



R.W.E.

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EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

Distinguished Achievement Award Presented to Branka Arsić

We are delighted to announce that Branka Arsić is the recipient of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society's 2024 Distinguished Achievement Award.

Branka Arsić is the Charles and Lynn Zhang Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Her scholarship specializes in the literature of the nineteenth-century Americas and its scientific, philosophical, and religious contexts. She is the author, most recently, of *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Harvard University Press, 2016); *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Harvard UP, 2010); and a book on Melville entitled *Passive Constitutions or 7½ Times Bartleby* (Stanford UP, 2007). She co-edited (with Cary Wolfe) a collection of essays on Emerson, entitled *The Other Emerson: New Approaches, Divergent Paths* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010) and (with Kim Evans) a collection of essays on Melville, entitled *Melville's Philosophies* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

On Leaving remains required reading for Emerson scholars and is a pillar in the interpretations of Emerson that stresses his nominalism. Arsić argues for an Emerson that is both more materialist and in constant flux than an idealist, contradicting longstanding interpretations and highlighting Emerson's focus on the particular and concrete, rather than the abstract. She notes that for Emerson, truth resides in what we can touch, handle, see, and hear, requiring a bodily and perceptual approach to knowledge. By presenting Emerson as deeply engaged with materiality and the sciences, Arsić challenges the common view of him as a purely transcendental thinker. Her interpretation repositions Emerson as a philosopher more concerned with the physical world and its transformations, rather than abstract ideals

or spiritual transcendence. For Arsić, the trope of "leaving" refers to an interpretation of Emerson's philosophy as one that encourages constant movement, transformation, and the abandonment of fixed positions.

Furthermore, her work in *On Leaving* explores the ethical and political consequences of Emerson's vitalism, suggesting that his philosophy leads to a different understanding of our relationship with the natural world. While acknowledging the diversity of natural objects, Arsić argues that Emerson saw an underlying identity or force connecting all things in nature, creating an uninterrupted flow of change. Arsić offers a brilliant theoretical defense arguing that personality, for Emerson, is not a misnomer but a response to impersonality and as such represents an "activity" possessing "the power to respond to . . . otherness" and "the force of responsibility" (212). It is an echo to her earlier essay "Brain Walks: Emerson on Thinking," from *The Other Emerson*, which places Emerson "in contrast to a whole tradition of philosophy" when he argues that "thinking is not simply available to us, that we are not simply thinking beings, but rather that thinking is a 'task' or goal to which we must respond in order, precisely, to be responsible beings" (59).

Her work also clearly demonstrates Emerson's broad impact on late nineteenth-century European letters, further establishing that Emerson is a significant figure in world literature. In tracing Emerson's influence on figures such as Charles Baudelaire, Arsić's work has highlighted how Emerson's ideas energized the West's general impulse toward adopting more democratic values, showcasing his impact beyond literature into broader social and political spheres; or, as she has put it, "the notion of the modern man, which we owe to Baudelaire,

(Continued on page 8.)

2024 Emerson Society Donors

Emerson Society members continue generously to join at various “patron” levels of membership. All donations above the \$40 annual regular membership go to support special programs of the Society. Dues categories are Life (\$1000), Sustaining (\$75), and Student (\$10). Sustaining, & Life members will receive physical copies of *Emerson Society Papers*; Regular and Student members will receive digital copies. You may pay by PayPal or by check, payable to The Emerson Society (U.S. dollars only) and mailed to Peter Balaam, Carleton College, 1 N. College St., Northfield, MN 55057. For further details, see emersonsociety.org/membership. Thank you for your support.

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EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

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ESP welcomes notes and short articles (up to eight 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 editors, Kathleen Crosby (Elon University) and Mark Gallagher (Orange Coast College) at emersonsocietypapers.editor@gmail.com (email submissions are much preferred).

Review copies of books on Emerson should be sent to book reviews editor Todd Richardson at richardson_t@utpb.edu; please email regarding address for physical copies.

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PROSPECTS



CFP RWES panel for ALA 2025

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will sponsor three panels at the 36th Annual Conference of the American Literature Association, to be held May 21-24, 2025, at the Westin Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston. More details about the ALA may be found here: <https://americanliteratureassociation.org>

“Emerson’s Like-Minded Transcendentalists.”

There were many authors, ministers, artists, philosophers, activists, and free thinkers in Emerson’s orbit who have had the term “Transcendentalist” attached to them or appear worthy of the name in retrospect. Through meetings of the “The Transcendental Club,” Emerson’s wide lecture tours, his publications, the distribution of *The Dial*, and his general national reputation as an American intellectual, his ideas caught on amongst a wide-range of like-minded thinkers. These include his more immediate friends and interlocutors, as well as individuals more indirectly inspired by him: Henry David Thoreau, Frederic Henry Hedge, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, James Freeman Clark, Ellery Channing, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Caroline Dall, Ellen Sturgis Hooper, Jones Very, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, Moncure Conway, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Charles Peirce, and many others. What Emersonian ideas, motivations, and goals do we find in the projects of his lesser-studied peers? How does attending to Emerson’s social circle alter our understanding of his life and works? What counts as transcendentalism?

Please send 300-word abstracts by email to Thomas Howard < thomas.howard@wustl.edu > and Bill Scalia < bscalial@alumni.lsu.edu >. The deadline for proposals is Wednesday, 15 January, 2025.

RWES panel for TAG 2023

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will sponsor a panel at the 84th Annual Gathering of the Thoreau Society (July 9-13, 2025). This year’s conference theme is Thoreau’s *Revolutions*. We will consider papers both on the topic below and on the conference theme more generally.

More details about TAG may be found here: <https://thoreausociety.org/events/annual-gathering-2023-thoreau-the-politics-of-extinction/>

“Emersonian *Revolutions* Today”

Bronson Alcott in 1871 wrote that “He helps us most who helps us to answer our own questions. [Emerson] gets us to do our own work, does not do it for us. He does his work well, for he never produces any finished piece of work. That is his great excellence.” As well, Theodore Parker notes that “Emerson belongs to the exceptional literature of the times – and while his culture joins him to the history of man, his ideas and whole life enable him to represent also the nature of man, and so the write for the future.” We might say that for Emerson, revolution was an ongoing process, a particular way of seeing the world. How and where do we see Emerson’s revolutionary processes in the world today? Papers might consider Emerson’s work in social and political reform (women’s rights, abolition, et cetera), as well as aesthetics, language theory, spiritual practice, self-culture, and his unique approaches to our perceptions of, and continuity with, nature.

Please send 300-word abstracts by email to Thomas Howard < thomas.howard@wustl.edu > and Bill Scalia < bscalial@alumni.lsu.edu >. The deadline for proposals is Wednesday, 15 January, 2025.

Ralph Waldo Emerson Society
Secretary-Treasurer's Report / 23 May 2024

Peter Balaam, Secretary-Treasurer / pbalaam@carleton.edu

Membership

The Society has 94 members, total, in a newly-adopted Membership scheme with 4 (instead of 5) membership levels. For a few years during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, patterns of membership renewal were disrupted in ways that resulted in uncertainties regarding our actual numbers. Not wanting to cut potential but non-renewing members out, for official reports like this one each May, I continued to grandfather in lapsed members and to count those memberships in our totals. I'm discontinuing that transitional practice this year and, as a result, the current numbers are much lower than reported one year ago. As of 21 May 2024, our numbers are as follows:

Student	8
Regular	26
Sustaining	14
<u>Life</u>	<u>46</u>
TOTAL	94

Finances

Bank of America	Current balance:	\$8034
PayPal	Current balance:	\$3931
Total:		\$11,965

Bank of America Checking Account	Current Balance: \$8034
Acct Balance 1 year ago (5/23/22)	\$8616 (\$582 higher than current)
Acct Balance 2 years ago (5/26/21)	\$9269 (\$1,235 higher than current)

Checking Account activity since June 2023

Credits to checking	\$4,505
All credits	\$ 505 Membership dues sent by check \$1000 donation fr. RWE Memorial Assoc \$3000 transfer from our PayPal acct

Debits from checking **-\$2116**

Major annual debits are typically for printing and cash awards for essay prizes. (In 2023, we had unusual expenditures in website re-design and the publication of *In Memoriam: Joel Myerson*)

Anticipated Expenses in 2024

-\$ 750	ApexGraphics (printing)
-\$ 1950	Annual awards to be paid
-\$ 1,000	1 st annual subscription of <i>The Dial</i> w/Project Muse
-\$ 250	Annual donation to Thoreau Society

RWES PayPal Account	Current Balance: \$3931
Acct Balaam 1 year ago:	\$1834
Acct Balance 2 years ago:	\$3219

Activity since June 2023

Debits	-\$3000	Transfer to BoA Checking Acct
	-\$ 990	Awards for Essay Prizes

Credits since June 2023

(membership dues paid)	\$3230 (gross)
PayPal fees	-\$152] (4.7% of gross) = \$3078 (net)

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Balaam
pbalaam@carleton.edu

RWES Business Meeting Agenda / DRAFT

Friday, 24 May 2024, 5:30pm Central (6:30 pm EST), via zoom: <https://sc-edu.zoom.us/j/89440509815>

Michael Weisenburg, presiding, and Peter Balaam, Léa Boman, Bonnie Carr, Prentiss Clark, Alice de Galzain, Nick Guardiano, Thomas Howard, Anita Patterson, Sarah Ann Wider, Jonathan Levin, and John Pallas; on Zoom, Chris Chaves, Wendell Refior

- I. Welcome and introductions
 - a. Michael proposes to run this hour-long meeting as a slate of motions to be discussed and some voted on.
- II. Secretary/Treasurer's Report (Peter)
 - a. Brief discussion in response to Peter's call for members to identify strategic ways to recruit and retain more members to the Society.
 - i. Sarah Ann Wider recalled that many older generation Society members became Life Members when Life Memberships were at one point offered at a one-time marked-down price; she also noted she understands anecdotally that Members in Japan consistently have trouble with PayPal as a portal for membership renewal.
- III. BUSINESS
 - a. A vote to approve annual donation of \$250 to the Thoreau Society [Approved]
 - b. Motion to postpone officer and Board member elections (Treasurer/Secretary and 3 new members of Advisory Board) [Approved]
 - c. New Board Member nominees (none from the room; Michael proceeded with 3
 - i. Andrew Wildermuth
 - ii. Maurice Lee
 - iii. Austin Bailey
 - d. Discussion of the need to establish a New Advisory Board Position: *Dial* Liaison
 - i. A new elected position [see "Dial Final Proposal" and Minutes of Board discussion of this issue from 26 June 2023], creating a link between the editorial board of *The Dial* and the Advisory Board of the Society
 1. Some discussion about whether a new position was really necessary; responses to the effect that it certainly was, lest sympathies and shared purpose between *The Dial* and the Society become disparate
 2. Further discussion about the role the *Dial* Liaison might play editorially for the journal
 3. An appeal to the room for volunteers for this Liaison position [none]
 - e. Nominees for new ESP editors
 - i. Mark Gallagher and Kathleen Crosby will edit together the fall number of *ESP* 35.2
 - f. The Society needs a new Secretary/Treasurer to begin in January
 - i. Peter described the role
 - ii. Call for volunteers

- g. Michael announced a summer ballot to go out to the Society Membership during the summer, following Roberts Rules for a virtual vote

IV. ANNOUNCEMENTS & UPDATES

- a. Awards Updates
 - i. Distinguished Achievement Award (to Branka Arsić)
 - ii. Packer Fellowship (awarded to Andrew Wildermuth)
 - iii. Graduate Student Paper Award (to Léa Boman)
 - iv. RWES Special Research Award to grad student Benjamin Goff
 - 1. Some discussion about very few submissions for our slate of awards; the Society website, for example, has not clear description of our slate of annual awards
- b. Report from the Program Committee
 - i. Successful showings with recent panels at C19, here at ALA, Thoreau Annual Gathering, and SAAP (Soc for the Advancement of American Philosophy)
- c. Report from the Media Committee
 - i. Website rollout has had a few bumps that we are working on; Social Media-- possibility of establishing an RWES presence on Blue Sky (as alternative to Twitter); discussion of developing a podcast on Bandcamp or Soundcloud
- d. Report on *The Dial*
 - i. Thanks to the RWE Memorial Association for a donation that will cover the costs of our subscribing to Project Muse for open-access publishing; issue no. 1 (with themes of climate change and ecological concern) is a few months out, late summer or early fall; essays for second issue have been selected; Guidelines for submissions to *The Dial* are forthcoming and will be made public after the first two numbers are published.

V. DISCUSSION

- a. Nick: should Society communications be controlled as currently, so that they reach only current members? Why not seek to broadcast what we do to as wide an audience as possible?
- b. Calls for Vision and Reinvention of the Author Society as a genre: what kinds of connections do we want the Society to foster, what exactly do we want it to be about? What do our members want?
- c. Thomas: aim to produce more and more tangible products that come as clear benefits of membership—e.g., on-line events for Members

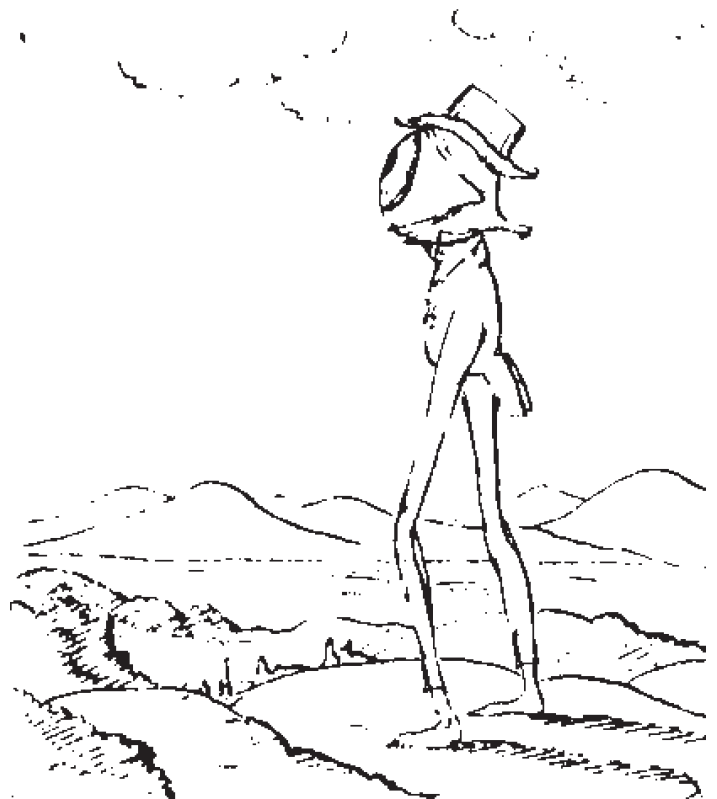


ing the philosophical implications of literary works and the literary expression of philosophical ideas, Arsić's scholarship demonstrates the rich interplay between these two disciplines in American intellectual history.

Not only has Branka Arsić distinguished herself in Emerson scholarship, but she has also demonstrated a capacious curiosity about the contours of nineteenth-century letters. With innovative and incisive investigations into the works of Thoreau, Melville, and Dickinson, she has demonstrated time and again the interconnectedness of the era's thinkers while also illuminating what is distinctive about each of the representatives who attract her attention. She also admirably extends beyond the nineteenth-century on both sides: reaching back to Mary Rowlandson, Anne Bradstreet, and Jonathan Edwards on the one side and to Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell on the other. Throughout her labor as a critic and theorist, she provides a robust and engaging model of scholarship conducted at the interface of literature and philosophy. In all these dimensions, Arsić exemplifies Emersonian strains of interest in the conduct of language and disciplinary variety.

turns out to be Emersonian. It may thus be that Paris, defined by Benjamin as the capital of nineteenth-century modernity, imported some of its modernity from nineteenth-century Boston, and that European modernity was in fact American" (*On Leaving*, 78).

In her analysis of Thoreau's work, Arsić demonstrates how his writing blends scientific knowledge with poetic expression, creating what she calls a "new poetry" and "new science" (*Bird Relics*, 182). This interpretation reveals the philosophical underpinnings of Thoreau's literary style. Arsić's concept of "radical empiricism" in Thoreau's work highlights how his literary approach eschews rigid classification systems in favor of direct observation and experience. This reading bridges Thoreau's literary practice with philosophical empiricism. Similar to her scholarship on Emerson, her reading of Thoreau focuses on the vitalism of thought and its relation to being, and she reveals how both authors' writing styles, and particularly Emerson's use of the "optative," are intrinsically linked to a philosophy of possibility and becoming. Her analysis of both Emerson and Thoreau, and of Transcendentalism more broadly conceived, showcases how literary form embodies and enables philosophical concepts. By consistently examin-



Being and Becoming: Ambiguity and Double-Consciousness in Emerson's "Self-Reliance"

Maximilian Werner, University of Utah

--"What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls restrain'd by decorum . . ." (Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*)

According to William Empson, "we call [literature] ambiguous when we recognize that there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternate views might be taken without sheer misreading" (19). When reading Emerson, we are no less puzzled and enticed by, than we are confronted with, ambiguity, though Emerson himself may have preferred to describe this aspect of his work as "double-consciousness" or "two-sidedness" (qtd. in Yoder, 316). For the alternate views, "sides," or ideas we encounter in "Self-Reliance" present readers with a series of disorienting possibilities we must negotiate in order to discern Emerson's "wholly strange and new" (OA 141) perspective.

However disorienting, the ideas are "what [we] can now nearest approach" to "the way, the thought, the good" as Emerson sees it. A dialectic then ensues between these meanings or possibilities, between what is known and unknown, which in turn creates a "sacred" space that "absorbs past and future into the present hour" (OA 140). Thus, Emerson confounds our notions of intellect and intuition with this "parable of [our] being and becoming" (141). For "in that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin (139-140).

Although as readers we privilege analysis, reason, and the logical affordances of language, Emerson instead invites us to proceed from "an impalpable/certain rest" (Whitman 66) that he creates with ideas that in themselves are at once static or fixed, but that become unstuck, "plastic and permeable" (OA 142) when combined. For instance, in what essentially functions as a forecast of the "ways" he explores in "Self-Reliance," Emerson writes: "It is the best part of the man, I sometimes think, that revolts most against his being the minister. His good revolts from official goodness" (OA xxiii).

Emerson here revolts, not just against being a minister, in this case, of the Second Church, but

against tradition more generally as well as the limits of language itself. For "from" has at least two meanings here: "from" as in "His good revolts away from official goodness" and "from" as in "His good comes from official goodness." However ambiguous or opposite, these meanings literally "share a common origin," first, in the word "from" and second, in "the best part of the man," that is, in his good. Borrowing again from Whitman, "Apart from the pulling and hauling [of these meanings] stands what [Emerson is]" (66), a man who, like the world itself, both is and is becoming.

Thus it is a short step from the possibilities of language to the possibilities of the world from whence language springs or, as Emerson put it:

We unite all things by perceiving the law which pervades them; by perceiving the superficial differences and the profound resemblances. But every mental act,—this very perception of identity or oneness, recognizes the difference of things. Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak or to think without embracing both. (quoted in Yoder 315)

Linguistic/existential doubleness is also captured by Emerson's use of the word "revolt," which, in addition to its common meaning "to rebel," comes from the Latin *revolvere*, meaning "revolve." Together, and perhaps as an allusion to "the gravitation of spirits" and the "resolution of all into the ever-blessed ONE" (142), the two meanings suggest that Emerson's good resides outside both himself and official goodness, and yet it is his good. This sense is carried further when Emerson writes, "When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way" (141).

Here good is only near, while life is in and, unlike official goodness, does not come from any known or (customary) way. But if neither the good near or life in us comes by any known or accustomed way, then how does one recognize either as such? Might this conundrum explain why, according to Emerson, "the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said"? Perhaps, but that does not stop

Emerson from trying. He continues in this paradoxical vein by noting that “you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;—the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience”(141).

This progression of ideas illustrates how “Emerson summons not argument or proof, but rather wave after wave of assertion, all striking from the same direction so that a tremendous cumulative force is built up and the rock of opposition finally shattered—” (Yoder 317). Insofar as the word “Shall” connotes the formality of a sermon, it would seem related to “official goodness,” or to what is customary or, known, but that is where our recognition ends. That is, the series of assertions that follow are far from familiar and ultimately culminate in our estrangement. For we have now entered a region that is without distinguishable insignias, i.e., footprints, faces and names. But as Whitman reminds us, “Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,/Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn” (65).

Moreover, the sermon-like quality also refers us to the pun on “wholly,” which, when read with “strange” and “new,” produces feelings of ambivalence, of both familiarity and unfamiliarity. “You take the way from man, not to man” (142) has a similar effect in that “take” and “way” can mean different things. For “way” could refer to either a way of doing things or to a road or path. The first interpretation implies conformity while the second implies departure, separation, privacy, and estrangement. If it is a path we take from man, as in “away” from man, Emerson implies that it leads to a bewildering place without foot-prints, faces and names.

The “cumulative force” of Emerson’s vision continues: “All persons that ever existed are its forgotten ministers. Fear and hope are alike beneath it” (142). The vision here, as elsewhere, becomes apocalyptic when we consider what is meant by “alike,” which could be paraphrased “both” or “the same.” Because “beneath” implies descent we are, consequently, left with (or is it in?) a subterranean space that contains every person that ever existed, where there is either fear and hope or nothing. It is as if we, the “forgotten ministers” of the future, are poised above a region that, despite its allusions to hell, is unlike anything we have seen, thought, known, felt, or experienced, which, para-

doxically, is still an experience.

Emerson builds on this idea when he says that, “There is somewhat low even in hope. In the hour of vision, there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy” (142). In the first sentence, we have no choice but to read “there” as referring to a (non-existent) place. As a result, the “there” of the second sentence invites and results in a similar interpretation. “There” becomes a place where fear and hope, gratitude and joy, are, like “example” and “experience,” excluded. Gratitude, coming from the Latin *gratus*, which means “grace,” extends the apocalyptic vision by implying that “there” is also a place devoid of grace. And yet it is by means of this way that we “behold identity and eternal causation” (142).

The identity we behold or look upon is simultaneously our own and everything else’s, which inspires feelings of both optimism and discomfort insofar as we are significant and insignificant, bound and unbound. A similar phenomenon occurs when Emerson notes that the soul “calms itself with knowing that all things go well” (142). For although we know that all things go well, the idea that the soul must calm itself implies that beholding identity and eternal causation is as alienating as it is unifying. Thus, the passage is both prospective (all things go well) and (psycho-)retrospective, in that we must reflect on why the soul, apparently free of all corporeal and worldly constraint, would need to calm itself. In both cases we do not have a concrete reference point, and therefore remain anchored in the present, which, however unnerving, absorbs “long intervals of time, years, centuries” (142).

Emerson marshals the known, material, and possible in the service of the unknown, immaterial, and impossible. “This idea, that everything is two-sided, and that its polarity can be defined by a string of analogies based on the antithesis of identity and diversity, is the essence of Emerson’s method” (Yoder 316). How else to explain the estrangement we experience at the thought of a place without footprints, faces, names, example and experience? We become suspended between a place where these things exist and a space where they do not. We begin to move both in (the hour of vision) and outside of time, which is consumed by the present “because it works and is.” “In the hour of vision...long intervals of time...are of no account” (OA 142)) because “years, centuries” could be those already passed or yet to come. The present collapses all-time, and thus

contains every moment, be it past, present, or future. "Life only avails," Emerson reminds us, "not the having lived." The present is a state of constant renewal and "all persons that ever existed [become] its forgotten ministers"(142). For this we are neither grateful or joyous, fearful or hopeful, just calmed "with knowing that all things go well," including ourselves.

"Self-Reliance" creates its own inner and outer world and "double-consciousness" of rationality and irrationality, complete with its own laws and principles, possibilities and impossibilities, intuition and logic, limitations and vastness; it is a world that is both primary and apposite, both here and elsewhere, of this time and of all-time. Perhaps this is why, as Yoder suggests, "the essays do not submit to paraphrase or summary: the vitality of the inner life shows more clearly that ordinary logic would not serve Emerson's purpose" (313), which, according to John Holloway, "is to quicken his reader's perceptiveness; and he does this by making a far wider appeal than the exclusively rational appeal" (qtd. In Yoder, 313), which results in the reader's experience of both being and becoming.

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The Shadow of Theology: A Bio-Semiotic Perspective on Ralph Waldo Emerson

Marco Dalbagno, l'Istituto Sacro Cuore

At the end of the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson concluded a decade of radical personal and professional transformations with a series of lectures entitled "Human Life" in the city of Boston. The death of his wife Ellen, his gradual separation from the Unitarian Church, and his travels in Italy and Europe had marked the stages of a complex journey in Emerson's biography, which now - in the winter between 1838 and 1839 - saw the growing success of the philosopher and lecturer. Indeed, since his return from Europe, Emerson - in addition to the publication of his *Nature* (1836) - began to give numerous speeches at some of the most important stages in Massachusetts such as those held at Harvard: "The American Scholar" (1837); "Divinity School Address" (1838).

This article aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on Emerson as a philosopher, specifically exploring the semiotic and/or bio-semiotic dimensions of his theology following his resignation from the Unitarian ministry.

In particular, we will focus on Demonology, one of Emerson's Boston lectures. To approach this writing, which was published in 1877 in the *North American Review*, we can observe that elements inherent to the modern concept of semiotics such as representation, analogy, sign, and symbol are already traceable in Emerson as early as his "Divinity School Address" (1838).

Addressing the graduating class, the father of transcendentalism remarked:"

But when the mind opens, and reveals the laws which traverse the universe, and make things what they are, then shrinks the great world at once into a mere illustration and fable of this mind. What am I? and What is? asks the human spirit with a curiosity new-kindled, but never to be quenched. Behold these outrunning laws, which our imperfect apprehension can see tend this way and that, but not come full circle. Behold these infinite relations, so like, so unlike; many, yet one. I would study, I would know, I would admire forever. These works of thought have been the entertainments of the human spirit in all ages. A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to man when his heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue.

Then he is instructed in what is above him. He learns that his being is without bound; that, to the good, to the perfect, he is born, low as he now lies in evil and weakness. That which he venerates is still his own, though he has not realized it yet.¹

From this perspective, terms such as “illustration,” “fable,” and “infinite relations” clarify a view that sees the world as a symbol of something, as a channel leading to something greater and “superior.” It would be easy to invoke modern pantheism; however, the key to understanding Emerson’s worldview, which, along with another great contemporary figure like Gregory Bateson, we could define as a “pattern that connects,” is already present in another writing, *Nature* (1836), which precedes the ones we are now examining, but seems to anticipate precisely this type of connective perspective.

Here, “Our” refers to the poet as one who can see beyond the individual parts and perceive the whole, and vice versa. Emerson opens up this possibility of knowing the Other to all men, this knowledge of the divine makes the subject the protagonist in the search for connections: making them play an active role in the relationship with the world and with God. In this way, one would avoid the inconvenience described in the episode of the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 12: 38-42) in which the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus to show them a sign, but He reacts negatively as those verses recount. In this sense, for Emerson, the signs are already present “The whole world is an omen and a sign” (*Demonology*, 1838): one must have the ability to find them and to look at them authentically. Connected to this vast theme of the sign is the central body of the text *Demonology*, in which Emerson seems to denounce that the attention to signs - when it is present - is often misunderstood and falls into that vast cauldron of spiritualism that in the first half of the nineteenth-century was taking root in Boston. Emerson, despite being aware that various elements that in one way or another arouse interest in human life can be attributed to the term *Demonology*:

THE NAME *Demonology* covers dreams, omens, coincidences, luck, sortilege, magic and other experiences which shun rather than court inquiry, and deserve notice chiefly because every man has usually in a lifetime two or three hints in this kind which are specially impressive to him.²

1. See, passim R. W. Emerson, *Divinity School Address* in: <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/addresses/divinity-school-address/>

2. See contributor JSTOR, R. W. Emerson *Demonology* in *The*

At the same time, Emerson strives to encourage the listener (or reader) not only to look at these ‘corners’ but to let themselves be surprised by life as a whole and by the authenticity of human living. The sign, therefore, is not exclusive to theology, but spiritualism and the occult in general master certain channels with alterity and interpretations (often influenced by personal desires) seem to indicate a way, thus transforming the sign into a portent.

Here - before returning to our Emerson - a phrase by the Swiss psychoanalyst Gustav Jung may be useful: “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.” Emerson seems to be of the same opinion when in his ‘*Demonology*’ he asserts:

The soul contains in itself the event that shall presently befall it, for the event is only the actualizing of its thoughts. It is no wonder that particular dreams and presentiments should fall out and be prophetic. The fallacy consists in selecting a few insignificant hints when all are inspired with the same sense. As if one should exhaust his astonishment at the economy of his thumb-nail, and overlook the central causal miracle of his being a man.³

And choosing some things instead of glimpsing a complex plot that can make everyday life miraculous, could be the message that Emerson feels like giving at the conclusion of a complicated decade that has invested his life and the life of those he loved. But then what kind of semiotics can we talk about? A bio-semiotics, a semiotics that looks at life (and life at its creator), at the world as the highest representation of a perfect idea that, although sometimes it strains the lives of men and other times elevates it. And man is the protagonist of this ascent in which, as Emerson reminds us, one does not admire fields and properties, but the landscape. Do not be content with the first sign and the first meaning, do not confuse a superficial analysis with a deeper and more laborious one but which we can call connection. Emerson thus closes his essay with a brief hymn to humanity: man is greater than these small things, because he has the ability - if he knows how to look - to put them in their place.

The whole world is an omen and a sign. Why look so wistfully in a corner? Man is the Image of God. Why run after a ghost or a dream? The voice of divination resounds everywhere and runs to waste unheard, unregarded, as the mountains echo with the bleatings of cattle.⁴

North American Review, 1877, vol. 124. p.179.

3. *ibid*, 182

4. *ibid*, 190.

REVIEWS

Frank Lloyd Wright & Ralph Waldo Emerson: Transforming the American Mind.

Ayad Rahmani, Louisiana State UP, 2023. 352 pp.
\$49.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback.

“Every spirit builds itself a house,” Emerson observed in the final lines of *Nature*; “and beyond its house a world.” The idea of an inherent harmony expressed between the life and its habitation could almost be mistaken for a principle of organic architecture. That was in 1836, though, and of course, in the technological, incorporated, and capitalized United States then already coming into being, many spirits would prefer to hire an architect. Cue the entrance of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959), one of the most innovative and important architects of all time, whose incomparable twentieth-century work, as it happened, was steeped in a particular conception of Emerson. Wright himself openly embraced his Emersonian roots and scholarship on Wright has consistently granted Emerson a major place among Wright’s influences. Nevertheless, it is the claim in a new book by Ayad Rahmani, Professor of Architecture at Washington State University, that Emerson was “a critical contributor to the architect’s intellectual maturity,” without whom, real understanding of Wright and his work would be incomplete (1).

If Emerson, approaching age 60, plumed himself that “I have not now one disciple,” he failed to predict the celebrity that would descend upon him in the decades after the Civil War. A stratospherically lofty conception of Emerson came to Wright as a legacy of his Welsh-immigrant family on his mother’s side, all of them Unitarians, progressive in their social and educational thinking, several of them noted clergy. That side of the family had adopted for itself the motto, “Truth against the World,” and the notion of Unity that they found extolled in Emerson seems to have stood for a fair expression of that truth. What Wright took from Emerson, Rahmani argues, was less about learning from nature or the Euclidian geometries underlying moral reality (as others have suggested) than it was the figure and oppositional stance of the prophet-artist offering his visions against the materialist drift of the times and the “degradation of the nation” (5). For all his glamour and notoriety, the complexity of his genius

and the Gatsby-esque self-fashioning of his personae, Frank Lloyd Wright, according to Rahmani, pursued a program of “nationalist daring” and “coercive” design aimed to intervene against the conformism and lazy thinking of the prevailing culture around him (1, 3).

Relying significantly for his project’s archive on Wright’s notoriously inconsistent and often fictive autobiographical writings, Rahmani takes the stance not of truth-telling biographer promising to set the record straight, but psychoanalytic cultural critic. He allegorizes Wright’s development as an oedipal effort of supplanting various fathers and a “hero’s journey” out of Joseph Campbell. In “peeling away... conscious to get to unconscious,” Rahmani seems prepared to take whatever comes up as potentially indicative of his subject’s truth and “yearning for a more perfect life” (xiii).

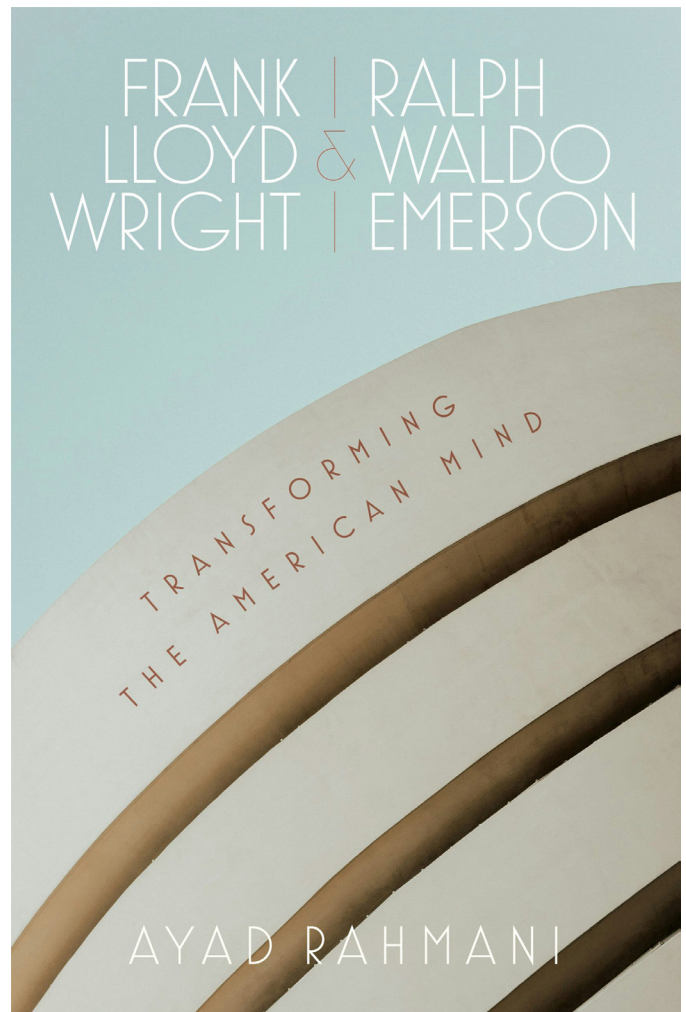
The book unfolds in three major moves, beginning with a contest between the capitalist and incorporated nation forgetful of its origins and the figure of “the prophet” born to challenge and heal it. Three chapters follow connecting a series of visual innovations central to Wright’s work with potential points of contact in Emerson’s thought: first, the sublime, intended to jar observers out of complacency, typically involving the architect’s pushing the “engineering ... to the brink of collapse”; next, the “new ocular regime” that Wright fostered through basic design elements such as close-to-the-ground orientations, corner windows, open domestic layouts; finally, the restoration of perspective in Broadacre City, Wright’s decades-long reimagining of urban space, where train stations and factories have been redesigned as “low-lying buildings” on the scale of barn and farmhouse and “run by [the] same agrarian values” (37). Two chapters making up the book’s final move take us inside the house and, following twentieth-century nuclear physics, inside the atom to lay out the principles behind Wright’s designs for domestic furniture and the creation of his masterpiece, the Guggenheim Museum. With unfortunate results for the larger claims of the project, substantive connections to Emerson drop out entirely in these two final chapters.

I leave to others more qualified than I to assess the value of Rahmani’s work as a contribution to Wright studies, but for the Emerson-oriented readers most likely to come upon this review, a few observations seem worth making. First, Rahmani’s objective to bring more light than we have had to the question of

the particular kind and degree of Emerson's influence on such a towering figure as Wright across the many decades of his work is certainly worthy but no simple task. For one thing, the most salient connections between Wright's work and Emerson's philosophy have been cogently laid out by others. Rahmani's work would be sharper with a fuller, more transparent, and more agile use of crucial fellow-travelers on this terrain such as William Cronon, Robert McCarter, and Jerome Klinkowitz. It seems likely that getting beyond these important predecessors would require either clear indications from Wright about those connections or a powerfully comprehensive and convincing way of showing how particular elements of Emerson's complex and ever-changing thought and intricately demanding and rewarding prose and poetry could somehow be captured, represented, embodied in architectural forms, relations, and spaces. In the case Rahmani offers so far, too much remains too implicit. And this only makes sense. For the genteel and in some ways excessive reverence for Emersonian thought such as Wright was steeped in within his family was typical of certain constituencies after the Civil War, and this way of revering Emerson was predicated upon not actually reading him. Ultimately, Rahmani has set himself the challenging task of attempting to reveal the latent Emersonian underpinnings of Wright's visions and built creations, but is limited in that effort by how thin the record is of Wright's substantive engagements with Emerson's actual work. On this point, Rahmani, too, hesitates. Reasonably unsure how to describe an influence that, like "salt dissolved in water" (xvi) is everywhere but cannot precisely be spotted, Rahmani himself simply punts: "We may quibble about which Emerson essay contributed most to, say, Wright's Johnson Wax counterintuitive 'Lily Pad' columns, whether Nature or 'The American Scholar.'" "The answer is: who knows? All of Emerson's work contributed to that design" (xvi). As posed, the question—which essay's ideas gave rise to the design of these particular columns?—seems far too literalistic, expressing unrealistic expectations for verbal concepts in Emerson to be given legible form in these materials and spatial arrangements. But Rahmani's conclusion—that what the columns express is not one particular essay but all of Emerson—is unwarranted as well, not to mention disappointing. More likely, it is not at all all of Emerson present in the columns, but rather an image of Emerson that Wright, with help from his family, built for himself and then idolized and

emulated. If that Emerson had demonstrably little to do with the actual Emerson's ideas and their intricate rhetorical expression in his work, it was another of Wright's brilliant constructions.

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Glad to the Brink of Fear: A Portrait of Ralph

Waldo Emerson. James Marcus, Princeton University Press, 2024, 344 pp. \$29.95 hardcover.

Marcus is an accomplished editor, translator, and writer whose essays have appeared in many publications including *The American Scholar*, *The New Yorker*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *Atlantic*. *Glad to the Brink of Fear* rests not only on Marcus's obvious affinity for Emerson but also on his familiarity with Emerson scholarship, considerable research, and desire to bring Emerson to people's conversations today.

Marcus's biography is a painterly portrait of Emerson. He renders Emerson both in broad strokes and with minute and immediate details, connecting each and all with intention, effect, and expression. The result is a lively, personally engaged biography that captures Emerson as a "convoluted" man of "mixed and mercurial" thoughts and feelings (129, 105), comfortable with *and* distressed by ambivalence, a marvel of a thinker whose "self-detonating sentences" *are* thought in process (131), and "a visionary figure, who speaks to our cultural moment with tremendous urgency" (1).

Emerson clearly also speaks to Marcus's private experience. In his introduction, Marcus describes turning to Emerson's essays twenty-five years ago while "struggling with a chronically ill spouse, a vulnerable child ... a collapsing marriage" and finding "something ... that made it easier for me to get through the days ... to ... bear and be" (13). In a later chapter, he considers Nature from start to finish, but he is most excited to arrive at the passage that begins "Every spirit builds itself a house." This "vision of the individual as limitless, held back only by fear, stupidity, caution, custom, tribal deference" is "the thing to read when you feel powerless, helpless ... It will momentarily make you feel heroic, and not in a self-deluding way, but in terms of potential. Every human being deserves to feel this way" (70). That last sentiment speaks to Marcus's motivation for writing the biography: his sense that Emerson's life and writings are moving and relevant to a very wide readership. He has a remarkable instinct for relating Emerson's life and writing to today's readers and circumstances.

Marcus is very good at contextualizing Emerson, whether positioning Emerson in current contexts via empathetic, compelling connections (among other topics, he includes the Covid pandemic, political polarization, and racism), or in Emerson's own contexts

that Marcus fleshes out with deeply researched accounts of reception, friends and relations, marriage and fatherhood, and nineteenth-century history. His knowledge of Emerson scholarship is extensive.

The biographical events Marcus details—the early childhood, the Harvard education, the teaching days, time in St. Augustine, Murat, marriages to Ellen and Lidian, little Waldo's death, lecture tours, the 1872 house fire, memory loss—will be familiar to Emerson scholars as will the quotations from Emerson's letters, sermons, essays, and journals, but Marcus brings fresh insights and responses to them. The book reads like a stimulating conversation, like being *in* a conversation with Emerson and Marcus, so strong and fluent are the connections, not only Marcus's to Emerson, but Marcus's and Emerson's to the reader.

In depicting Emerson's life and work, Marcus takes his cue from Emerson's methods of reading "for the lusters," analogy (that is, connecting difference rather than compartmentalizing it), and the convoluted paths of memory.

As Marcus notes, Emerson's sentences "revel in pretzel-shaped paradox. They practically invite you ... to make up a private anthology of the most explosive bits and leave the rest behind" (5). Analogously, Marcus's approach as a biographer is geared "toward those elements of Emerson's life that spoke to me most directly" (15), but he has "not papered over Emerson's failures" (16). In the chapter on little Waldo's death, he criticizes "the abstractions that scuttled the second half of 'Threnody'" compared to the depth of "Experience" and its "philosophy with teeth (mostly sharp) and heart (mostly broken)" (157). Other chapters detail Emerson's cringe-worthy "slow awakening of a political conscience" with respect to the anti-slavery movement (16).

Acknowledging contradiction as the human condition and the condition of thought, Marcus focuses on the unresolved (and unresolvable) tensions in Emerson's life and writing (for example, solitude and society, sacred and secular callings, love and loss). Such tensions are sustained in life by its inevitable "series of surprises" and in the mind by metaphoric thinking. Marcus writes that Emerson "believed that grasping the manifold and metaphor connections between things was the whole point of thinking" (7).

Rather than ordering events chronologically into a narrative of unfolding cause and effect, Marcus vows to "resist the gravitational pull of chronology" (42). He

writes with the conviction that events and thoughts and sentences “do not happen in order,” but rather “there is a floating, omnidirectional sense” in which Emerson’s life and thought unfolds that warrants circling and memory (82). The final chapter, which echoes Evelyn Barish’s *Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy*, considers Emerson’s birth and childhood. Marcus returns to Ellen’s death on several occasions, for example in this moving explanation of Waldo’s decision to leave the pulpit:

Let’s say you had recently suffered through the decline of the person you loved most in the world ... Let’s say that person had died of a wasting disease whose most visible symptom was the coughing up of blood ... Now let’s say you were obliged to perform, every single Sunday, a ritual in which a cup of Madeira wine was supposedly transubstantiated into blood. You drank the blood, tasted its acidity and sacramental sweetness on your tongue. Wouldn’t you recoil at a certain point? Wouldn’t it break your heart to pretend?” (82-83).

The final chapter also encircles Marcus and Emerson with Marcus’s own visit to Bush and Sleepy Hollow and the admission that “I had been thinking about Waldo for so long that his life now seemed to overlap my own” (270). The occasional autobiographical entrances and asides to the reader are as compelling as his evident command of history, Emerson, and the scholarly works of “Emersonian heavyweight[s]” (82).

The citations and notes are thorough and reflect Marcus’s knowledge of Emerson scholarship. He quotes Emerson from such collections as the 1983 Library of America edition of Emerson’s essays and lectures, but also from more scholarly works such as Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson’s *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, and Rusk and Tilton’s *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. In reader-friendly fashion, notes and citations appear in a separate section at the end of the book along with the index and bibliography.

Marcus’s book serves as a wonderful introduction to readers new to Emerson. His personal engagement with Emerson, akin to John Kaag’s approach in *American Philosophy: A Love Story*, will also attract those already familiar with Emerson’s life and work.

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