson forms a relationship to that tradition; one must also situate that form in conceptual space, to see it as one mode among many in order to judge its efficacy. As Nehamas says about the artists of living, even if they wish to create an image of life as self-understanding that is in some way beyond the need for the corroborative judgments of anyone else, it is still in the purview of philosophy to judge “whether that image is or is not coherent or admirable. That is a different question altogether. It concerns the nature of the character constructed in their writings, the question whether life can be lived, and whether it is worth living, as they claim. It is a question about us and not primarily about them” (Art 8). To this large question about Emerson’s thought, thinking, and forms, I will take up the smaller question: What of the mode of allusion as a philosophical art?

Since allusion connects to others it can have the effect of creating a tradition. While stealing an image can be mere theft, or dropping a name an inauthentic theft of authority, the only way to tell is to pursue the allusion and see if a significant ratio is created over the topos
that is the texts ringing the similar sounds. And in this way, it doesn’t differ significantly from
the way intellectuals have established their traditions of discourse over time. Find someone you
agree with and continue their thought; find someone you disagree with and assert the opposite of
what the thought’s about. Philosophers are said to be footnotes to Plato because they are in
some manner pondering the questions that Plato seems to have given first voice. But what if you
don’t want to ponder Plato’s questions? What if you think they are bad questions? What if you
don’t want to assert yay or nay or say anything related to what Plato thought about?

Those are the questions that Richard Rorty ponders, and part of his work has been given
over to thinking about how philosophers evade the traditions they’ve inherited while remaining
part of those traditions. How do you remain a philosopher, contributing to philosophical
tradition, while at the same time making it new? While Emerson doesn’t himself think that Plato
thought about the wrong things, the man who said “imitation is suicide” is obviously
antagonized by the problem. In the essay on Plato, Emerson echoes “Nominalist and Realist”s
discussion of reading for the lustres, but instead of emphasizing “the author’s author”
(“Nominalist” 137), or the “one mind common to all individual men,” as Emerson calls this
author in “History” (3), Emerson’s emphasis in Representative Men is on the author’s
appearance in time. He begins the essay on Plato by singling out Plato’s books “among secular
books”—books that, as Edward Emerson reminds us in his note to “secular” in the Centenary
edition, “live through the ages” (312). As Emerson says towards the end of his addendum,
“Plato: New Readings,” “[Plato’s] writings have also the sempiternal youth of poetry” (40)—not
eternal, outside of time, but born in time and forever lasting after. It doesn’t feel timeless, but
rather has a “perpetual modernness” (“Plato” 26).
This life and modernness, as we can see as early as “The American Scholar,” is a function of the reader rising to the level of a great writer. There he says, “It is remarkable, the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They impress us ever with the conviction that one nature wrote and the same reads” (57). While this might seem the same kind of invocation as “the author’s author,” what Emerson means by “one nature” is better gleaned later on when he says, “There is then creative reading, as well as creative writing” (58).

However, while in “The American Scholar” it is weak readers and writers, and the colleges built on them (56), that get the blame for divinizing poets and their chants, in the essay on Plato we get a clearer sense of the active part played by the older generation of writers in the conspiracy against the new generation’s imagination. “[T]he writings of Plato have preoccupied every school of learning, every lover of thought, every church, every poet, making it impossible to think on certain levels, except through him” (“Plato” 26). While on the surface a typical vamping on Plato’s influence for Emerson, he follows it with the extraordinary ambiguity: “He stands between the truth and every man’s mind, and has almost impressed the language and the primary forms of thought with his name and seal” (26, emphasis mine). It is not our sluggishness here, as in “The American Scholar,” but Plato’s power that stands between us and “Man Thinking” (“American Scholar” 53). If “the author’s author” suggests a kind of flattening of individuality as we connect to our aboriginal selves, then the essay on Plato emphasizes the struggle for strength we must undergo against past strength.

This is the angle that Rorty uses to understand a particular tradition of philosophers that he charts from Hegel to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. Rorty takes those four as “paradigms of ironist theory,” paradigms of philosophical evasion. Since Hegel, Rorty suggests, the primary technique of evasion has been telling new stories about the history of
philosophy. In Rorty’s interpretation of Hegel, the author’s author is history. More generally, then, narrative has come to be the name of an alternative in philosophy because philosophy apotheosized the semantic or synchronic dimension of thought, and its handmaiden came to be the technique of system-building. Hegel’s historicism added the pragmatic or diachronic dimension, so undermining previous systems was given explicitly a new mode—not just picking away at particular points in the synchronic dimension, but showing in the diachronic dimension how each system improves on the immediate predecessor in a mounting story of progress that can be assessed as a gradual synthesis from our present vantage (and thus be judged a “rational” progression).

One of the ways of charting this historicist tradition is by comparing them to Hegel. Nietzsche and Heidegger, for example, tell stories of regression, not progression, and it’s hard to tell if Derrida’s stories have a moral at all. But stand a little ways back, and there’s a kind of logic to this increasingly self-conscious philosophical tradition: If Plato wanted vertical ascent up the divided line, then Hegel laid it out horizontally to get a historical progression. Nietzsche took that progression and, in The Birth of Tragedy, claimed that Socrates actually sent us on a path of descent from a golden age of unity. Heidegger sees what Nietzsche is up to and claims that he simply “inverted Plato,” and gets busy giving potted stories of the history of philosophy via imaginative and sometimes specious etymologies of words. Derrida sees what Heidegger is up to and leaps over him to grab some of Nietzsche’s jouissance, and gets busy experimenting with even more stylistic forms than Nietzsche. And Rorty stands back from all of these writers he loves and says, ‘All that these writers wanted was freedom from the books that crowded their imagination, freedom to create themselves in their own image without painful, unconscious imitation.’ “This means,” Rorty says in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, “that their criterion
for resolving doubts, their criterion of private perfection, is autonomy rather than affiliation to a power other than themselves. All any ironist can measure success against is the past — not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his own terms, thereby becoming able to say, ‘Thus I willed it’” (97).

How does Emerson fit into this tradition from this perspective? Emerson, it is true, doesn’t often tell stories about the history of philosophy. The essay on Plato is a rare moment of his coming close to it, though its form is far more abstract than the stories the other ironists tell. While Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida could all give detailed descriptions of the sequence of philosophers and their terms of argument from Plato to Kant and beyond, it’s doubtful Emerson ever cared enough about the details of the sequence. I hope to have shown, however, that he does have command of a breadth of particular details in Plato. And since philosophy is in part a matter of taking positions in particular conceptual topoi, one can attempt to construe Emerson’s position by such triangulation, just as every reader of the history of philosophy does when asking the past to speak today. If I’m right, however, in my interpretation of those positions in the essay on Plato, then Emerson inverted Plato before his ephebe, Nietzsche did. Emerson’s use of night, chaos, abyss and their analogues makes every apparently flatfooted appearance of light, order, and compensatory plenitude ironic—not in our own flatfooted construal of irony as “the contrary,” but in the older Greek sense of eirôneia that Harold Bloom interprets as “swerve.” Emerson does mean to invoke the Platonic Sun—just a little to the left, under the shade of that copse of trees. Emerson’s ulterior purpose was to show the importance of poetry in saving Plato from himself, in what makes him still our first philosopher. Though Plato mainly is not a poet, and didn’t want the decisive gift of lyric
expression, it is ironically just that injection of poetic opacity that makes his text endlessly productive for new interpretive exercises.

Emerson’s irony, his ability to swerve away from his predecessors as he invokes them, might though best be construed in Bloom’s term *apophrades* for the strong poet’s final move against precursors. Nehamas interprets irony as making possible the situation of “insinuat[ing] that something is taking place inside you that your audience is not allowed to see, but”—he adds—“it does not always entail that you see it yourself” (*Art* 67). This is very much Emerson’s picture of the aboriginal self. But Emerson’s stance to affiliate with the power of the aboriginal self, in Rorty’s terms, is to go through his precursors by affiliating with them. This is why Emerson tells us in “Uses of Great Men” to “not fear excessive influence” and “Never mind the taunt of Boswellism . . . . Be another: not thyself, but a Platonist . . . .” (17). Rather than backsliding, this ironic affiliation, I believe, hopes to achieve the conjuration Bloom called *apophrades*, “or return of the dead”:

The later poet . . . holds his own poem so open again to the precursor’s work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet’s flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself . . . . But the poem is now *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work. (*Anxiety* 15-16)

The essay on Plato might ironically give us a rare index of success in what must be, for Bloom, the experience of the reader reading both later and earlier poets. For as legions of commentators read Emerson as a Platonist, and Daniel Walker Howe says, “there is practically nothing to
distinguish his treatment of Plato’s philosophy from one that a Unitarian of the classical school
might have written,” we can now see Emerson saying, “Thus I willed it.”

1 The most important exception is Ray Benoit’s essay, “Emerson on Plato: The Fire’s Center.”
Mark Bauerlin follows in Benoit’s spirit when he gives a reading of the essay on Plato during his
discussion of “Thinking in the Emersonian Way” (26-28), and I follow both in thinking
Emerson’s essay offers an important version of his thesis of “bipolar unity” (Journals 7: 200).
Other readings of the essay include Merton Sealt’s Emerson on the Scholar (162-164) and David
Robinson’s Emerson and the Conduct of Life (94-98). Roger Thompson in Emerson and the
History of Rhetoric gives a reading of “Plato” as a representative of democracy that I discuss
below.
2 Brown in “Emerson’s Platonism” points out that his great predecessor, J. S. Harrison in his The
Teachers of Emerson, did not “get to the root of the matter” (325) of Emerson’s Platonism
because, as F. I. Carpenter says, he “assumed the identity of Platonism with Neoplatonism”
(Carpenter 40). Harrison and Carpenter’s Emerson and Asia are both very useful in tracing debts
and parallels in Emerson’s work to the Neoplatonists, particularly Plotinus and Proclus.
Carpenter’s work especially is useful for a reading of “Plato” because of Emerson’s weaving of
what we still often call Eastern philosophy into his discussion of Plato.
3 It is striking that Berry, in his chapter “The Plutarchan Philosophy,” discusses “the two
extremes of flux and stability, of difference and identity” (135) in “Montaigne,” though precisely
the same motif can be found in “Plato.”
4 See Schirmeister 147-151. Schirmeister says that “Each of the essays in Representative Men
locates its subject in an explicitly political context” (149-50), but it’s difficult to asses this claim.
Her first illustration is “Plato,” but following her assertion that it “reopens the whole question
about the relation between poetry and philosophy and its political context” (150), her only
evidence seems to be by implication. So, by placing “Plato” as the first essay, it implies that
philosophy “lays the foundation for the other essays; without philosophy, we would have no
mysticism, nor poetry, no politics, and so on” (150). When Emerson says, “a philosopher must
be more than a philosopher” (“Plato” 25), “one is further reminded that the quarrel between
poetry and philosophy, even as it stages itself within Plato’s work, takes place specifically in a
political context” (Schirmeister 150). Schirmeister’s reliance on a general allusion to Plato’s
Republic leaves vague what she means by “political context,” given Plato’s dialogues’ own
transformations of local contexts into abstract, philosophical material. For example, certainly
Plato’s understanding of politics in The Republic has a lot to do with his response to Socrates’
death at the hands of a democratic Athens, but his response is specifically philosophical—not an
intervention into politics, but a ratcheting of the problem up several levels of abstraction. When
Schirmeister speaks of a “practical politics” (148) or how Emerson’s notion of representation
“might lead to a politics” (158), she seems to be responding more to the New Americanists’
assertion that Emerson is a mere apologist for an American ideology of possessive individualism
(see her comments on Sacvan Bercovitch, 166). I think with Schirmeister that Emerson has in
mind “the question of the political” (148), but Emerson, at least, seems to agree with Plato that
such a question is philosophical, and not closely enough aligned with any particular political
program. I try to identify a more specific sense of political in the second section, below.
One of the most interesting omissions is Cavell’s. Not only is Cavell a trained philosopher, and one interested in its history, but he has also positioned Plato as the earliest figure of the tradition of “moral perfectionism” that Emerson is always his foremost figure, even remarking at one point, “we see that we must think of the transfiguration in Emerson’s prose of an unknown number of Platonic terms and images . . .” (Conditions 10). Even if we ultimately forgive Cavell for being a genuine American Scholar, rather than scholar, it still seems regrettable to not turn to an essay where one might count some of them.

Eve, even if we ultimately forgive Cavell for being a genuine American Scholar, rather than scholar, it still seems regrettable to not turn to an essay where one might count some of them.

See Frank M. Turner’s discussion of “The Victorian Platonic Revival” (369-446, especially 370-74 on the previous state of scholarship). More generally, however, is the transformation during the 19th century of learning into an array of professional disciplines with their own vocabularies, forms, and mannerisms. So while Benjamin Jowett’s comprehensive translation of Plato’s corpus became standard during this time period (first published in 1871), Emerson’s favorite translator, Thomas Taylor, was generally agreed in his own time to have had poor Greek and seems to have been quickly forgotten. In 1848, Emerson told Wordsworth, “as I usually did all English scholars, that it was not creditable that no one in all the country knew anything of Thomas Taylor, the Platonist, whilst in every American library his books are found” (Journals 10: 559). Frank B. Evans, III’s “Thomas Taylor, Platonist of the Romantic Period” lays out Taylor’s somewhat harsh reception during his lifetime, but see Kathleen Raine’s “Thomas Taylor in England” for a more upbeat version of his reception. Both cite Coleridge’s comment in a letter of 1810 to Lady Beaumont that Taylor’s translation of Proclus was “so translated that difficult Greek is transmuted into incomprehensible English” (qtd in Evans 1075; Raine 18). Raine, and John Glucker in “Plato in England: The Nineteenth Century and After,” suggest though that disparagement of Taylor might have been due more to his fanatical neo-Platonism, rather than his scholarship.

Gregory Vlastos is widely regarded to be a central figure in this shift through his writing, teaching, and institutional work (as organizer of conferences and collections and chairman of Princeton’s philosophy department when it ascended to the forefront).

Robert Richardson’s discussion of Representative Men in his Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance (85-88) is usefully representative. It’s illuminating about Emerson’s process of allegorization, and insightfully calls Emerson’s book “part mythology, part theology, and part hagiography” (87), but doesn’t give a reading of any of the essays. Two good readings of Emerson’s concept of representativeness are Robert Weisbuch (198-203) and Mark Patterson (168-186). See also my comments on Anita Haya Patterson below.


“Swedenborg is excellent in likeness; excellent in many respects;—yet I said to myself, on reaching your general conclusion about the man and his struggles: ‘Missed the consummate flower and divine ultimate elixir of Philosophy, you say? By Heaven, in clutching at it, and ‘almost getting it,’ he has tumbled into Bedlam,—which is a terrible miss, if it were never so near! A miss fully as good as a mile, I sh say!’— —In fact, I generally dissented a little about the end of all these Essays; which was notable, and not without instructive interest to me, as I had so lustily should ‘Hear, hear!’ all the way from the beginning up to that stage” (Slater 460). Carlyle is perceptive in seeing that Emerson’s method is to criticize his subject for precisely the ambition they flexed their strength upon. See Kerry C. Larson’s reading of Representative Men, 34-39, which begins with a reading of “Plato.”
Buell echoes Matthiessen’s judgment of 60 years earlier: “Where he was at his best in *Representative Men* was in translating Plato into Concord, in giving a portrait of Socrates . . .” (634). And both had probably read Carlyle’s comment to Emerson: “Plato, I think, tho’ it is the most admired by many, did least for me: little save Socrates with his clogs and big ears remains alive with me from it” (Slater 460).

Carpenter points out that Emerson’s famous line about “reading for the lustres” appears after a mention of Proclus and Plato and that the whole passage “express[es] an individual and discriminating praise” rather than “dispraise” (60-61) of the Platonists, as Carpenter says it has often been quoted (circa 1930). I think this is right, and I will return to this passage in “Nominalists and Realists” below to show just what praise he meant.

Reading the essay on Plato as a commentary on Emerson himself goes back at least to E. D. Mead’s “Emerson and Plato” in 1882.

Bloom and Hollander both locate the beginning of this tradition in Fletcher’s footnote on Samuel Johnson’s observation that for Milton “‘the spectacles of books’ are a means of sublimity,” dubbing this a “transumptive style” (*Allegory* 241n33; see Bloom, *Map* 129; Hollander, *Figure* 117).

Hollander points out that metalepsis, after Quintillian’s dismissive treatment of it, hasn’t fared well in rhetorical tradition (*Figure* 133). Quintillian says metalepsis “form[s] a kind of intermediate step between the term transferred and the thing to which it is transferred, having no meaning in itself, but merely providing a transition.” His Latin example is: “*cano* is a synonym for *canto* and *canto* for *dico*, therefore *cano* is a synonym for *dico*, the intermediate step provided by *canto*” (qtd. Hollander, *Figure* 135). As Hollander reads it, Quintillian’s “synonym” papers over tropological transitions in the *cano-canto* and *canto-dico* transitions. This licenses Hollander to suggest that Quintillian himself provides the standpoint that metalepsis “provid[es] a transition from one trope to another” (*Figure* 133). However be rhetorical tradition, the point for Fletcher, Bloom, and Hollander is specific to poetic tradition—that beginning (perhaps) with Milton, allusive echo became a trope because “the echoing itself makes a figure” (114). (The Greek Alexandrians were likely doing this first.) And so, like the recovery of *canto* so that when we read *cano* we understand it to mean *dico*, “the interpretation of a metalepsis entails the recovery of the transumed material” (115) in order to reach the trope’s final landing area, turning a rhetorical pirouette into a poetic lutz.

See Porte: “Though Socrates was older, and therefore presumably the teacher, the younger man may be said to have perfected, or completed, the work of his master. One can say that there would have been no Plato without Socrates or no Socrates without Plato, but the truth is that they created each other, exemplified each other, and synthesized each other. That seems to have been how Emerson thought of the relationship between himself and Thoreau. Though Emerson’s identification of Thoreau with Socrates and himself with the disciple might be ascribed to the former’s earthiness or to his own inveterate love of Plato, it is also clear that Emerson often felt himself to be the pupil in his relationship with Thoreau” (319). Porte is convincing on this point, but I think we can go further in specifying the symbolic relation being reversed here.

This marks the difference between Socratic elenchus and Platonic dialectic. See Richard Robinson’s “Elenchus,” especially the end: “Thus elenchus changes [in the middle dialogues] into dialectic, the negative into the positive, pedagogy into discovery, morality into science” (93). “Elenchus” denotes Socrates’ method of cross-examination, while dialectic is Plato’s word for a method that ascends to truth. (See also Nehamas *Art*, Chapter 3.) It is an old tradition that Socrates was more practical-minded than Plato and other early philosophers. Emerson twice
cites Cicero in this connection Bowdoin Prize essays during college. In “The Character of Socrates,” Emerson alludes to Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations’s famous “Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens” (Two Unpublished 7). In “The Present Situation of Ethical Philosophy,” he quotes the Latin from Academicae Quaestiones: “Socrates was the first person who summoned philosophy away from mysteries veiled in concealment by nature herself, upon which all philosophers before him had been engaged, and led it to ordinary life” (Cicero 425; see Two Unpublished 47). Thomas Stanley’s The History of Philosophy, which Emerson consulted often while writing the essay on Plato, cites the latter, as well as Diogenes Laertius: “Noting how little advantage speculation brought to the life and conversation of mankind, [Socrates] reduced her to action.” “Thus esteeming speculative knowledge as far only as it conduceth to practice,” Stanley says, “he cut off in all Sciences what he conceived of least use” (1: 72; I’ve modernized spelling).

18 For Fletcher, Bloom, and Hollander, the temporal reversal is central to the power of metalepsis, making it the only true diachronic trope. Typically considered, tropes partake of a synchronic semantic field and interpretation selects which “meaning” the trope turns the reader to. For these three critics, though, a diachronic trope turns to another specific moment of troping, rather than a flattened, equal space of possible meanings.

19 I don’t take up below why Emerson might constantly take this Platonic position regarding ideas, but it seems to me part of his larger campaign to boost our self-confidence in changing the world. To change the world, one has to convince oneself that one’s idea is strong and worthy enough to challenge the world’s current power. Emerson’s Platonism doesn’t seem to me aimed at an escapist perfection, as Dewey saw Plato, but rather at engaged transformation.

20 Emerson became familiar with these as scholarly problems in college, though Emerson’s tendency was to draw indiscriminately from wherever he found facts and passages about Plato. Stanley’s history, cited above, traces back every claim made about Socrates to its ancient source, giving a clear view of how the picture is being drawn. (This is the style of many of his primary college resources as well, for example Jean-Jacques Barthélemy’s Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece. See Cameron’s Transcendental Climate for lists and selections of what Emerson likely encountered while at Harvard.) Stanley also highlights the conflicts among Socrates’ disciples in characterizing him (1: 72), citing a tradition that Socrates heard Plato once and said, “how many things doth this young Man feign of me?”

21 For an interesting discussion of “Emersonian fable,” see Gertrude Reif Hughes’s chapter, “Leasts and Lustres: Emerson’s Fables” in Emerson’s Demanding Optimism. Her reading of a passage in “Shakespeare, or the Poet,” 81-82, is especially pertinent.

22 Stanley cites Quintilian and Cicero’s references to Socrates in their discussions of irony as a figure of thought (see 1: 71). Quintilian especially appears to imply that Socrates was hypocritical when he defines the ironist as “one that personates an unlearned Man, and is an admirer of others as Wise” (qtd. in Stanley 1: 71; see Quintilian 4: 61). Nehamas disputes the picture of irony as necessarily involving hypocrisy when he argues that the two Roman rhetoricians “do not believe that irony always points to the contrary of what it says. And if it does not, then it is difficult to believe that Socrates’ irony always allows us to know exactly what he means” (Art 56). And if one takes a wider stance toward irony as a trope, to mean not-X rather than opposite-of-X, then one can take more seriously Socrates’ claims to ignorance, despite the fact that Quintilian didn’t. See Nehamas, Art 50-57.

23 Two other popular ways of referring to Socrates’ daemon were as his “familiar” or “genius.” Emerson often uses “genius” in this sense, but see especially “Character”: “This is that which we
call Character,—a reserved force which acts directly by presence, and without means. It is conceived of as a certain undemonstrable force, a Familiar or Genius, by whose impulses the man is guided, but whose counsels he cannot impart . . .” (53). Socrates’ daemon was also a bigger deal to earlier interpretation of Greek philosophy than it is now, likely because it was a possible conflict between Christian theology and “pagan” antiquity. Stanley, for example, like many following him, contains an entire chapter in his section on Socrates, “Of his Dæmon” (1: 78-79). And on the other hand, Paul Shorey’s 1935 Loeb translation of the Republic has this note to the word’s appearance in Book 6: “The enormous fanciful literature on the daimonion does not concern the interpretation of Plato, who consistently treats it as a kind of spiritual tact checking Socrates from any act opposed to his true moral and intellectual interests” (Shorey 2: 52n). See my further discussion of “daemon” below.

24 The Theages has since been largely rejected as spurious.

25 Mark Joyal says that the Theages had two different subtitles that appear genuinely ancient, “Of Wisdom” and “Of Philosophy” (Joyal 195). Subtitles to Plato’s dialogues, many ancient, were commonplace to translations until the 19th century. (Jowett, who dominated English translations at the end of the 19th, dropped them.) Emerson’s first translation of Plato, the abridged English translation of Dacier’s French, has “Of Wisdom.” Thomas Taylor calls it “A Dialogue on Political Wisdom.”

26 Emerson splices a passage from 129e with 130e in his quotation (Taylor 5: 173-74), but it is the Taylor translation with mainly minor changes except for one: Taylor has “pleases divinity” where Emerson has “pleases the God.” In context, the reference to Socrates’ daemon occurs at 129e, but “pleases divinity” at 130e—and by this time in the dialogue, “divinity” refers to “the gods” that have crept into Socrates and Theages’ conversation. However, Emerson’s “the God” seems to suggest a reference back to Socrates’ daemon. This doesn’t attribute a meaning that doesn’t already exist in the dialogue (for the dialogue too seems to suggest that the daemon is the gatekeeper for not only conversation but also benefit), but it does suggest that Emerson is more concerned with restricting attention to the daemon.

27 One might also add that nearly every other citation of Plato’s dialogues in the essay on Plato is attributed to Plato, while the citation of Theages begins, and thus his gloss and pronoun here refers back to, “Socrates declares.” Additionally, Emerson uses single-quotes for his gloss, as against his consistent use of double-quotes for actual citations of other texts in the essay on Plato. I don’t believe there has ever been a study of that particular phenomenon in Emerson. However, just glancing at some particularly prominent cases, there does not appear to be perfect consistency about double quotation marks being only used for citation (e.g., in “Self-Reliance”), but single-quotes do only appear to be used when summoning an imagined voice. (If this is indeed the case, it would put a final end to any speculation about the Orphic Poet in Nature being some person in Emerson’s life, and not just a figure for Emerson.)

28 See, for example, this passage from his lecture on George Fox:

G[eorge] F[ox] believed in an infallible guidance which he called the Light: by which he understood nothing that was peculiar to himself but a leading that was tendered to every man who yielded himself to it. This doctrine was not new. The faith has always been in the world that every man was the care of a Genius who befriended him. Traces of this faith are in all story sacred or profane: in the story of Socrates’ Daemon; in the poems of Homer; in the belief in fairies, and tutelar saints; in the doctrine of special providence. All these are symbols or parables of the fact that an infallible Adviser dwells in every heart very silently . . . What is made known to us by this Teacher is attended by a
conviction which the opinions of all mankind could not shake and which the opinions of all mankind could not confirm. (Early Lectures 1: 172, italics mine)

It’s the final clause that especially indicates the difficult mystery inherent in trusting oneself for a taskmaster that Emerson defines for self-reliance (see “Self-Reliance” 43).

29 I should add that Emerson’s confidence in the world’s “perfection,” it being ordered and sound, does not simply (or even mainly perhaps) stem from a metaphysical Platonism, but likely from the regulative requirements of modern science that were crashing in on New England religious practice and causing conflicts with the idea of revelation and miracles. Most today call this regulative idea “methodological naturalism” and distinguish it from a “metaphysical naturalism.” A metaphysical naturalist would assert that the world is really material ruled by cause and effect, but the methodological position only requires the assumption of an ironclad cause-and-effect relationship (see Ruse 83-84). The latter is necessary for the scientific mode of explanation through prediction, while the former is merely sufficient.

30 Emerson twice repeats of Plato, “he said Culture” (36, 37) as his definitive contribution, and recall that Socrates in Theages is introduced as “A happier example of the stress laid on nature . . .” (37).

31 “Thus, reader,” Montaigne says in his preface to his Essays, “I am myself the matter of my book” (2). Branka Arsić ends the appendix of her interpretation of Emerson with a compelling reading of Emerson’s genre of essay as Montaigneian, though her emphasis is on the omnivorous quality of the essay. The essay, for Montaigne and Emerson, is able to incorporate anything that accidentally enters its path. This makes the essay an experimental form, able to change flexibly as one’s interpretation of the world changes. See Arsić 324-329.

32 Richardson is, essentially, talking about Emerson’s feeling about bad writing. He gives a Thoreauvian inflection when he says, “[Emerson] wanted original accounts, first-hand experiences, personal witness” (First We Read 10), and he cites an early lecture: “A vast number of books are written in quiet imitation of the old civil, ecclesiastical and literary history; of these we need take no account. They are written by the dead to be read by the dead” (First We Read 10-11; Early Lectures 3: 210). What’s really at issue is how to keep what you’ve read alive when you give personal witness to its effect on you.

33 “Books,” Emerson records in his journal in 1835, “for the most part, are such expedients as his who makes an errand for the sake of exercise” (Journals 5: 275).

34 Montaigne’s “Of Physiognomy” also includes an ironic screed against copious quotation, during which he says, “I, among so many borrowings of mine, am very glad to be able to hide one now and then, disguising and altering it for a new service. At the risk of letting it be said that I do so through failure to understand its original use, I give it some particular application with my own hand, so that it may be less purely someone else’s. These others put their thefts on parade and into account; and so they have better credit with the laws than I. We naturalists judge that the honor of invention is greatly and incomparably preferable to the honor of quotation” (809). Montaigne’s use of Socrates, allusion, and quotation figure prominently in Nehamas’s interpretation of “Of Physiognomy,” Art 101-127.

35 I do think there is probably something interesting to be said about why Emerson was so attracted to the tradition of Platonism in philosophical history, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter.

36 Russell Goodman offers an excellent summary of Emerson’s philosophy as well as a reading of “Nominalist and Realist” in his “Paths of Coherence through Emerson’s Philosophy: The Case of ‘Nominalist and Realist.’” Goodman is especially attentive to tracking Emerson’s mood as he articulates particular ideas. Of the lustres passage, Goodman says that here “Emerson brags for
humanity” (50). I think this is generally right, that Emerson is attempting to make us confident in the face of our great predecessors in this passage and articulate how that stance might practically be achieved. On the other hand, we must also note how, as is often the case, the flipside is riven through Emerson’s moods. He admits reading for the lustres is “least flattering to the author” (“Nominalist” 137), but when Emerson says Proclus is “a piece of nature and fate” (137), he’s judging Proclus a necessary object for scrutiny on his path, as unavoidable as a mountain or destiny.

37 As the fundamental trope for replacing one thing with whatever one associates it with is metonymy, Bloom defines metalepsis as “the trope of a trope, the metonymic substitution of a word for a word already figurative” (Map 74).

38 Emerson seems to first use this image of the hand and fingers in “The American Scholar,” amplifying the idea of our fall from “One Man” into “the divided or social state” (53, italics Emerson’s). I discuss “The American Scholar” on the topic of the role of the American Scholar in the Postlude.

39 I consulted Liddell and Scott’s lexicon for διαφορά and διάφορος. Henry Davis’s translation for the Bohn edition follows Taylor (Davis 297), but Victor Cousin’s translation uses “brouillée” and “querelle” (10: 263) for the two different Greek words in the passage (the second being enantiôsis, where Taylor and Davis have “opposition”). Jowett uses “quarrel” (322) for diaphora, as do most English translators after.

40 It might be worth noting that Emerson’s stance here is the opposite of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s in A Defence of Poetry (1840)—“Plato is essentially a poet” (484)—though the import is ultimately the same for both. In fact, Emerson checked out from the Boston Athenaeum the first volume of the posthumous collection the Defence first appeared in, edited by Mary Shelley, Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments (1840), the same day (June 2, 1845) he checked out the fourth volume of Thomas Taylor’s translations of Plato, effectively beginning his process of writing the essay on Plato (see Cameron’s Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Reading). Since Emerson makes no mention of Shelley in his journals at this time, it’s not clear what he read out of it. And given his generally low estimation of Shelley, I suspect he was after Shelley’s translation of The Symposium, and not the Defence that begins the volume.

41 Here’s Emerson’s citation of the divided line in “Plato”: “A key to the method and completeness of Plato is his twice bisected line. After he has illustrated the relation between the absolute Good and True and the forms of the intelligible world, he says: — ‘Let there be a line cut in two unequal parts. Cut again each of these two parts, one representing the visible, the other the intelligible world, and these two new sections representing the bright part and the dark part of these worlds, you will have, for one of the sections of the visible world, — images, that is, both shadows and reflections; for the other section, the objects of these images, that is, plants, animals, and the works of art and nature. Then divide the intelligible world in like manner; the one section will be of opinions and hypotheses, and the other section, of truths’” (38-39).

42 In Journal Y, there is a three page outline of what amounts to the first nine pages of the essay. The first page is represented by the editors this way (Journals 9: 331-32):

Plato

General Excellence
Culture of nations
All but life itself
Vast range
is Europe
is American

Genuineness

Absorbed into himself all the learning of time

Travelled & imported the other Element

Quotation

We have to solve the problem how he came to stand so high

After that final line there’s a line break.

Perhaps Nietzsche’s most pungent version of this criticism is the section of *Twilight of the Idols* entitled, “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable.” This articulates Nietzsche’s rejection of the philosophical appearance/reality distinction. His first stage is the idea that the “true world” is “attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it, he is it.” Nietzsche calls this the “oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, and persuasive. A circumlocution for the sentence, ‘I, Plato, am the truth’” (485). At the final stage, Nietzsche implies the rejection of the very distinction between a “true world,” the real reality, and the world of appearance, what merely appears to be reality, when he says, “With [abolishing] the true world we have also abolished the apparent one” (486).

“Philosophy is the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world. Two cardinal facts lie forever at the base; the One; and the two. 1. Unity or Identity; and, 2. Variety” (“Plato” 27). Notice that “the One” is described by two words, made interchangeable by the “or,” whereas “the two” is described by only the one word.

I won’t dwell on Gnosticism in Emerson or as a tradition, but it is inescapable in a reading of how Emerson’s light imagery works. In summary, the Gnostic understanding of the act of Creation as simultaneously the Fall (or catastrophe), rather than the latter being a later event, implies a necessary dualism. Emerson, it seems clear from the allusions below, read Milton, or at least Satan, as a Gnostic dualist at odds with the monistic unity of God and Platonism. If the Platonic ideal is a world bathed in light, then the Gnostic knows there’s a shadow always somewhere.

See Journal CD, 1847: “Eyes outrun the feet, & go where the feet & hands can never follow. So Plato the practicalists” (*Journals* 10: 115). This follows a paragraph that begins, “The distinction between speculative & practical, seems to me much as if we should have champions appointed to tilt for the superiority respectively of the Four Elements—except insofar as it covers the difference between seeming & reality. In this world of dreamers, it makes small difference whether the men devote themselves to nouns or to laying stone walls, but whether they do it honestly or for show” (114). This echoes the thesis of *Representative Men*, of difference as well as antagonism between elements within us. “Speculative” is the word Stanley uses when talking about Socrates versus Plato’s philosophy—see Stanley 1: 72. We can see in these conjoined passages that oscillation in mood and perspective regarding the idea of difference between thinking and doing.

Compare the allegory of the sun in Taylor’s translation of the *Republic*, 508a-d (I’ve indented the different dialogue parts as well as modernized the spelling):

[Socrates:] The sight is not the sun, nor is that the sun in which sight is ingenerated, which we call the eye.

[Glaucion:] It is not. But yet I think that of all the organs of sense it is most solar-form. Very much so.
And the power which it possesses, does it not possess as dispensed and flowing from hence?

Perfectly so.

Is not then the sun, which indeed is not sight itself, yet as it is the cause of it, seen by sight itself?

It is so, said he.

Conceive then, said I, that this is what I called the offspring of the good, which the good generates, analogous to itself; and that what this is in the intelligible place, with respect to intellect, and the objects of intellect, that the sun is in the visible place with respect to sight and visible things.

How is it? said he: explain to me yet further.

You know that the eyes, said I, when they are no longer directed towards objects whose colours are shone upon by the light of day, but by the splendor of night, grow dim, and appear almost blind, as if they had in them no pure sight.

Just so, said he.

But when they turn to objects which the sun illuminates, then I think they see clearly, and in those very eyes there appears now to be sight.

There does.

Understand then, in the same manner, with reference to the soul. When it firmly adheres to that which truth and real being enlighten, then it understands and knows it, and appears to possess intellect: but when it adheres to that which is blended with darkness, which is generated, and which perishes, it is then conversant with opinion, its vision becomes blunted, it wanders from one opinion to another, and resembles one without intellect. (Taylor 1: 345)

48 When this three-page journal passage was used for the essay, Emerson rearranged the order. If in the essay they move from the allegory of maturation to the starry night allegory to conclude with the arrival of “Plato, the distributor” (“Plato” 27), the journal passage moves from maturation to the arrival of Plato, then the cut passages, and concluding with the starry night allegory.

49 Distributing is also associated with defining in the essay, and that both were for Emerson closely associated with classifying is given credence by this passage in his late lecture, “Classes of Men,” from 1860: “The power of method or of right classification is also one of the chief distinctions among men. That is the fame of Plato, of Aristotle, or Linnaeus, and Cuvier, Shakespeare and Swedenborg, and Kant,—that they were classifiers. Plato himself said, ‘He shall be as a god to me who can rightly define and divide.’ There comes now and then one of these men with a solar eye,—his look is classification,—and he distributes mankind” (Later Lectures 2: 163). The Plato citation is from Phaedrus 266b, and is quoted in the essay on Plato before he says, “This defining is philosophy” (“Plato” 27). (The editors of the Complete Works add that it is probably Emerson’s translation from Bacon’s Latin citation of it in Novum Organum.)

50 See further on in the essay: “If speculation tends thus to a terrific unity, in which all things are absorbed,—action tends directly backwards to diversity. The first is the course or gravitation of mind; the second is the power of nature. Nature is the manifold. The unity absorbs and melts or reduces. Nature opens and creates” (“Plato” 29). Action, like in Socrates, is linked with Nature and the frustration of speculation, or theory.
51 Compare “Self-Reliance”: “And we are now men . . . [and] guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark” (28). The editors of Emerson’s Journals and Collected Works often point out “chaos,” “night,” and “abyss” as allusions to Paradise Lost, though not the 1845 invocation of “Abyss, Nox, & Chaos.” The following passages from Paradise Lost deepen Emerson’s sense of Nature in the essay on Plato. (Compare, for example, another union of impossibilities figure in the essay: “The seashore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea” (“Plato” 31)).

Before their eyes in sudden view appear
The secrets of the hoary deep, a dark
Illimitable ocean without bound,
Without dimension, where length, breadth, and highth,
And time and place are lost; where eldest Night
And Chaos, ancestors of Nature, hold
Eternal anarchy, amidst the noise
Of endless wars, and by confusion stand. (bk. 2; l. 890-97)

...........
. . . Chaos umpire sits,
And by decision more embroils the fray
By which he reigns: next him high arbiter
Chance governs all. Into this wild abyss,
The womb of Nature and perhaps her grave
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confus’dly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless th’ Almighty Maker them ordain
His dark Materials to create more worlds,
Into this wild abyss the wary Fiend
Stood on the brink of hell and looked a while,
Pondering his voyage; for no narrow frith
He had to cross. (bk. 2; l. 907-20)

..........
He [Chaos] ceased; and Satan stayed not to reply,
But glad that now his sea should find a shore,
With fresh alacrity and force renewed
Springs upward like a pyramid of fire
Into the wild expanse, and through the shock
Of fighting elements, on all sides round
Environed wins his way . . . (bk. 2; l. 1010-16)

...........
. . . Sin and Death amain
Following his track, such was the will of Heav’n,
Paved afer him a broad and beaten way
Over the dark abyss, whose boiling gulf
Tamely endured a bridge of wondrous length
From hell continued reaching th’ utmost orb
Of this frail world . . . (bk. 2; l. 1024-30)
But now at last the sacred influence
Of light appears, and from the walls of heav’n
Shoots far into the bosom of dim Night
A glimmering dawn; here Nature first begins
Her farthest verge, and Chaos to retire
As from her outmost works a broken foe
With tumult less and with less hostile din . . . (bk. 2; 1. 1034-40)

The Journal W passage continues to a short paragraph on Plato (before the page ends with a short list of his chapters for Representative Men, again suggesting how Emerson’s mind interweaves the objects of his discussion): “For Plato, it would be pedantry to catalogue his philosophy, the secret of constructing pyramids & cathedrals is lost, & not less of Platonic philosophies. But every whole is made of similar and in morals & metaphysics this is specially true. I shall think a grand proposition important. The fables of Plato will reward the ear” (Journals 9: 223). What I’d like to point out is how “grand” here seems to function as the antithesis of “fine.” The production of fine propositions is the use of talent, and not negligible for that, but grand propositions are those sublime productions of genius that break free from their verbal constraints, so large in the ultimate proportions of their meaning.

See Journal Y: “It is the largest part of a man that is not inventoried. He has many enumerable parts: he is social, professional, political, sectarian, literary, & of this or that set & corporation. But after the most exhausting census has been made, there remains as much more which no tongue can tell. And this remainder is that which interests us. This is that which the preacher & the poet & the musician speak to. This is that which the strong genius works upon; the region of destiny, of aspiration, of the unknown” (Journals 9: 341).

This implicitly offers an interpretation of Pater as defining a stylistics: “To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (Pater 120). This would apply to the genre of aphorism as well as Hollander’s sense of metalepsis.

For a very different interpretation of public, private, political, and social in Representative Men as a whole, see Anita Haya Patterson’s From Emerson to King, 11-23. Patterson points at this scene of Emerson’s I’ve been focused on as the exemplar of her claim that Emerson “is always unclear as to precisely where this full expression [by the free and uninhibited] takes place—whether such moments of expression are, properly speaking, private, social, or public. . . . The effect of Emerson’s blurring of distinctions between the private realm of the household and the public realm of politics is one that simultaneously encourages and bars access to publicity and public action because, by this account, no distinct realm exists beyond the confines of the private” (22, 23). Patterson is especially concerned with the “racialist exclusions” promoted by “Emerson’s occasional repudiation of democratic values performed in his recourse to the rhetoric of scientific racialism” (21). One could easily add the gender exclusions that feminists like Phyllis Cole have emphasized in the masculinist rhetoric Emerson uses almost everywhere (e.g, “Man Thinking”). Such powerful critiques of Emerson’s thought and writing, to my mind, raise broader questions about the relationship between philosophy, politics, and public writing that are beyond the scope of this dissertation. What is useful and penetrating about Patterson’s reading of Emerson (which follows in a trend of critique initiated most powerfully by Sacvan Bercovitch) is that she largely agrees with the deconstructive dispensation of Emerson criticism, but draws consequences worth thinking about—for example, that in the sphere of political action using blurry, imprecise language can aid in deceptive
practices like dog-whistling. Emerson’s oscillations in sense and stance can seem an awful lot like irresponsible flip-flopping when transposed into certain practical contexts.

I take evidence that Emerson does intend to say straightforwardly that a common kind of accuracy, precision, and hence clarity are necessary for politics from a comment in his addendum to his essay on Plato, “Plato: New Readings.” Here he includes several lists of major Platonic topoi, one of which is the analogy of city and soul that leads to the question of the relationship between the philosopher and the actual politics of the world that comes up especially in Book 6 and Book 9: “[Plato’s] discernment of the little in the large, and the large in the small, studying the state in the citizen, and the citizen in the state, and leaving it doubtful whether he exhibited the ‘Republic’ as an allegory on the education of the private soul” (Emerson: New Readings” 46).

Since I will go on to show below how Emerson reads the Republic as just such an allegory, why one should doubt what is not exactly obvious about the Republic is puzzling. The answer, I think, is historical. Julia Annas suggests that since Benjamin Jowett’s influential translation of Plato and the resurgence of attention to Athenian democracy in 19th-century Britain, interpretation of Plato’s Republic as a whole has been beholden to a tradition of reading it as primarily political—a tract about an ideal state, an ideal government of people (see Annas 78-79). This was reinforced in the 20th century when Karl Popper’s The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945) codified an anti-totalitarian (and anti-German) mood by tracing widespread (and right-leaning) fears of Soviet communism back from Marx and Hegel to Plato. Emerson, however, was writing before Jowett. While Annas thinks we might have “reason to wonder if the political interpretation is giving us the right focus” (79), Emerson had to wonder the other direction. Emerson’s Plato was the Neoplatonic picture of Thomas Taylor, which is a Plato much more focused on the individual’s relationship to truth (and often dismissed as “mystical,” as Annas does, 78n19). Robert Richardson calls this Neoplatonic picture of Plato “Liberal Platonism,” and says, “it is not primarily interested in the Platonic ideas or forms; it is not primarily interested in Plato’s political ideas, and it does not look to the Republic as its major text” (“Liberal Platonism” 2). However the tradition as a whole, that Emerson cited or obviously alluded to the Republic almost as often as all the other dialogues combined in the essay on Plato and “New Readings” suggests a more complex orientation on his part.

See “Friendship” in Essays: First Series, a generally undervalued essay in Emerson’s corpus that is receiving better attention. There are in general some fascinating modulations of Emersonian vocabulary. For example: “By oldest right, by the divine affinity of virtue with itself, I find them, or rather, not I, but the Deity in me and in them derides and cancels the thick walls of individual character, relation, age, sex, circumstance, at which he usually connives, and now makes many one” (115). “Character” in Emerson is a figure for fate, and often a trope for that deified part of one’s self that holds one erect in the position of self-reliance (e.g., Character teaches above our wills” (“Self-Reliance” 34)), but here it becomes the encrustation of conformity self-reliance derides. Most of all in this essay, however, is the intimation of the medial concept “social soul” (“Friendship” 122), which augments the form of oscillation between society and solitude Emerson envisages. So “the Genius of my life being thus social” (115) holds tension with “The law of nature is alternation forevermore. Each electrical state superinduces the opposite” (116). Excellent accounts of friendship in Emerson’s thought are in Kateb 96-133 and Arsić 168-209.

Thompson argues that in the essay on Plato Emerson “democratizes Plato by imagining him as a philosopher whose primary virtue is his wedding of ultimate truth with social action. Indeed, for Emerson, the idea of a philosopher, in general, requires that contemplation of divine or
universal principles be yoked with civic duty, so that when Emerson reads Plato, he finds in him the greatest example of what a philosopher should be” (20). I’m not sure I’d emphasize “social action” and “civic duty” the way Thompson does as Emerson’s image of Plato, but it’s worth noting that part of Thompson’s argument is that “Central to Emerson’s reading of Plato . . . is a project to make Plato a man of the streets” (24). My reading of Socrates supplements Thompson’s claim because it is through Plato’s consumption of Socrates that this bridging between high and low occurs.

59 Jowett translates δαήμονες as “knowing or wise” (1: 340), and Liddell and Scott’s entry for δαήμον has “knowing, experienced in a thing” (171).

60 Plato also does extend the possibility of daemonization to everyone, which I called Emerson’s democratization, in the Cratylus: “Hence both [Hesiod], and many other poets, speak in a becoming manner, when they say that a good man after death will receive a might destiny and renown, and will become a daemon, according to the surname of prudence. I therefore assert that same, that every good man is learned and skillful; that he daemoniacal, both while living and when dead; and that he is properly denominated a daemon” (Taylor 5: 510). There still seems to me a difference between Emerson’s sense that the daemon resides within all to be tapped into and Plato’s sense that we label those who fit a certain bill “daemon.”

61 Besides Emerson’s own use of the words “distribute” and “definition” in their divided and combined ways, Emerson also would have encountered the entry for “Dæmon” in the first American edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (646), which Harvard held while he was in college and that he used extensively while writing his two Bowdoin Prize essays. The entry notes Plato’s etymology in the Cratylus as well as the Homeric derivation from “distribute.”

62 The editors of the Journals had not previously identified this translation, but it’s from William Sewell’s An Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato (1841). On 24, Sewell quotes both passages that Emerson cites in his journal entry with the same page numbers that Emerson uses. Emerson borrowed Sewell’s book from Harvard College Library on November 8, 1848 (Journals 10: 469n2). Sewell’s translation is likely his own from “the little pocket edition of Plato published at Leipsic by Tauchnitz” (Sewell xii).

63 See also, “The simplicity of nature is not that which may easily be read, but is inexhaustible. The last analysis can no wise be made. We judge of a man’s wisdom by his hope, knowing that the perception of the inexhaustibleness of nature is an immortal youth. The wild fertility of nature is felt in comparing our rigid names and reputations with our fluid consciousness” (“Spiritual Laws” 80-1). Or take this one from “The Poet,” which resonates with the idea of coming into a social relationship with yourself, or piece of writing generally:

[Nature] makes a man; and having brought him to ripe age, she will no longer run the risk of losing this wonder at a blow, but she detaches from him a new self, that the kind may be safe from accidents to which the individual is exposed. So when the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away from it its poems or songs,—a fearless, sleepless, deathless progeny, which is not exposed to the accidents of the weary kingdom of time: a fearless, vivacious offspring, clad with wings (such was the virtue of the soul out of which they came), which carry them fast and far, and infix them irrecoverably into the hearts of men. These wings are the beauty of the poet's soul. The songs, thus flying immortal from their mortal parent . . . (14)

Or this one:

Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage
draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists, which must not in turn arise and walk before him as exponent of his meaning. Comes he to that power, his genius is no longer exhaustible. All the creatures, by pairs and by tribes, pour into his mind as into a Noah’s ark, to come forth again to people a new world. (“The Poet” 23, italics Emerson’s)

64 See, for example, the moment directly before Socrates offers the analogy between city and soul as the premise for the Republic, 367a-368c.

65 John Hollander is particularly perspicacious on the two modes of philosophy and poetry, and is a constant source of wisdom about them. Here’s Hollander in the midst of writing about poetic questions in Melodious Guile: “There are certainly philosophical questions—indeed, philosophy however we may define it starts with, or perhaps even in, questioning. But it is questioning in one of a number of kinds of logical good faith. Philosophical questions start where matters of accessible fact, as we know, give way, but they are pursued with the intention of literally answering them. . . . [I]f philosophizing may lead to abandoning the question, or to choosing to ask another, quite openly, in its place, the literal integrity of the question is always presumed and honored” (26-7). The ethos of Emerson’s poetic philosophy might be put thiswise: Questions can be posed and pursued in any manner one wishes, at one’s leisure. To get them to work, however, will require alternation between modes.

66 This line is interestingly given in the essay on Swedenborg to “the impatient reader” (76) that Emerson conjures to carry on the line of thought that began about vitality and Swedenborg’s interlocutors. This records his own doubts; compare the end of the essay on Plato: “I think it is truelest seen, when seen with the most respect. His sense deepens, his merits multiply with study. When we say, here is a fine collection of fables; or, when we praise the style; or the common sense; or arithmetic; we speaks as boys, and much of our impatient criticism of the Dialectic, I suspect, is no better. The criticism is like our impatience of miles, when we are in a hurry; but it is still best that a mile should have seventeen hundred and sixty yards” (44).

67 Compare, too, the journal with the final version of “Plato is philosophy”:

That Plato is philosophy, & philosophy Plato, is the stigma of mankind. Vain are the laurels of Rome, vain the pride of England in her Newton, Milton, & Shakespeare, whilst neither Saxon nor Roman have availed to add any idea to the categories of Plato. (Journals 9: 179)

Plato is philosophy, and philosophy Plato, at once the glory and the shame of mankind; since neither Saxon nor Roman have availed to add any idea to his categories. (“Plato” 23)

The shift from “stigma” to “glory and shame” seems to me a softening of an edge that was on his mind and in the mix.

68 We get a sense of this struggle against strength in “Character,” Essays: Second Series: “Higher natures overpower lower ones by affecting them with a certain sleep. The faculties are locked up, and offer no resistance. Perhaps that is the universal law. When the high cannot bring up the low to itself, it benumbs it, as man charms down the resistance of the lower animals” (55).

69 In the terms of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, “ironism” is a subversive tendency toward vocabularies (see 73), and “theory,” from theoria, “suggests taking a view of a large stretch of territory from a considerable distance” (96). “Ironist theory,” then, is Rorty’s name for the
modern tradition of evading the traditional vocabulary of philosophy one picks up by reading the sequence of philosophers from Plato to Kant.

70 See Rorty’s claim that “ironist theory must be narrative in form” (Contingency 101) and the role Hegel plays in that chapter in locating Nietzsche and Heidegger (and Derrida in the next chapter) in relationship to the “Plato-Kant canon” (96).

71 If there’s disagreement about historicism these days, it’s the extent to which one can evade Hegel’s bad version of what “rational progress” entails. Hegel’s version seemed to imply that everything that happens must be made to fit into a system of progress (i.e. history as system). This made historicism a form of theodicy, which Emerson often echoes (principally in his law of compensation).

72 “Swerve” is Bloom’s famous name for the first, and foundational, move against tradition, and in Map of Misreading he comes to identify it with the trope of irony. See Nehamas, Art 49-67, for a fascinating discussion of irony in the context of Socrates and the Roman rhetorical tradition that began to dominate both our interpretation of rhetorical tropes and of Socrates.

73 Nehamas goes on: “Irony often communicates that only part of a picture is visible to an audience, but it does not always entail that the speaker sees the whole. Sometimes, it does not even imply that a whole picture exists. Uncertainty is intrinsic, of the essence.”
Postlude

The American Scholar and the Humanities as Cultural Politics

The theme of this dissertation has been (from the title): literature can be a coherent participant in not only philosophical discourse, but our practices of thinking generally. It becomes one via traditions of reading, of receiving so-called “literary” figures, often into disciplinary contexts. The resistance to some of these figures comes from the fact that the disciplinary contexts are often still dominated by the idea that philosophy guards the gate of these contexts by being about Thought. This then spreads denigration to all those procedures of thinking that aren’t associated with what one’s local philosophy departments haven’t previously cleared. And so performers of “Man Thinking,” like Emerson, have had for example a hard time maintaining status in American philosophy departments (Chapter One) and in the pulpits of a very different religious world, early 19th-century New England Unitarianism (Chapter Two).

One special reason those who trust such cognitive arts as explicit argumentation find Emerson difficult to assimilate is that he seems to defy important virtues pertaining to argumentation being an effective vehicle in achieving a better world, viz. 1) it is a moral good to be consistent in thinking (and thus avoid hypocrisy, mendacity, sophistries and such) and 2) it is a moral good to guide one’s behavior on principles, or at least regularities, protecting from a fall into shallow whimsy (Chapter Three). Nevertheless, Emerson’s thinking occurs in modes that embody the best of what we consider scholarship, the use of a deep body of writing that has true and false things said about it (Chapter Four). One subtext of all of these chapters has been Emerson, the American Scholar, the figure who finds themself at the center of all these controversies and thus justifying themself on behalf of literature in general.
If the theme is literature’s thinking and the subtext the scholar, however, then the undersong has been the social valence expressed in its different aspects. In Chapter Three, for example, the most theoretically oriented study undertaken, it was expressed in the articulation of Emerson’s concept of mood as creating the possibility of a single body housing several persons, as when Emerson says, “Our moods do not believe in each other” (“Circles” 182). A tough-minded philosopher might take that to be a flight of fancy, false on its face but perhaps indicative of some other point. That is indeed how trope works, but only if we follow its flight into possibilities of fullest significance. For example, if we situate this picture in terms of our need to come to terms with ourselves, because Emerson takes the side of Socrates in rejecting the Cartesian picture of one’s mind being transparent to oneself, which then instead makes self-knowledge the primary task of the philosopher, then one will enlist such metaphysical-ish posturing in terms of a campaign against Cartesian metaphysics in order to urge us to better conversational relations with our other moods and thoughts.  

However, in Chapters Two and Four I take two defining moments in Emerson’s career as an American Scholar and thus highlight more social-communal aspects of Emerson’s thinking. The first is the Divinity School Address, his one great public controversy, which he refused to reply in public to. In a sense, Emerson couldn’t believe that his speaking openly and honestly on momentous issues of the day, like the relative importance of the personality of God or the function of the preacher, was treated as heresy—yet Emerson knew where he was, at the Harvard Divinity School addressing in a professional context new ministers of the Unitarian faith. Emerson violated the rules, of professional decorum and expectations—but where else than in the university should one find thoughts being debated, thought through, and bandied about? That’s the reply Emerson didn’t make, though it’s always pertinent. For the significance of
Emerson’s return to the fold of philosophy, guardian of the gate of cognition, is the degree to which his voice is inserted into the conversation; his role in the conversation in Chapter Two is embodied by my interpretation of the philosophical significance of his articulation of the preacher’s role in an ideal church. That ideal, roughly, is that the only distinction between parishioner and priest, elected leadership and layperson, is between one who is subsidized to provoke the others into self-inquiry. Here again is a facet of Emerson’s American Scholar, one still only difficultly accommodated in the modern university. As the great Harvard historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, was to remark ironically of the Divinity School affair, “The unforgivable sin of the University was her failure to find Emerson the chair of Rhetoric that he craved, or to provide something to keep him in Cambridge, even if he did nothing more than play Socrates for half a morning hour at the Yard pump” (244).

The second defining moment I turn to, in the final chapter, is Emerson’s essay on Plato. Here I perform that old, academic genre of “Why hasn’t anyone written about this text?” The relevance here is that if Emerson is being returned to philosophy, then one would expect concerted work on Emerson’s most direct conversation with the undisputed center-origin of Greek Western philosophy. But the wheel turns on all figures, and the thing we lose by not looking into the essay on Plato is how Emerson turns the wheel on him. I spend much of my time giving an interpretation of how Emerson’s essay converses through allegorical allusions with Plato’s philosophy and perspective. The ultimate conclusion of the chapter is that Emerson articulates the activity of and performs an act of philosophical interpretation that uses the material of scholarship, but bends it to a significance beyond mere accuracy.

It’s this latter act of the lectures on “representative men” that turns back to the figure of the American Scholar performing the act of what Emerson called “large criticism.” In his time,
with the phrase Emerson seems to have been describing the kind of essay we can still find today in such venues as the *New York Review of Books* or *Atlantic Monthly*: large in scope with a breadth of learning. This kind of critical essay is what I defined in Chapter One by citing Rorty in “Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture,” where he says, “Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macauley and Carlyle and Emerson, a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre.” This genre, Rorty says, aims “to understand, not to judge. The hope is that if one understands enough poems, enough religions, enough societies, enough philosophies, one will have made oneself into something worth one’s own understanding” (66).

What I didn’t say there is that Rorty’s distinction between understanding and judging is somewhat unfortunate. That is because, as he later suggests, the specific attitudes one takes toward that gamut of what one understands is indelible to the project, what is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly. As Poirier puts it on behalf of transcendentalist culture, “Reading can be a civilizing process, not because the meanings it gathers may be good for us—they may in fact sometimes be quite pernicious—but because that most demanding form of writing and reading called literature often asks us to acknowledge, in the twists and turns of its language, the presence of ancestral kin who cared deeply about what words were doing to them and what they might do in return” (*Poetry and Pragmatism* 175). This rejects what Bromwich calls the “vitamin-injection theory of culture and society” (*Politics* x). The function of large criticism is to create contexts with which its producers and consumers engage with cultural artifacts, but the emphasis is on *engagement*. One engages with cultural artifacts in order to produce beliefs about those artifacts and thus the cultures of one’s surroundings. This large criticism, however, is its
own genre and thus has its own internal conversations. One of those conversations is about itself, why it should exist. It is to that conversation “The American Scholar” of 1837 belongs, for Emerson essentially articulates the figure of the American Scholar as the Large Critic. So I’d like to turn to a reading of “The American Scholar” in order to find Emerson’s particular justification for the Large Critic, and especially as it interacts with the broader social fabric that such cultural criticism is aimed towards.

The center of “The American Scholar” seems to be its powerful description of the “duties” of the American Scholar. It is in essence his first great public declaration of the concept he would become most recognized, “self-reliance.” For the duties “may all be comprised in self-trust” (“American Scholar” 62), itself becoming a duty when later declared in Delphic manner “Trust thyself” (“Self-Reliance” 28). The “office” of the American Scholar, he then suggests, “is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (“American Scholar” 62). To cheer, to raise, and to guide are the American Scholar’s duties, and the means to these ends are these “facts”—a word become suspect in our postmodern theory environment. However, the function of “to cheer” shows Emerson’s self-conscious appreciation of the problematic nature of what appears to us fact. For Emerson immediately turns in the paragraph to heap on the American Scholar knowledge of their untimeliness, “shiftlessness,” how “Long he must stammer in his speech” (62). Why is encouragement and cheerleading a central duty? First of all because those who would cheerlead need it!

They need it because of the means by which they pursue their large criticism, which is, again, a model for everyone. This is the distinctly Emersonian justification of large criticism—it’s needed to produce individuals. For these “facts” that the American Scholar shows the
community are “observations” of oneself, the self-conscious public display of what one takes to be the case. The American Scholar, “in his private observatory, cataloguing obscure and nebulous stars of the human mind . . . must relinquish display and immediate fame” (62).

Emerson’s tremendous figure of the “private observatory” invokes what Daniel Dennett calls the “Cartesian Theatre,” a picture of the mind as putting on a play of what is ostensibly outside in the world. This picture has its precedent in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, but the anxiety is transplaced from Plato’s fear of appearances not matching reality or Descartes’s existential dread of solipsism to Emerson’s fear of lack of recognition. For this private observatory is in competition with other observatories, and to the fore is an implicit contrast with “public observatories,” perhaps even the public observatory.

This latter hyperbole, which is best treated as a personification, like “the State” or “American society,” constantly threatens Emerson’s rhetorical mode of dealing with the authority of other particular people. “Self-Reliance”s famous “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (29) has its precursor in “The American Scholar”: “For the ease and pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society, [the American Scholar] takes the cross of making his own, and, of course, the self-accusation, the faint heart, the frequent uncertainty and loss of time which are the nettles and tangling vines in the way of the self-relying and self-directed; and the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society” (62, emphasis mine). In “Self-Reliance,” “society” deploys more like an Abstract Agent, but such a hypostatization, “The American Scholar” shows us, might in some ways be predicated on the American Scholar’s own stance of (seeming) virtual hostility “to society,” in general. Despite this pull in Emerson’s rhetoric, it seems equally pulled to compensate by inducing
scenes of imaginative encounter, whether it’s “Self-Reliance”’s nonchalant boys and whim on the lintels or “The American Scholar”’s articulation of the practical context the American Scholar faces, its dangers, difficulties, and vices.

This is the funny thing about Emerson: he seems to focus on the individual, but who is the writing, the orating for, if not society? The American Scholar’s duties are directed toward others. The vision articulated is in some manner a practical template. Here’s a key passage, the ending of this single paragraph of “The American Scholar” I’ve been considering:

He [the American Scholar] is one who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world’s eye. He is the world’s heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history. Whateover oracles the human heart in all emergencies, in all solemn hours has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions,—these he shall receive and impart. And whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of to-day,—this he shall hear and promulgate.

(62-63)

At first blush, one might reasonably read “raises himself from private considerations” as only an invocation of Emerson’s famed Optimism, which reads at the beginning of “Self-Reliance” as “To believe in your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men,—that is genius” (27). But in the context of “The American Scholar,” we are also getting a practical recipe. The arc of the American Scholar’s vocational training, from ephebe to full professor, is from close attention to oneself to the display of that self-knowledge to the world and its larger concerns. One raises oneself (as he did put it in “Self-Reliance”), and it’s our long
effort to learn how to do this that earns social deprecation for laziness and ignorance. In hewing one’s own path through books, for example, there might be much that appears in one’s private observatory that has little in common with those that went to a public observatory for their education.

Emerson’s practical program is something like this: the education one arranges for oneself will produce greatness and recognition if one “breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts.” The irreducible ambiguity here is that Emerson does want to say that everything can be “public and illustrious” in the required way here, even if it is “the near, the low, the common” (67), as he puts it toward the end of “The American Scholar.” But Emerson also wants to put in a good word for the accumulated mass of a book-driven education, what we used to call a “literary education,” then “liberal education,” but now call “the humanities.” The arc is from “private considerations” to the consumption of “public and illustrious thoughts,” wherever one finds them, and thus it becomes a self-driven program of education and discrimination for the “preserving and communicating [of] heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history.” “Observe thyself!” he quite nearly says in “The American Scholar” by earlier equating “the ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature’” (55). But what one is looking for in one’s observations are not the commonplace, but answers to emergencies, solutions to the problems of our moment. Emerson’s keen thought is that this record of responses to emergencies speak “in all solemn hours,” that they speak not just to issues of the moment, or “the times” as Emerson’s age put it, but to issues of moment, momentous issues that call upon our powers in such a way that they prove continually applicable as commentary.

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As with so much in our reception of Emerson, I think what really upsets us is Emerson’s faith in the process, his Optimism that seems endlessly propounded with providential guarantees. It might be genius to think what is true for you is true for all, but the future perfect always makes us uneasy today when he goes on to say, “Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense” (emphasis mine), and then seals it with a reveille, the “trumpets of the Last Judgment” (“Self-Reliance” 27). When one combines Emerson’s providential decrees with his outmoded gendering of “Man Thinking,” it makes him susceptible to Dickinson’s high mockery:

“Faith” is a fine invention

For Gentlemen who see!

But Microscopes are prudent

In an Emergency!³

Emerson’s leftover New England aristocratic elitism deserves our rebuke, but the sense of this dissertation has been that Emerson is in fact interested in the small particulars one should be aware of when handling particular problems, even if one turns them large. What we are worried about is faith in the process being transferred to the product. We’re worried about faith- and God-rhetoric being translated into dogmatism, since it so often has been. But when Emerson speaks of “Reason from her inviolable seat” in “The American Scholar,” we should not take Emerson to mean some turn to an irrefutable authority, but read it as part of his cheerleading campaign for each person’s self-trust (perhaps noting it is the seat in ourselves that might be inviolable).

But might we not have too much self-trust today? Emerson’s philosophical large criticism constantly records the antagonism between Individual and Society, I think, because it is groping towards a democratic vernacular in which to talk about how to disagree with each other
on public issues of moment—something we’ve shown we still lack in the United States. In a
democracy, each individual needs their own voice and judgment because each has their own
vote. Emerson apotheosizes the Individual for this reason, but opposes Society in general
because deferring to the authority of others is the pre-democratic norm. So all of those habits
need to be de-emphasized to establish new democratic norms. And Emerson’s campaign of de-
emphasis constantly makes conflict appear as people not thinking for themselves, but instead still
under the influence of others.

This is a rhetoric we are very familiar with today, but it doesn’t get you anywhere
because the nature of persuasion involves authority, even if it is simply in terms of “who one
takes seriously.” In his time, Emerson clearly did not think that Madisonian factionalism, at the
political level, was an analogous threat at the intellectual level. Emerson predicted quite the
opposite, a kind of ideal Hobbesian state of intellectual discourse, one on one, all against all, yet
with vibrating waves of recognition, as one recognizes the words “Plato,” “America,”
“transcendentalism,” “science.” “Society,” Emerson says in his 1839 lecture, “The Protest,”
“should be a congress of sovereigns, without the pride, but with the power” (Early Lectures 3:
95). For such individuality-as-semantic-authority, Emerson would say much, but I want to
broaden our focus in order to locate Emerson’s sense of philosophy as something inherently
public-facing. The American Scholar ostensibly had an audience, and in its ideal would be other
American Scholars. So their discourse would be just what, for example, the “conclusions of
history” are, or the conclusions of any other discipline. The American Scholar may speak in the
vernacular of observation-report, but the observations are on all fours epistemologically with
quite contradictory observations—when all are incorrigible, then none are corrigeable at the level
of observation. The existential fear elites always have about democracy, then and now, is that
you’d just get a bunch of dogmatists walking around declaiming and being disorderly, but this is not the real problem Emerson’s work directs us towards.

Rorty’s pragmatism, a guiding influence in this dissertation, can help elaborate this final point about Emerson’s philosophical large criticism. One of the ways Rorty’s philosophical pragmatism was elaborated was by taking Thomas Kuhn, Norwood Hanson, and others’s side in the philosophy of science. This meant thinking that all knowledge is produced within paradigms held in agreement. Hanson’s way of putting this point was to say that all observations are theory-laden. So when the American Scholar “oracles the human heart” and utters commentary on the world of actions for all solemn hours, the oracular reports are spoken in a vocabulary—they come theory-laden. Rorty generalizes this argument as it articulated itself in the philosophy of science, epistemology, and the philosophy of language, becoming what Robert Brandom calls Rorty’s master trope, the “vocabulary vocabulary.” The way we talk conditions what we talk about, and thus the objects that present themselves to our attention. As we change vocabulary, for example simply ceasing discussions that center on the term “God,” we can change the focus of our thinking. Thus Rorty’s argument in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity is that all real philosophical argument is about vocabulary choice.

In Emerson’s idiom, it is the reason the American Scholar becomes the Poet at times. The Poet is the Sayer, the “Namer, the Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, giving to every one its own name and not another’s, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary” (“The Poet” 13). It is a tremendous pirouette to seamfully blend together poetry and philosophy’s function, as “appearance” goes to the poets and “essence” to the philosophers, and then to have Poetry “rejoic[e] the intellect.” The intellect is typically the province of the philosopher, since it is
philosophers who paint boundaries but nothing else—these are the “Forms,” εἴδος, Greek for “appearance,” in a great historical irony, until Plato’s great power as a poet made it into its opposite, the essence as opposed to appearance of a thing. That’s why Emerson touches on the great modern writer’s hope, to make their mark on the consciousness of the time, when he considers Plato the Philosopher: “He has clapped copyright on the world” (“Plato” 43). In Rorty’s terms, it is the work of the “strong poet,” though he stole that term from Harold Bloom’s book The Anxiety of Influence. Rorty’s point, which I find strongly suggested in Emerson’s work, is that arguments can only be had between those who agree on a vocabulary into which to state the argument. So when people really disagree, it might often be because neither side agrees to what vocabulary to use. So the American Scholar, and large criticism generally, is aimed at the question of what vocabulary to use to make sense of the world. In Chapter One, it came in the guise of “self-image.” In Chapter Two, in the form of the preacher’s provocations to their community of self-inquirers so they don’t slide into dogmatism. In Chapter Three, as how to manage being honest today without worrying about what was honest yesterday or might be tomorrow. In Chapter Four, it was the role of unsystematic “philosophical exercitations,” wanting as “the ambition of Individualism” to swallow the world as a “Boa Constrictor,” but “fall[ing] abroad in the attempt, and biting gets strangled” (“Plato” 43). These are, I take it, the limits of the vocabulary that is this Boa Constrictor. When we need new words, we put down our Plato.

Rorty in his later work called this kind of wrestling over which vocabulary to use “cultural politics.” It is his suggestion for the context to place philosophies when debating their final merits, their significance to the world at large. As he puts it in his “Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God,” “God-reports”—and recall that all observation reports are
Rorty’s point is that when the vocabulary is called into question, a cultural-political debate occurs. Showing how smaller debates connect to other smaller debates and larger debates are ways of constructing a chain to give significance to the particular thing one is currently writing about. The implication is that if a philosophy cannot give such an account, then it has shown the sterility of the professional problem perhaps solved by the philosophy in question.

This is the function of large criticism, and we can generalize it to all professions. The argument of literature that Emerson pursues is an expansion of our sense of what is desirable for thinking. The most satisfying way of tying together these studies might be to say that Emerson’s American Scholar fights for the side of imaginative ways of thinking, whether in our spirituality that consists in self-inquiry, or by reconsidering the purview of strictures of consistency, or when interpreting a canonical figure in our own image. Always the American Scholar considers how to coexist with others, and thus enter conversationally with others, but always in order to push the conversation further, make it larger. The cultural-political initiative this campaign for literature’s power is a part of is the thinking through of democracy. When one inserts Emerson into conversational canons, it has the inevitable effect of turning that conversation to those issues dealing with imaginative even heretical leaps, honest if whimsical pronouncements, and all the other messes of conversation when no one has final authority.

This dissertation is animated by the belief that Emerson’s sense of the American Scholar is a desirable goal of humanistic inquiry, and that his peculiar comportment amount to a monument to what is possible. Each chapter argues the case individually. But behind each is the
interest in exposing the aspect of Emerson that lay obscure. What they combine in is this sense that the cultural politics of our moment desperately needs more in number equipped to translate the moment into these various cultural campaigns with labels like “democracy,” “naturalism,” “the Enlightenment,” or “Platonism.” Emerson probably did not seriously countenance the social ramifications of the fracturing of intellectual discourses implied by freedom of inquiry in terms of, not different university-sanctioned disciplines, but information silos with their own academic wings in the form of think tanks. However, the problem of expert communities in a democracy is at the heart of Emerson’s hard thinking through of the problems of the American Scholar. For the American Scholar recognizes no authority but their own in the final analysis—at least on paper. In practice, the American Scholar muddles through as much as anyone else in deciding what, in particular, should be authoritative, should carry that day’s cultural-political initiative. The campaigns vary in size, but greater self-consciousness about our significance is what the American Scholar always urges, from private considerations to public and illustrious thoughts.

1 This might be a minority direction of thought, but it is not unheard of. For example, Richard Rorty, a signal influence on the philosophical posture of this dissertation, has followed the great analytic philosopher, Donald Davidson, in suggesting that Freud was on to something when he began partitioning the self into subpersonal drives. However, Davidson says, for something like the id to explain “irrational behavior,” we have to treat it as a rational person, with its own desires, attitudes, and reasons for behavior. Only then does it make sense to explain our “irrational,” uncharacteristic behavior in terms of something within us we do not control but is yet “mental” (and not physiological, and thus like the bumping of an arm rather than something taking control of our arm). So the best way to appropriate Freud for our moral psychology and projects of self-inquiry is to emphasize the counter-intuitive proposition that our “self” is populated by unfamiliar selves that need to come to terms with each other, thus providing a context for understanding the efficacy of, for example, talk therapy. See Rorty’s “Freud and Moral Reflection” and Davidson’s “Paradoxes of Irrationality.”

2 See my note in Chapter One regarding my use of Emerson’s “large criticism.” In essence, scholarship has de-canonized “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England” making the phrase problematic. However, I cite a letter where Emerson records a conversation in which Wordsworth referred to the “breadth” of criticism in the periodicals over there.
This is Poem 202 in Franklin’s edition.

See Brandom’s “Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism.” He presents there the most persuasive account of Rorty’s philosophical trajectory, from his early work on philosophy of mind, culminating in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, to his later work generalizing his early positions.

See, for example, F. E. Peters’ *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon*, which has the most expansive list of meanings I’ve consulted: “appearance, constitutive nature, form, type, species, idea.” The most basic, original meaning is “that which is seen,” but as evidence of Plato’s extraordinary influence, Wikipedia’s page for “eidos” (consulted April 2019) lists only *form, essence, type, or species*, with links to pages on Plato and Aristotle, but no reference at all to the ancient Greek root in “what is seen.”
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