

R.W.E.

Volume 28, Number 1

Spring 2017

# EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

## INSTRUCTION AND PROVOCATION

A FEATURE DEDICATED TO INNOVATIVE EMERSON PEDAGOGY

## Essaying with Emerson

SEAN MEEHAN

Emerson's readers, scholars and students alike, have long confronted the challenge of his paratactic style, whereby the juxtaposition of thought within sentences, and the relation between those sentences, lacks subordination. The word "parataxis" comes from the ancient Greek *paratassein*, "a placing side by side"; it contrasts with "hypotaxis," the syntax of subordinate construction.<sup>1</sup> "I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall" (CW 2:182). So Emerson writes in "Circles," in a stunning juxtaposition whose very premise resists the idea of subordination, a resistance that the syntax of the sentence practices. Traditionally, this rather essayistic element of Emerson's work has warranted the critical pronouncement that he lacked the systematic coherence required for philosophical argument, if not also for poetic achievement. "Although I am a god in nature, I am also a weed by the wall," some critics might have edited the sentence for Emerson.

However, a renewed appreciation for Emerson's paratactic thinking and expression has emerged in the claims made more recently for an Emersonian inheritance in the essay tradition and what we've come to call creative nonfiction. David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* perhaps best demonstrates the creative renewal at work. For Shields, an Emersonian parataxis of juxtaposition, embodied by numerous chunks of sentences borrowed from writers without evident attribution, unsettles the conventions of artistic originality. Emerson, it is no accident, is one of the essayists most extensively invoked for Shields's purposes. In one passage Shields writes that "there is no pure originality. All minds quote." This quotation, from Emerson's essay "Quotation and Originality," is juxtaposed on the same page with a statement in which Shields (by way of Emerson) also declares "I hate quotations."<sup>2</sup> By these lights, Emerson's ways of thinking analogically and of writing paratactically, through "a mosaic-like parataxis of adjacent

figures," as Paul Grimstad has put it, has come to make sense as a crucial principle in the rhetorical style Emerson brought to the essay.<sup>3</sup>

This rhetoric is worthy of further study in the composition and nonfiction courses where Emerson's essays are frequently taught. At the same time, lessons from Emerson's rhetorical parataxis can also serve the literature classrooms where Emerson's essays continue to be read and written upon in critical responses. Students learning to write and critically think through the essay, in composition classes, creative nonfiction workshops, as well as in literary studies of the essay genre or surveys of American literature, can better grasp the dynamics of Emerson's essaying by experimenting along with him. In other words, teachers can extend the rhetorical effects of Emerson's essays into the classroom, itself a venue for parataxis, for placing side by side the reading and writing of our students with the texts and authors assigned. I discuss here a three-part workshop I organize in my "Introduction to Nonfiction" course that serves both the English major and a general education writing requirement, a course that I have developed as a hybrid of an advanced composition course and a literary study of the essay genre.

The workshop begins with a tactical warm-up that juxtaposes critical discussion of Emerson's style, parataxis in particular, with several of Emerson's essays read previously, including "Circles," "Intellect," and "Quotation and Originality." In this brief warm-up, students recompose an Emersonian paragraph by re-positioning various sentences from different parts of "Quotation and Originality," Emerson's somewhat surprising paean to an art of unoriginality, a necessary and natural phenomenon of thought and writing that he names, in the final word of the essay, "recomposition" (CW 8:107). I next invite students to share the results of their Emersonian recomposition, enjoining the class to listen for the relation and meaning that emerges from these seemingly

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### EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

The newsletter of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society  
Published at Purdue University

[www.emersonsociety.org](http://www.emersonsociety.org)

Editor: Derek Pacheco  
Editorial Assistant: Daniel Fladager  
Book Review Editor: Leslie Eckel  
Design and Production: Peggy Isaacson

*Emerson Society Papers* is published twice a year. Subscriptions, which include membership in the Society, are \$20 a year. You may subscribe using PayPal by visiting us at [emerson.tamu.edu](http://emerson.tamu.edu). Send checks for membership (calendar year) and back issues (\$5 each) to Bonnie Carr O’Neill, Department of English, Mississippi State University, Drawer E, Mississippi State, MS 39762.

*ESP* welcomes notes and short articles (up to about 8 double-spaced, typed pages) on Emerson-related topics. Manuscripts are blind refereed. On matters of style, consult previous issues. We also solicit news about Emerson-related community, school, and other projects; information about editions, publications, and research in progress on Emerson and his circle; queries and requests for information in aid of research in these fields; and significant news of Emersonian scholars. Send manuscripts to the editor, Derek Pacheco, English Department, Purdue University, 500 Oval Drive, West Lafayette, IN 47907 or [dpacheco@purdue.edu](mailto:dpacheco@purdue.edu) (email submissions are much preferred).

Review copies of books on Emerson should be sent to book review editor Leslie Eckel, English Department, Suffolk University, 8 Ashburton Place, Boston, MA 02108.

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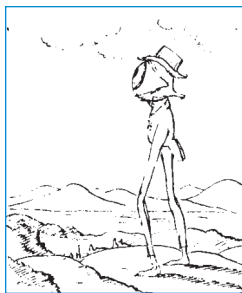
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# PROSPECTS.



## Emerson Society Panels at ALA Conference

The Society presents annual panels at the American Literature Association meeting, to be held this year from May 25 to 28 in Boston. Visit [americanliterature.org](http://americanliterature.org) for more information.

### Emerson and Social Justice

Organized by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society  
Chair: Roger Thompson, Stony Brook University

1. Holly Jackson, University of Massachusetts, Boston. "The Utopian Emerson: American Renaissance in the Age of Fourier."
2. James Hussey, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. "...not content to slip along through the world": Emerson's "Active Soul" and Social Justice in Jacksonian America." *Winner of the Emerson Society Graduate Student Travel Award*
3. Kevin Pyon, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Ralph Waldo Emerson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the (African) American Spiritual Legacy of Double Consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*."
4. Prentiss Clark, University of South Dakota. "The 'perpetual achievement of the impossible': Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin Writing Toward 'a larger, juster, and fuller future.'"

### Beautiful Foes: A Roundtable Discussion of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Affiliations with Women

Organized by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society  
Moderator: Phyllis Cole, Penn State University, Brandywine  
Sarah Ann Wider, Colgate University  
Kate Culkin, Bronx Community College  
Noelle Baker, Independent scholar  
Christopher Hanlon, Arizona State University  
Andrea Knutson, Oakland University

## Thoreau Bicentennial Gathering: Celebrating the Life, Works, and Legacy of Henry David Thoreau

The Emerson Society presents annual panels at the Thoreau Society Gathering, to be held this year from July 11 to 16 in Concord, Mass. For information and full schedule, visit [thoreausociety.org](http://thoreausociety.org).

### Thoreau's Influence on Emerson

Chair: Roger Thompson, Stony Brook University

Christina Katopodis, CUNY Graduate Center. "Emerson's Thoreauvian Ear and the Music of the Spheres."

David Heckerl, St. Mary's University (Canada). "'Where Do We Find Ourselves?': The Experience of Idealism in Emerson & Thoreau."

Ayad Rahmani, Washington State University. "F. L. Wright as Measure and Mirror of Emerson's Influence on Thoreau."

Mark Gallagher, UCLA. "No Truer American: Thoreau's Influence on Emerson's Later Lectures."

## "Transcendentalist Intersections: Literature, Philosophy, Religion"

University of Heidelberg, Germany, July 26 - 29, 2018

Sponsored by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society, the Margaret Fuller Society, and the Anglistisches Seminar and Center for American Studies at the University of Heidelberg

At its first meeting in 1836, the Transcendental Club declared an "organ of spiritual philosophy" to be essential to the project, and, when *The Dial* came forth in 1840 under Margaret Fuller's editorship, its subtitle—"Literature, Philosophy, and Religion"—was meant to convey both the breadth and depth of the movement's aims. As Emerson introduced it, the ambitious new journal would "share [in such] impulses of the time" as "special reforms to the state," "modifications of the various callings of men," "opening a new scope for literature and art," "philosophical insight," and "the vast solitudes of prayer."

In the spirit of *The Dial*, and with its subtitle too, the organizers of "Transcendentalist Intersections" invite paper proposals seeking to do justice to that breadth and depth of the movement, generously construed. For this multidisciplinary, international conference dedicated to new scholarship on American Transcendentalism, we are particularly interested in proposals engaging literature, philosophy, and religion, and encourage literary scholars, historians, philosophers, theologians, and others to share their ideas.

- With regard to literature, we welcome papers examining texts and authors traditionally ignored or cast as "minor"; such forms as journalism, literature of reform or revolt, correspondence, travel writing, history, philosophy as literature; relations between literature and visual or musical arts; biographical approaches; transnational dialogues; reception history, the history of the book and the relevance of literary institutions; and revisionist approaches to or paradigms of Transcendentalism. We encourage papers that address the convergences and tensions between literature and philosophical issues on the one hand and/or issues of religion, spirituality, or the sacred on the other.

- With regard to religion, we especially invite papers discussing the entanglements of Transcendentalists (major or minor) with other 19th-century American religious movements such as the Second Great Awakening, the Holiness and Spiritualist revivals, Catholic immigration, and the emergence of groups centered on new "American Scriptures" such as Mormonism. We are interested in the engagement of Transcendentalists with various Christian theological debates and scholarly discourses of the time, such as the higher criticism, the "New Christianity" of the Saint-Simonians, the Christian socialism of the Abbé Lammenais, the pantheism of Pierre Leroux, and the comparative study of religion. We also encourage papers investigating the contribution of Transcendentalists to the construction of religion as a category or of particular religious traditions (e.g., "Hinduism" or "Buddhism"); as well as Transcendentalism's role in the coming of the modern paradigm of "seeker spirituality."

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## PROSPECTS

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- With regard to philosophy, we encourage proposals in all of the subfields that have been so vigorously engaged by Transcendentalist scholars in recent years. This would especially include work on the Transcendentalists in relation to social and political philosophy (e.g., feminism, antislavery, liberalism, democracy, socialism, environmentalism, human rights); religious philosophy (e.g., secularism and post-secularism); ethics (e.g., Kantian and post-Kantian, pragmatist ethics, virtue ethics); metaphysics (e.g., “neo-Platonism, Romantic theories of being and selfhood, Nietzscheanism, post-metaphysics”); epistemology (e.g., agnosticism, fallibilism, anti-foundationalism, skepticism); and aesthetics (symbolism, theories of metaphor and poetic expression, art and social reform, translation, and (again) music and the visual arts).

Please direct abstracts (300–500 words) and two-page CVs by August 1, 2017 to any of the members of the conference planning subcommittee: Charlene Avallone [avallone000@gmail.com](mailto:avallone000@gmail.com), Dan Malachuk [ds-malachuk@wiu.edu](mailto:ds-malachuk@wiu.edu), or Jan Stievermann [jstievermann@hca.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:jstievermann@hca.uni-heidelberg.de).

A conference webpage and announcement of keynote speakers are forthcoming. This CFP is posted in the meantime at [emersonsociety.org/2016/09/22/heidelberg-cfp/](http://emersonsociety.org/2016/09/22/heidelberg-cfp/) and [fuller-society.org](http://fuller-society.org). For more information about our hosts: [hca.uni-heidelberg.de/index\\_en.html](http://hca.uni-heidelberg.de/index_en.html), and [as.uni-heidelberg.de](http://as.uni-heidelberg.de).

### Emerson Panels at the International Poe and Hawthorne Conference

Kyoto Garden Palace Hotel—Kyoto, Japan, June 21–24, 2018

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society invites proposals for the above conference. Depending on the number and quality of proposals, the Hawthorne and Poe societies will host up to two panels on Emerson.

We would encourage proposals on the theme of “Transpacific Emerson.” Other areas, e.g., connections between Emerson and Hawthorne and/or Poe, will also be considered. Any requests for A/V equipment must accompany the proposal.

Please send 250-word paper proposals to David Greenham, Emerson Society Program Chair, at [david.greenham@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:david.greenham@uwe.ac.uk), by July 18, 2017. All those whose proposals are accepted for the

conference must be members of one of the author associations (Emerson, Poe, or Hawthorne Societies) to present papers or to chair sessions.

Banquet speaker will be Michael J. Colacurcio; plenary speaker will be Takayuki Tatsumi.

### New Ralph Waldo Emerson Society Website

The Emerson Society is pleased to announce that we have a new website. [Emersonsociety.org](http://Emersonsociety.org) is now based on a WordPress server, which allows us more freedom and adaptability with regard to maintaining and updating the site.

Now that the transition from the old site is complete, we would like to solicit ideas for and feedback on the website from the membership. How do members use the site? What aspects of the site are most valuable to users? What would people like to see added or changed? Members may send comments about the site to the Media Committee: [emerson.society.webmaster@gmail.com](mailto:emerson.society.webmaster@gmail.com).

### Emerson Sightings/Citings

USC Game Innovation Lab, with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, is set to release “Walden, a Game,” which *Smithsonian Magazine* has called “the world’s most improbable video game.”

As the *New York Times* describes it, the “game... is likely to cost \$19.99 [and] takes six hours to play. It starts in the summer and ends one year later—offering players tasks such as building a cabin, planting beans, or chatting, virtually of course, with Ralph Waldo Emerson.” The developer hopes to release the product in time for Thoreau’s 200th birthday this summer. For more, see [nytimes.com/2017/02/24/arts/henry-david-thoreau-video-game.html?\\_r=0](http://nytimes.com/2017/02/24/arts/henry-david-thoreau-video-game.html?_r=0) or [waldengame.com](http://waldengame.com).

Mary Moody Emerson is featured in the most recent issue of *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment of the Arts*. Vol. 38, No. 1 (Winter 2017). For more on this feature, authored by Emerson Society members Noelle Baker and Sandy Petrulonis, see [neh.gov/humanities/back-issues/vol38/issue1](http://neh.gov/humanities/back-issues/vol38/issue1).

*The Atlantic* has selected Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Boston Hymn” as its “Poem of the Day” for April 6, 2017, in celebration of National Poetry Month. For more, see [theatlantic.com/notes/2017/04/poem-of-the-day-boston-hymn-by-ralph-waldo-emerson/522192/](http://theatlantic.com/notes/2017/04/poem-of-the-day-boston-hymn-by-ralph-waldo-emerson/522192/).



## Fellowship Update

### Report from Reed Gochberg, Packer Fellowship recipient, 2016

I'm very grateful to the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society for supporting a month of research at the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) in August 2016 through the Barbara L. Packer Fellowship. I am currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Amherst College, and I received my PhD in English from Boston University in 2016. With the help of the Packer Fellowship, I was able to begin revising my dissertation into a book manuscript by completing additional archival research at the AAS relating to the history of collecting, natural history, and scientific museums in the United States during the nineteenth century.

My book project, *Novel Objects: Museums and Scientific Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, argues that nineteenth-century American writers used scientific museum collections to consider the distinctions between literary and scientific forms of information, evidence, and representation. Drawing on work in the history of science, intellectual history, and material culture, I show how American writers confronted

the challenge of organizing information in material form within museums. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, reveals his anxieties about preservation by imagining bonfires that destroy all material remnants of the past, while William Wells Brown celebrates overabundant information and the opportunity to begin his self-education following decades in slavery. A national collection of patented machines invites Ralph Waldo Emerson to rethink literary originality in relation to technological novelty, and the labor of specimen collecting pushes Henry David Thoreau and William James to wonder if the cabinets and storehouses of a museum can represent the flux and variability of nature. By tracing their engagement with the specimens, artifacts, and models within museum collections, I show how nineteenth-century writers sought to distinguish between literary modes of representation and the tangible objects of study organized within museums.

During my month at the American Antiquarian Society, I examined periodicals, scientific treatises, and engravings in the AAS collections in order to situate the work of museums in a



wider context of scientific and material collection practices. I compared an 1853 circular soliciting donations of specimens that was issued by Louis Agassiz—and answered by Henry David Thoreau with the donation of several turtles from Walden Pond—to similar circulars, broadsides, and manuals for collecting and preserving natural history specimens. I also reviewed works on natural history for children and illustrated scientific texts, in order to compare nineteenth-century museum practices to other forms of collecting and representing nature, including scientific texts and illustrations. This research will inform my chapter on the work of Thoreau and William James as specimen collectors for the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. Additionally, I examined scientific periodicals and engravings relating to the history of the U.S. Patent Office and the application process for obtaining a patent, which included submitting a written specification, drawing, and model. My work on Emerson, Whitman, and the Patent Office gallery is forthcoming in *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* in Spring 2017.

## ESSAYING WITH EMERSON

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meaningless iterations of sentences placed side by side. Students begin to hear the syntax of parataxis as a generative principle of Emerson's writing (and thinking) as it emerges within a sentence, then a paragraph and, through the relation of paragraphs, across an essay.

In the next part of the workshop, students brainstorm in their journals for ten minutes to develop initial ideas for an upcoming essay writing assignment. The assignment challenges student writers to develop their own philosophy of the essay, informed and inspired by Emerson and other essayists in the course. I characterize this brainstorming strategy as "intellect receptive," borrowing the phrase and concept from Emerson's "Intellect." "Our thinking is a pious reception," Emerson writes there: "Our truth of thought is therefore vitiated as much by too violent direction given by our will, as by too great negligence" (CW 2:195). As a prompt for this reception, I ask students to quote directly one or two passages from "Quotation and Originality" into their journals, something of particular interest to them as essayists and as critical readers of the essay, and then begin to write in response to those particles of text. In doing so I develop upon Emerson's understanding that the invention of thinking emerges through receptivity to prior ideas, images, language, and experience. Emerson's paratactic thinking guides this reception by emphasizing that students should not try too soon to subordinate the ideas and material just emerging; for Emerson, receptive intellect originates in the placing of thought side by side. In addition to Emerson's argument from "Intellect," a page or two photocopied at random from Emerson's own voluminous journals—part commonplace book, part workshop for his emerging lectures and essays—can offer students a practical model for the ways meaning emerges through the juxtaposition of ideas.

And yet, as Emerson argues in "Intellect," reception, however pious, is necessary but not sufficient. After this "receptive" phase, I turn attention to the organization and development of initial thinking in the third part of the workshop. Working under the sign of "intellect constructive," Emerson's necessary complement to "intellect receptive," students return to the paratactic pile of material in their journals and, writing for another ten minutes, expand their thoughts by beginning to organize their thinking around a particular particle of interest: a moment, an image, a phrase from a text or from an experience, that gets their attention or invites further exploration. In a previous class focused on figurative language and the essay, I discuss with students Emerson's rhetoric of metonymy, the figural relation of thought by way of context and contiguity, a rhetoric he claims in his later work to be the crucial figure of writing and expression, and indeed, of all thinking. "All thinking is analogizing," Emerson writes in "Poetry and Imagination,"

"and 'tis the use of life to learn metonymy" (CW 8:14).

In turning the focus toward "intellect constructive," I invite students to develop and enlarge upon the metonymic elements of their still-partial experience (and pile of material). Students work toward what could become an organizing analogy for a paragraph or section in the essay, if not an idea for the essay as a whole. Metonymy is particularly helpful for students in the context of nonfiction writing, whether we call that nonfiction "creative" or "critical" or both, given that most have been trained to think of figurative expression, and most commonly metaphor, as something limited to poetry or fiction, a flight of fancy. Metonymy emphasizes that there is useful and meaningful figurative expression and analogical significance to be discovered in the common contexts of experience. Students need not, and perhaps should not, begin by looking deductively and abstractly for a metaphor or other symbol that is removed from their primary experience of contiguous thinking: such abstraction represents "too violent direction given by our will." At the same time, metonymy emphasizes that the meaning that is closer at hand is nevertheless constructed, shaped, and condensed into the inherently analogical work of thinking that the essay develops. As Emerson describes the matter in "The American Scholar": "The near explains the far" (CW 1:68).

These inventional and experimental "paratactics" demonstrate that the poetic and expressive elements of an essay, as well as the logical and propositional quality of the essay's thought, qualities for which Emerson has been traditionally blamed for having too much or too little, are necessarily mediated by what Emerson calls in "Intellect," "the rhetoric of thought" (CW 2:199). The rhetoric of an effective essay, I emphasize with my students, continuously relates its philosophy and its poetics without subordinating one to the other. In "The Essay, Brick by Brick," Mike Whisenant, a student in the class, effectively transmuted his poetic recomposition of Emerson into his own philosophy of the essay, using his understanding of the Emersonian sentence (and his experience with Legos) as both inspiration and evidence. "The essay," Mike argues, "is, in essence, a building-block construction set. It is fundamentally customizable."<sup>4</sup> In writing essays, as in building with Legos, one both receives and constructs.

Relating these lessons of the rhetorical Emerson to the contiguous work of student writing—those building-blocks we work with as teachers—reiterates a pedagogy of parataxis. This practice of reading and writing with and from Emerson's rhetoric of recomposition, I mean to say, has implications that reach beyond a class exercise. A better grasp of the syntax of Emerson's essayistic thinking, I would argue, provides students in the literature or composition classroom with a meaningful guide for thinking through Emerson's writing, but also for composing or essaying with it. For in that classroom, writing remains necessarily contiguous with the process of thought. Whether we are asking



students to write critical essays about the forms of literature they have received, or inviting students to construct essays as a creative form of literature, we prompt their recomposition of the rhetorical intellect that our courses, texts, and assignments place beside them. The god in nature, Emerson's syntax reminds teachers and writers, lies in waiting near the weed by the wall.

*Sean Meehan is Associate Professor of English and Director of Writing at Washington College.*

## Notes

1. See Jeanne Fahnestock's discussion of parataxis and hypotaxis in *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 382-384.
2. David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Knopf, 2010), p. 120.
3. Paul Grimstad, "Emerson's Adjacencies: Radial Empiricism in Nature." In *The Other Emerson*, ed. Brank Arsić and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 258. See also David LaRocca's highly paratactic, critical study, *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
4. Mike Whisenant, "The Essay, Brick by Brick," *The Thought Distillery: Raise Your Spirits*. 21 February 2014. < <https://thethoughtdistillery.wordpress.com/2014/02/21/the-essay-brick-by-brick/>>.

## Book Subvention Award

Daegan Miller, February 2017

Of all the many pleasure of researching, writing, and revising my book, *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent* (forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press, February, 2018), one of the keenest was spending long hours looking at some of the nineteenth-century's most beautiful paintings, photography, and maps. *This Radical Land* is a series of four, layered essays that move from Henry David Thoreau's maps to a band of anarchists in California's sequoias by way of an abolitionist wilderness community and photographs of the transcontinental railroad. It reveals an alternative history of freedom, mutual aid, and social justice rooted in the land, a history that I think is vitally important in our era of global climate change and rampant inequality.

The book is a cultural, intellectual, and environmental history of the nineteenth-century U.S., and one of the ways it presses its argument is visually. It includes, for instance, Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* and *Home in the Woods*, photographer A. J. Russell's *Hall's Fill above Granite Canon* (sic) and *1000 Mile Tree*, Albert Bierstadt's *The Great Trees, Mariposa Grove*, and Thoreau's manuscript map of the Concord River. I hope readers will find my book smart and well written, but there's no doubt they'll find it beautiful. For this, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society's tremendous generosity in awarding me a subvention to help defray the costs of procuring and reproducing a portfolio of 44 photographs, maps, lithographs, and paintings.

Emerson's influence hangs over the entire book, and it is his *Ode* from 1846—

Things are in the saddle,  
And ride mankind.  
There are two laws discrete,  
Not reconciled,—  
Law for man, and law for thing;  
The last builds town and fleet,  
But it runs wild,  
And doth the man unking.

—that launches my narrative. Emersonians may be especially interested in the book's second part, which begins with Emerson's trip to the Adirondack Mountains of New York State in 1858. While Emerson camped, a remarkable community of African Americans—both free and escaped slave—was gathered just a few miles to the north, and in their midst was the abolitionist John Brown, whom Emerson personally knew. Brown was plotting his Harper's Ferry raid, but the African Americans were there as part of a remarkable



*Cole, Thomas. House in the Woods, 1847.*

*Reynolda House Museum of Art, gift of Barbara B. Millhouse*

experiment that sought to peacefully eradicate not just slavery, but also racism through eutopian agrarianism—the practice of making a place good through mutual aid and mutual cultivation. Theirs was an incipient environmental ethic that was another casualty of civil war.

If one of the pleasures of writing *This Radical Land* was gazing at beautiful images, one of the great pleasures of having it in press is getting to thank all those who helped make it possible. "Build, therefore, your own world," Emerson wrote in *Nature*. Thank you to the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society for all that you do to help build new worlds of scholarship.



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## Reviews

**AN EMERSON CHRONOLOGY.** Ed. Albert J. von Frank. 2nd ed.  
2 vols. Albuquerque: Studio non Troppo, 2016. 614 + 590 pp.  
\$60.00 paper.

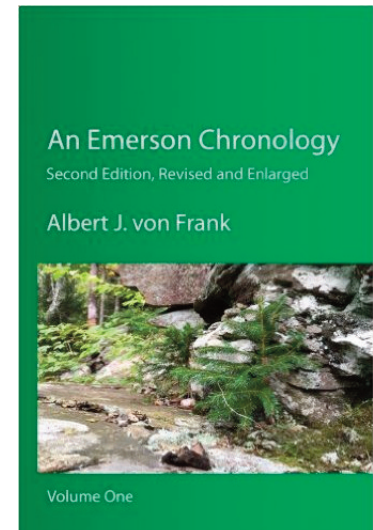
In his 1851 poem “Days,” Emerson imagined the passing of calendar days as a single-file procession through his garden of rapt, dervish-like goddesses. “Muffled and dumb,” explaining nothing, the days entice and threaten, bearing in their arms “diadems and fagots” (for achievement, crowns; for beatings, rods) (*CW* 9:427). Despite these portents, the offerings these weird goddesses actually deliver are “gifts after his will”; that is, ones determined by the ability of each human receiver to make good on the day’s potential. The poem recounts a botched afternoon in which the speaker, provoked by the day’s “pomp,” “forgot [his] morning wishes,” took a swipe at some low-growing aims (“a few herbs and apples”), and then watched as the day, her gaze fixed on possibilities the speaker has failed to imagine, turned silently away in scorn. Mama said there’ll be days like this, and anyone who has spent parts of days in pursuit of Emerson through his journals and letters and published works knows how frequently he disapproved of his own failures to see the day aright. One can’t help thinking of this poem while reading through the revised and expanded second edition of Albert J. von Frank’s *An Emerson Chronology*, which is both an eminently useful reference work devoted to the mundane nuts and bolts of Emerson’s professional existence and an intimate biography built of the events of his days between 1826 and 1882. The pages of the *Chronology* beautifully conjure the poem’s sense of time’s crucial, unmasterable, and relentless passing. As Emerson himself puts it in the entry here for New Year’s Eve, 1843, “how much the years teach that the days never know!” (439).

In its original, briefer form, *An Emerson Chronology* first appeared in 1994, becoming a go-to source for anyone looking to gain a circumstantial sense of the events and concerns in Emerson’s family life and relationships, travels and finances, reading and correspondence within any period of his long public career. Unlike the comprehensive *Letters* and the oceanic immensity of the *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, in which it is easy to lose all sense of time, the *Emerson Chronology* is bolted firmly to the calendar through the authority of that single-file line of days. No substitute for the *Letters* and *JMN*, on which—along with several other sources—it relies and the contributions of which it wonderfully combines, the *Emerson Chronology* is where scholars will want to start when they need a clear and well-evidenced perspective on the lecture-performance origins of a particular essay or an image of what else was happening in Emerson’s projects and preoccupations during any week, or season, or year or two. In entries of between four and four hundred words, covering ten to twenty days in any given

month, the *Chronology* corrects and updates previous standard accounts in William Charvat’s and Eleanor Tilton’s work to become the most accurate record we have of all of Emerson’s public performances—“sermons, lectures, and readings”—as they were produced and delivered (x). The first edition of *An Emerson Chronology* has long been out of print, and second-hand copies hard to come by; the new edition, following new sources, has been revised for greater accuracy and expanded to almost 1200 pages, more than twice the length of the original.

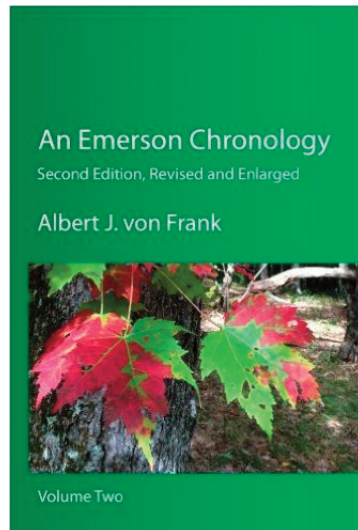
A work of immense editorial care and knowledge of its subject, *An Emerson Chronology* may be the crowning achievement of von Frank’s remarkable contributions to scholarship on Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement over the past several decades. The countless acts of scholarly illumination for which von Frank has been responsible over his distinguished career have made him one of the few scholars of any era reasonably qualified to attempt a responsible portrait of Emerson through a redaction of sixty years of daily events. In the brief Introduction, von Frank lays out the limitations as well as the charms of chronology as a genre, explaining his well-grounded conviction that “attention to sequences of precisely datable events, most often involving the social or outer life,” may nonetheless offer “a kind of framework or context for something substantially more important: the continuous movement or evolution of Emerson’s life of the mind” (ix). Beyond the front matter, the volumes open with adroit sketches of the sixty-four individuals who most frequently appear in the chronology’s entries as well as a summary first chapter, “Born to be Educated,” that traces Emerson’s first twenty-two years of life, his genealogy and family, education at Harvard and work as a school teacher before entering the Unitarian ministry. The individual years between 1826 and 1882 are grouped into ten thematically oriented chapters. The years teaching much that the days never know, Frank supplies a headnote for each calendar year, a brief essay distilling themes out of the twelve months of entries ahead. A massive index of some sixty pages follows the entries at the back of the second volume.

Could there be a more demanding way to render a portrait of Emerson and his works and days, or one with greater claim to the accuracy of raw inclusiveness? The *Chronology*





busily corrects previous errors, puzzles out discrepant accounts, and directs readers to alternative sources of information in primary source material and 20th- and 21st-century scholarship. One of the best effects of von Frank's avoidance of more typical biographical storytelling is the number of ideas framed here for further investigation. Myriad *Emerson Chronologies* were possible, of course, and this one is von Frank's. The redaction of events that has resulted from his choices features several clear and welcome emphases, including the almost eerie importance to Emerson of his brother Charles before his sudden death in 1836 and the years and years of tireless work Emerson did on behalf of Thomas Carlyle. We knew such things already from the narrative biographies, but the lived reality of these matters accretes here week after week, and year after year, giving an impression of their real substance in Emerson's life. Depending on any reader's particular starting points and perspective as well, the *Emerson Chronology* will frame



questions and potential leads for thinking, further reading, and possible research.

An aspect of the professional Emerson that emerges clearly in the *Chronology* is his constant striving to get his own writing and that of others into print. In this sense it is unusual but possibly fitting that in our own age of technological and market changes von Frank has published this work of

scholarly eminence and importance through CreateSpace, the self-publishing arm at Amazon. With the work's inherently limited audience and length of nearly 1200 pages, would any academic press these days have touched it? Whatever reasonable misgivings may be out there about the Amazon octopus, in this case Emersonians should celebrate that a widely accessible print-on-demand provider makes this essential contribution to scholarship of the nineteenth century so readily available. The two paperback volumes have been inexpensively published and impeccably turned out by Studio non Troppo of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The books will be stocked on the shelves of very few if any bookstores, but can be ordered online through Amazon or by special order through your local bookseller.

—Peter Balaam  
Carleton College

**A Power to Translate the World: New Essays on Emerson and International Culture.** Ed. David LaRocca and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2015. 368 pp. \$85.00 cloth. \$45.00 paper.

That Emerson was at heart a genuinely global intellectual has become, over the last two decades or so, a truth (almost) universally acknowledged. The image of the narrowly “American Scholar” has been gradually superseded by a reading that redefines him and the Transcendentalists more generally as figures looking beyond the literary, historical, and geographical confines of the nineteenth-century nation-state. The most recent addition to this expanding globalist line of inquiry, *A Power to Translate the World* brings together the expertise of established and emerging Emerson scholars to offer seventeen new readings of both “Emerson’s incorporation of international culture and his effect on international culture” (24). Convinced that Emerson can be understood only with the help of an approach that extends beyond the explanatory framework of the nation, the volume’s contributors challenge and refine recent transnational and global interpretations of the Emersonian canon.

David LaRocca and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso’s wide-ranging editorial introduction to the volume (“Thinking Through International Influence”) sets the tone for this collaborative endeavor. Refreshingly skeptical about the heuristic potential of the transnational as an analytical tool, LaRocca and Miguel-Alfonso advance something of a post-transnational argument in resurrecting the “perhaps old-fashioned” category of the “international” (6). The nation, they suggest, is a historical reality in which Emerson and his nineteenth-century contemporaries are implicated in crucial ways that are obscured when seen from the vantage point of a hybridizing transnational approach that suspends national identity and cultural difference. While it is not entirely clear why transnationalism, either as a theory or as a method, should automatically invalidate itself as ahistorical if applied to the Transcendentalists’ “pre-transnational age” (5), and while the extent to which Emerson qualifies, in LaRocca and Miguel-Alfonso’s quasi-Herderian description, “as a national (American) writer” (4) begs further explanation, their defense of the (inter-)national nevertheless proves a valuable contribution to recent debates.

*A Power to Translate the World* divides into four parts, the first two of which (“Emerson Beyond Borders in His Time” and “Emerson and Global Modernity”) center around Emerson as transatlantic traveler, transcultural mediator, and subject of international appropriation. A particularly fine example of the work collected in the first part of the book, Robert D. Habich’s “Emerson as International Tourist, 1832–1833” presents a fresh perspective on Emerson’s transatlantic experience. Focusing on the first European tour

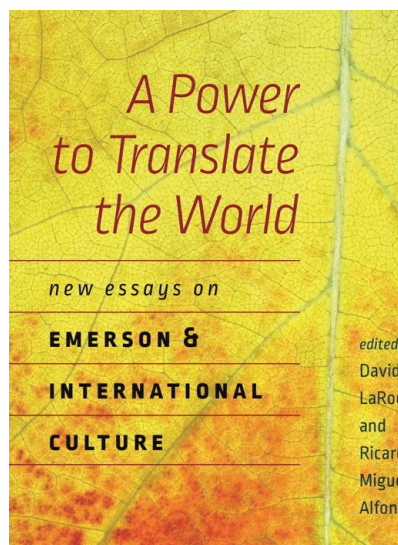
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## Reviews

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(the Italian leg of the journey in particular), Habich draws on insights from tourism research to elucidate the “concomitant admiration for, and criticism of, European culture” (105) that Emerson voiced when assuming the various personae of cosmopolite and patriot, tourist and cultural analyst.

While tangible throughout the volume as a whole, the question of influence and the problems that arise in its wake loom large especially in part two of the collection. In addition to reviving the international as a category, LaRocca and



Miguel-Alfonso also make a plea for the rehabilitation of influence studies, seeking to extend its scope from the study of “direct evidence of reading” to a more conjectural engagement with less obvious forms of intellectual cross-pollination, understood as “an occult happening that exceeds our capacity for tracing discrete elements, histories, and connec-

tions” (15). The opening piece of the volume’s second part, LaRocca’s own contribution (“Maeterlinck’s Readings of Emerson’s Somatic Semiotics”) eloquently intensifies this critique of narrowly philological practices of framing influence “anatomically, forensically, causatively, deductively” (130). The path toward a viable alternative to this remains less than clear, however. The methodological difficulties urrounding the study of influence are here at best circumnavigated, the term itself returning “with a certain alienated majesty” (CW 2:27) in a variety of verbal disguises, from “lines of resemblance” (116) to “points of affinity” or “moments of [...] resonance” (119).

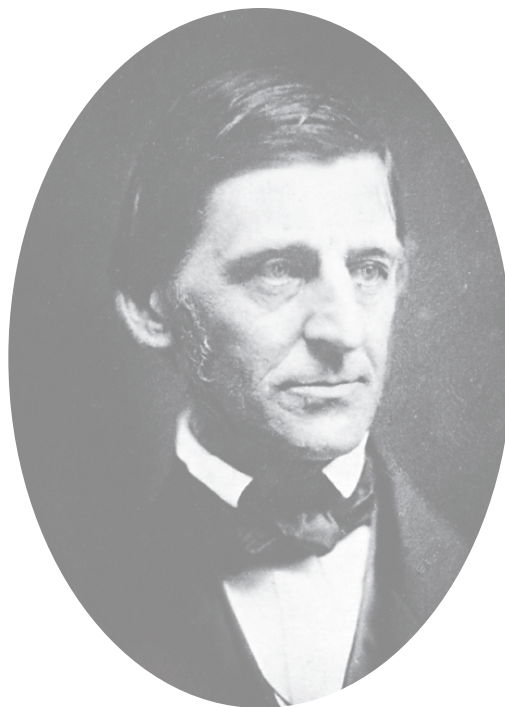
Arranged geographically, the remaining six essays that form parts three and four of the book fall under the headings of “Emerson and the Far East” and “Emerson and the Near East,” respectively. Perceptively scrutinizing the nature of Emersonian cosmopolitanism, Naoko Saito’s “Emerson and Japan: Finding a Way of Cultural Criticism” adds to the discussion of questions broached in the volume’s introduction. Saito critically revisits “transnational and transcultural reading[s]” (219) of Emerson that efface cultural difference along with the limits of the subject and suggests instead a Cavellian “antifoundationalism that does not dissolve

boundaries” (225). Not disinclined to use the cosmopolitan label herself, she emphasizes that there can ultimately be “no immediate fusion with the other, but only a gradual approaching” (230).

The volume’s final essay, Roger Sedarat’s “Middle Eastern-American Literature: A Contemporary Turn in Emerson Studies,” directs the reader’s attention to Emerson’s interest in Persian poetry and its refractions through the prism of German translation, with the aim of ascertaining “how Emerson’s voice [...] might derive at least in part from elsewhere” (312). Joining the conversation on questions of influence initiated by other contributors, Sedarat combines Harold Bloom and Homi K. Bhabha to develop a new approach in the framework of which “Persian and American traditions can be read as transforming [...] an originating and elusively emerging hybrid voice that seemingly claims complete rejection of any influence whatsoever” (314).

Revisiting terrain both familiar and unfamiliar along with reviving the genres of influence and reception study, *A Power to Translate the World* usefully reconsiders Emerson as a global figure. Although given its “prismatic and provisional” character, the collection does not ultimately provide a coherent “global approach to Emerson” (22-23), it offers fresh insights into the ongoing debate about his position in the “new and larger circles” (CW 2:180) of the local, the national, and the global.

—Tim Sommer  
University of Heidelberg



# My Emerson

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

CHRISTINE MARY MCGINLEY

What is it about Emerson, a man we know only through his writings, that makes us comfortable with the words “My Emerson”? “My” is a word we use only with those with whom we feel the deepest bonds, the purest intimacy. And yet it is not at all surprising to see these words or to ponder the feelings they represent.

For me they began when I was about twenty years old, the first time I read Emerson’s *Essays*. I remember being home for a visit and sitting until the early morning hours with my friend Jackie Plas, my high school speech and drama teacher, engrossed in the kind of conversation I was able to have with few people in my life. I remember the euphoria I felt at having discovered Emerson and knowing Jackie would understand the feelings. She even understood the dream Emerson had ignited in me of one day pursuing my own writing.

Today, after years of professional work and many more years finding my way as a writer, I still feel Emerson’s hand at my back urging me forward. He has been with me through the entire journey. After years studying Emerson—just enough to know the boundless depth of Emerson studies—and writing my recent book, *Detecting the Gleam of Light: Thoughts for the Aspiring Creative Writer*, I am pleased to reflect with other Emerson devotees on the difference Emerson has made in my life. And since most of you are educators, it is important to me to also reflect on the subject that has been central in all of our lives.

First, I must confess that I too would have been considered by many of my teachers a “mediocre” student. How I loved learning that Emerson felt like a “hopeless dunce” in mathematics and that he saw little point in some of the required subjects in school. I loved learning that the only thing of value he found at college was his “chamber alone” where he could pursue his own creative reading and writing. In my case, it was not that I was immersed in my own independent learning; for me that passion came later in life. Throughout my school years it was my emotional life that consumed all of my energy.

What is significant about my experience with education is that I do not believe it was at all unique. I believe I represent the vast majority of students who are unable to relate to many of their classroom subjects or to school in general, even throughout their college years. It is the rare young person who does not feel that the most urgent training and education they seek is in the emergence of their own inner life and in the navigation of relationships.

I was one of the fortunate ones, in that one of those early relationships was with a gifted teacher. Jackie Plas understood that the most important learning she could inspire was the kind that enables young people to ultimately stake out a place for themselves in the world and to have some grounding in who they are and what they believe. Looking back now I see that some of my earliest thinking, questioning, self-reflection, and self-determination began in conversation with my high school teacher and friend. As rudderless as I was in my academic pursuits, she managed to make me feel that I held some kind of promise. She recognized things in me that I would not see for a long time—so much so, that I am not entirely sure she did not put them there herself.

If I were able to reach educators with a single message, I would call their attention to the power of a single person’s belief in us when we are young and impressionable. I would urge them to keep this awesome power in mind with every student in their classrooms, especially the ones who appear to not really be there.

There is little doubt that Emerson’s school experience was as lackluster as he portrayed it to be and that the real teachers in his life were not among those he encountered in school. And yet, though I realize I am projecting some of my own experience onto Emerson, I am convinced there was one professor at Harvard who made his experience there valuable. Emerson said little in his journal and letters about his professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, Edward T. Channing, but we know he did spend time with Channing and valued his opinion enough to seek it out. What is most striking, as we look a little deeper into Channing’s life, are the ideas he sought to impress upon his students. He taught that it was the inner qualities of virtue, wisdom, and unquestioned sincerity that were the makings of a great orator and that nothing could “equal or even approach the power conferred by a good character.” He taught that the orator’s hearers must be convinced that “his life is steadily influenced by the sentiments he is trying to impress upon them, and that he is willing to abide by principle at any hazard.” Channing was either among the influences in Emerson’s young life or he was brilliantly clairvoyant about the force Emerson would become.

Emerson was critical of educational institutions for the same reason he criticized religious ones. He recognized how important they were, but also how much more they could be doing. He believed that the ultimate aim of education should

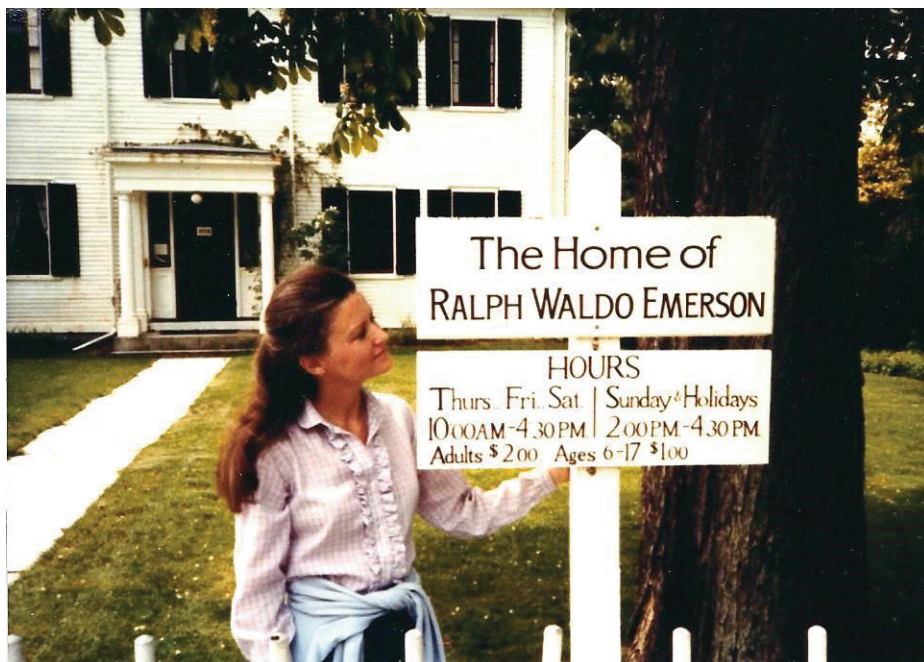
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## My Emerson

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be to draw out the inner guide that is present in every individual and to offer guidance in the very direction in which it points. He saw little relationship between formal



education and true scholarship. To Emerson, a “scholar” was a person awakened to his own critical thought. In its highest manifestation, the “scholar” was “the world’s eye,” “the world’s heart.”

Emerson is not only in great part responsible for the passion for learning that emerged in me in my adult years, but he has also helped me to understand why my early experience was as it was. As aimless as I may have felt throughout my school years, I was in fact becoming. I was finding my own way to the ideal Emerson persuades us is our entitlement as human beings, the ideal he gives us the courage to pursue—a life filled with meaningful learning and meaningful work and, above all, meaningful relationships.

Though I have at times wished I could go back with a major transfusion of discipline and apply myself to every single moment when I could have been learning, I see that this would not have been possible. I see that the discipline it takes for real learning can only be borne out of passion, the kind of passion that can only come from within. We can no more instill discipline in young people than we can instill a genuine recognition of the importance of education. We can only try to inspire in each of them a passion for learning that is personal to them.

Today I believe Emerson would be filled with pride at the scholars America has produced—in our colleges and universities and in the arts and in so many other fields. In

today’s America, I believe he would urge every one of us to recognize that the young people who sit in our classrooms and read our books are the only promise we have for our country and our world. He would urge us to impress on them in every way we can what the great teachers in all our lives have taught—that it is inner virtues rather than outward

achievements that make us who we are. And that no matter what we choose to do with our lives, “there is nothing to equal or even approach the power conferred by a good character.”

Among the many ways Emerson has enriched my life are the insights he has given me about education. He has persuaded me that the most deeply educated person is the person forever seeking a deeper education and that it is the hunger for learning that makes for a rich life. He has helped me to understand my own journey as a creative reader and creative writer. And yet, Emerson only arms us with insight about the personal so we may come to see the universal. He teaches us the value of an inner life so we may

ultimately care about the life of the world. My hope today for every American student is that they will not only come to appreciate these words “My Emerson” in some deeply personal way, but also the enormous significance of the words “Our Emerson,” as Americans and as citizens of the world. Above all, I hope they will learn from “the first philosopher of the American spirit” what the spirit of America truly is.

Christine Mary McGinley is the author of *Detecting the Gleam of Light: Thoughts for the Aspiring Creative Writer*

(Gleam of Light Press, 2017) and *The Words of a Woman: A Literary Mosaic* (Random House Crown Publishing, 1999).

She reintroduced and edited the 1921 Ethel Ireland Helleman translation of *L’intelligence du bien*, Jeanne de Vietinghoff’s *The Understanding of Good: Thoughts on Some of Life’s Higher Issues* (Gleam of Light Press, 2016).

