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EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

Loren Eiseley: Our Twentieth-Century American Transcendentalist

Nicholas L. Guardiano, Owen Polley, & David A. Dilworth

A century after Ralph Waldo Emerson in his full prime, Loren Eiseley (1907–1977) emerged as perhaps the foremost exponent of American transcendentalism in the twentieth century. Carrying this important legacy into our modern times are his philosophically rich writings on evolution, nature, and the history of science, which attest to his achievement as “bone-hunter” on the western *mauvaises terres*. Eiseley’s career spanned from prestigious academic paleontologist to historian of science, university professor and administrator, popular journalist, television science-series *impresario*, poet, and philosopher. Through these diverse channels and in his imaginative writings, Eiseley’s ideas came to influence generations of American scientists, artists, and philosophers. Here we wish to underline his philosophical credentials while recognizing his place in the tradition of transcendentalism. Serving the purpose are Eiseley’s first two books *The Immense Journey* (1957) and *The Firmament of Time* (1960), which launched his career as a popular scientist and a transcendentalist thinker on the world stage. They show deep elective affinities with an Emersonian worldview on the topics of nature, beauty, morality, and spirituality.¹

1. Though we do not develop it here, a byproduct of our account is Eiseley’s radiantly Emersonian roots that challenge recent efforts to rehabilitate Emerson’s status as a philosopher in deflationary nominalistic, anti-metaphysical, and de-transcendentalized terms. Emerson’s writings, beginning with his first small classic *Nature* (1836) and continuing with such essays as “The Method of Nature,” “The Over-Soul,” “The Poet,” and “Nature” (1844), as well as many celebrated poems, should be recognized as expounding an objectively realistic transcendentalism of the Neoplatonic tradition and in the line of Goethe, F. W. J. Schelling, and his Concord neighbors Benjamin and Charles Peirce among others. For an insightful analysis of the rehabilitation phase of Emerson scholarship and its missteps, see Urbas.

We can preview Eiseley’s transcendentalism by stating the two mottos crucially keynoting the hermeneutical trajectory of *The Immense Journey*. The first quotes the journals of the Concord transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau: “*Man can not afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her*” (4). The accompanying second motto is by the English archbishop William Temple: “*Unless all existence is a medium of revelation, no particular revelation is possible*” (ibid.). The mottos presage a paleontologist’s perspective with the lid blown off. They assert Eiseley’s vision for penetrating into the hidden secrets of nature, a way of looking not in the manner of your everyday scientist.² Furthermore, they suggest an allegiance to an Emersonian discipline of interpreting nature as “the symbol of spirit” (Emerson 20), as well as to a Thoreauvian branch of science that is both natural and mystical because it “deals with the higher law” (Thoreau 108).³ Bolstered by a century’s worth of geological knowledge laboriously accumulated since the time of Emerson and Thoreau, we will see that Eiseley draws fresh transcendentalist lessons now available to scientific inquiry.

1. A Paleontologist’s “Transparent-Eyeball”

Steeped in Eiseley’s paleontological expertise and years of field work around the Midwest and beyond,

2. The deeply religious pronouncement of the second motto receives its full articulation in Eiseley’s image of “The Star Thrower,” appearing in his follow-up, third book *The Unexpected Universe* (1969), conceived after the redemptive models of Christian and Buddhist compassion.

3. The quote is from Thoreau’s well-known journal entry of 5 March 1853 where he candidly composes a hypothetical response to the Association for the Advancement of Science regarding his area of scientific specialty. The entry quoted by Eiseley in his motto was made less than 3 weeks later on March 23, 1853.

(Continued on page 8.)

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PROSPECTS



RWES panels for ALA 2023

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will sponsor three panels at the 34th Annual Conference of the American Literature Association, to be held May 25–28, 2023, at the Westin Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston. More details about the ALA may be found here: <https://americanliteratureassociation.org>

“Emerson in Conversation”

The Society will be sponsoring two panels that consider Emerson in conversation with new and unexpected interlocutors. “In excited conversation we have glimpses of the universe,” Emerson notes; elsewhere, in “Circles,” he observes the tendency of conversationalists to outgrow one another. These papers imagine Emerson in “excited conversation” across diverse time periods, geographies, media, and cultures, and they consider how conversationalists probe the limitations of Emersonian thought on their way to other discussions.

FRIDAY, May 26, 11:30-12:50 – Session 10-J

Emerson in Conversation I: Poetry

Chair: Bonnie O’Neill, Mississippi State University
“Audre Lorde is Emerson’s Poet, Fully Realized,” Christina Katopodis, City University of New York
“‘Cool Starry Nights’ and Fanciful Female Flights’: Sarah Helen Whitman and Julia Deane Freeman on Emerson,” Catherine Kuncie, University of Colorado-Boulder
“Du Bois as the American Poet,” Amy Yue-Yin Chan, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
“Disillusionment and the Loss of Transcendental Peace in Sylvia Plath’s Bee Poetry,” Adyson Ross, East Tennessee State University

SATURDAY, May 27, 10:00-11:20 – Session 16-I

Emerson in Conversation II: Emerson Now

Chair: Randall Fuller, University of Kansas
“Emerson, Motion Pictures, and the Poetry of Things,” Bill Scalia, St. Mary’s Seminary & University

“Emerson, Brady, and the Uses of Monumental Portraiture,” Nicolas Blochel, Boston University

“What It Means to Be an American: The Conversation from Emerson to Baldwin,” Anthony P. Pennino, Stevens Institute of Technology

“Organic Scholars, American Intellectuals: R.W. Emerson’s Critical Consciousness in Dialogue with Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire,” Daphne Orlandi, Sapienza – University of Rome Technische Universität Dortmund

“Editing Emerson”

The Society will also sponsor a panel concerning the theory and practice of editing Emerson. The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, one of the first scholarly editions of a major American literary figure, remains to this day a remarkable achievement. The Belknap series of the Collected Works, fifty years in the making, provides the complete standard edition of Emerson’s writing. It therefore seems appropriate to ask if the study of Emerson has entered a new phase. Does the completion of the scholarly editions of public and private writing foreclose certain forms of scholarly attention? Or do they provide insights and opportunities for younger scholars interested in working on digital editions? How might digital editions reimagine or refigure the JMN or the Collected Works? Proposals might also explore current editorial efforts related to Emerson, such as The Almanacks of Mary Moody Emerson: A Scholarly Digital Edition or consider diverse archives still in need of scholarly editions.

SATURDAY, May 27, 4:00-5:20 – Session 20-H

Editing Emerson and his Circles: A Roundtable

Chair: Prentiss Clark, University of South Dakota
Noelle Baker, Independent Scholar
Leslie Eckel, Suffolk University
Christopher Hanlon, Arizona State University
Sarah Wider, Emeritus, Colgate University
Ronald A. Bosco, University at Albany

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society’s Business Meeting will take place at ALA on Saturday, May 27, 5:30-6:15 – Session 21-H – both in person and livestreamed on Zoom.

RWES panel for TAG 2023

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will sponsor a panel at the 82nd Annual Gathering of the Thoreau Society (July 12-16, 2023) exploring the themes of Thoreau, politics, and extinction.

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

“Fates, Fortunes, and Resources in the Postbellum Republic” Friday, July 14, 7:30-9 pm

In his 1863 lecture “Fortune of the Republic,” and at the peak of his lecture career after the Civil War, Emerson sounded the poles of hope and despair as he surveyed the state of the nation. He anticipated “a new era of equal rights” (LL II: 334) yet in his journal he remarked, “We hoped that in the Peace, after such a war, a great expansion would follow in the mind of the country: grand views in every direction, —true freedom in politics, in religion, in social science, in thought. But the energy of the nation seems to have expended itself in the war, and every interest is found as sectional & timorous as before” (JMN XV: 77-8). This panel explores how Emerson figures the fate of the nation and its resources, broadly defined, in the wake of the Civil War. How does he reassess, revise, and/or elaborate on his thinking about nature, technology, economy, and/or power? In what ways does he grapple with “extinction” events—personal, political, philosophical—and/or attempt to defy them, and how do we reflect on continuities, shifts, and/or changes in Emerson’s thinking as he confronts the fates, fortunes, and resources of the postwar American landscape?

Moderator: Peter Balaam

“1871: Waldo Exhausted; or, Where’s Logan?” Stephen Andrews

“The Imagination of Adverse Fortune: Intellect and Enmity in Emerson’s Postbellum Thought,” Suzanne Smith

“Emerson, Darwin, Idealism, Extinction,” Randall Fuller

Call for Papers

**PAMLA 2023 Los Angeles: “Shifting Perspectives”
October 26–29, 2023**

Emersonian Perspectives

Sponsored by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society

Abstract

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society invites papers that explore the conference theme “Shifting Perspectives” in the context of Emerson’s work and reception. Contributions may address how perspective informs Emerson’s philosophy, aesthetics, poetics and politics. They may also explore in what ways Emerson’s work teaches us to shift our approaches to reading, thinking, feeling, writing and teaching. Finally, they may also show how other philosophers, poets and artists shift our perspective on Emerson.

Description

“People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.” Emerson unsettles things—from religious orthodoxies to disciplinary conventions—and his body of writing provokes as well as demonstrates shifting perspectives. This panel, sponsored by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society, seeks to showcase research in nineteenth-century literature and culture that speaks to the PAMLA conference theme “Shifting Perspectives.” The panel is interested in contributions that look at how temporal, spatial and critical perspective informs Emerson’s philosophy (e.g. metaphysics vs. perfectionism), aesthetics, poetics, and politics. Contributions may also explore the ways in which Emerson’s work teaches us to shift approaches to reading (e.g. “active reading”), thinking, feeling (e.g. grief), writing (essays vs. poems) and teaching (e.g. books vs. teachers). Papers may also address how other philosophers (e.g. Nietzsche, Cavell, Rancière), poets (e.g. Novalis) and artists shift our perspective on Emerson.

Please submit your abstract proposals using the following submission form by May 31, 2023:

<https://pamla.ballastacademic.com/Home/S/18773>

“Emerson on Fate versus Freedom”
Panel Sponsored by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society
50th Annual Meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy
March 9–11, 2023, Denver, CO

Crucial to a complete understanding of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophy is his view on the fundamental relationship between fate and freedom. In such writings as *Nature*, “The Divinity School Address,” “Self-Reliance,” “Compensation,” “Spiritual Laws,” “Intellect,” “The Poet,” “Experience,” “Nature,” “Politics,” “Fate,” “Power,” *Natural History of Intellect*, and others, this important issue is at play in various discussions about moral law, natural law, divine providence, human limitations, the unpredictability of experience, moral autonomy, personal vocation, artistic creativity, power, dynamic and static forms of nature, and more.

“Fate as a Dialectical Concept,” Roger López, Independent Scholar

“Emerson ‘Causalty’: A Platonic ‘Wandering Cause’?” Joseph Urbas, Université Bordeaux-Montaigne

“To ‘Make Transparent the Whole Web of Circumstance’: Freedom, Fate, and Emerson’s Aesthetics,” Prentiss Clark, University of South Dakota

“The Ethics of Self-Culture in Emerson’s Solution to Fate,” Nicholas Guardiano, Southern Illinois University – Carbondale



Left to Right: Nicholas Guardiano, Joseph Urbas, Roger López, & Prentiss Clark.

THE EMERSON SOCIETY 2022 PEDAGOGY AWARD REPORT

Joan Wry, Saint Michael's College

As the 2022 recipient of The Emerson Society Pedagogy Award, I am most pleased to report on a very successful Emerson-themed retreat for the men's and women's varsity cross country running teams at Saint Michael's College. Our special "Emerson Camp" was held in August during pre-season training at Sleepy Hollow Inn in Huntington, Vermont, where both teams trained for a week on 35 kilometers of beautiful, wooded trails. Emerson's essays and addresses guided our discussions and reflections, and select passages helped the runners and their coaches (nearly all "brand new" to Emerson), to understand the many connections between Emerson and running.

The Introduction to Emerson's pivotal 1836 essay *Nature* helped to set the context for the natural world as a place where the individual flourishes, where we transcend the limitations that prevent us from being fully realized as human beings. The aphorism "In the woods, we return to reason and faith," became the keynote for our Emerson-themed training on the wooded trails of Sleepy Hollow, as well as a way to articulate an intuition-based belief in oneself, one's teammates, and in the ameliorating potential of the natural world. In reading, discussion, and journal entries, the runners and their coaches considered passages from multiple essays and addresses; a particular favorite was "Self-Reliance" with its focus on potential and various forms of personal power as essential to running strategy and motivation, as well as a way to adapt to various challenges and changes on a racecourse. Runners debated the idea that power "ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition" -- noting that repose or rest is perhaps a cessation of power, but it is also a necessary and rejuvenating aspect of training.

A week of pre-season training naturally includes various team-building exercises, but this year one of the more popular activities was Emerson-based. Our final activity was centered on the beautiful "Labrador spar" passage from the essay "Experience," but first each runner closely examined an unpolished piece of labradorite and recorded observations in a journal entry. We then turned to a discussion of the passage in which Emerson invites us to contemplate the human comparison to the "labrador spar, which has no luster as you turn it in your hand, until you come to a particular angle; then it shows

deep and beautiful colors." Runners easily understood the connection to running: the idea that they could, through practice, learn to recognize the best "turns" for themselves—those moments in training and racing when they show "deep and beautiful colors"—but also that they could learn to recognize those best "particular angles" and strengths in their teammates.

In short, Emerson's focus on self-reliance and individual power—as well as his assertion of the importance of flow and transition—are natural complements in a training program for young athletes hoping to improve as collegiate runners and teammates, as well as to become stronger, more deeply committed members of their respective communities. We are most grateful for the generosity of The Emerson Society for making these recognitions possible.



Joan Wry

Keegan O'Connor



On the Trail of Emerson and Thoreau

Keegan O'Connor, PhD Candidate, Queen Mary University of London
Barbara Packer Fellow, 2022

In the 1844 poem “Forerunners,” Emerson describes being on the trail of elusive presences; baited by quick-footed “guides” who outpace him at every turn:

Long I followed happy guides,
I could never reach their sides;
Their step is forth, and, ere the day,
Breaks up their leaguer, and away.

...

... no speed of mine avails

To hunt upon their shining trails (78).

The poem’s sense of what it feels like to read an intoxicating author (“guide”) has been registered by numerous readers. Emerson conjures a kind of reading that is a persistent tracking of a fleeting “spirit”; a kind of author or text who the belated interpreter seeks to attain. In this, he evokes the ways that the literary enterprise is necessarily secondary and past-haunted, voracious for that which has come before. And he evokes how the reader—or the late-coming, nineteenth-century poet—is not simply beleaguered by the debt to the before, the condition of all reading, but encouraged by it; prompted on in their pursuit by what Thoreau calls the “perpetual suggestions and provocations” (*Walden*, 98) of earlier writers. Emerson elsewhere calls these “lustres” (“Nominalist and Realist,” 267). In “Forerunners,” it is as though there were some adept and nimble force—some “precursor poet,” in the words of Harold Bloom—which is beyond the voice or the reach of the later poet who has summoned it into the pursuit of his writing. The forerunning spirit seems to inspire the chase, yet to run off with “hasting feet” faster than Emerson’s rhythmical iambs will go.

This kind of “tracking” and “tracing” of literary forerunners is the major concern of my PhD dissertation, *Volatile Presences: The American Experience of Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*. The project considers the ways that Emerson’s and Thoreau’s writings are literary quests; forms of revealing, discovering, reading, and reckoning with the past. In the dissertation, I trace the American authors forms of literary “trace.” I consider how, through acts of echo and allusion, the “shining trails” of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s texts evoke an English poetic past which they meanwhile mean to apprehend or to “transume.” In “Forerunners” alone, there are audible and enticing suggestions that the unattainable

guides that Emerson is hounding after are early-modern English figures like Shakespeare (for Emerson, the most “inconceivabl[e]” and “out of doors” figure in English poetry (“Shakspeare; or, The Poet,” 361)), Milton, and Herbert, whom the poem’s title alludes to.

Given that my project thinks about reading as a kind of trailing-after, as the pursuit of elusive literary precursors, it was also an enlightening experience to physically travel “on the trail” of the American authors during the summer of 2022. Making the transatlantic voyage, I combined a residency at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester with a university travel award, which accommodated for a stay in Concord to present in the Emerson panel at the Thoreau Annual Gathering and which also allowed for two weeks of manuscript research at the Morgan Library and the New York Public Library. During my month at the AAS, I consulted numerous first editions of Emerson and Thoreau, pamphlets of Emerson’s key orations from the 1830s and 1840s, as well as manuscripts of the authors’ correspondence, supplementing my archival research in New York. It was an enriching few weeks, re-animating my sense of the literary and critical enterprise as akin to the one Emerson evokes in “Forerunners.” Engaging with manuscripts in particular has distinctly influenced the direction of my studies. It has given my project an understanding of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s writing itself as a Literary Trail—a physical presence and a series of inscriptions for (always belated) readers to track and to trail, armed only with “what wisdom and valor and generosity we have” (*Walden*, 98). I thank the Emerson Society and the AAS for this unique, stimulating, and informative research opportunity.

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(Continued from page 1)

The Immense Journey tells the story of the origin of life on Earth and the evolutionary connections of living beings across vast expanses of space and time. The classic opens with Eiseley half-buried amongst the Earth's strata in a narrow "slit" (5) in the desolate American prairies. The layers with their embedded fossils represent millions of years of geological time and countless phases of life. Among these is one human-like skull that speaks to the bone collector about the distant beginnings of the age of mammals: "The skull lay tilted in such a manner that it stared, sightless, up at me as though I, too, were already caught a few feet above him in the strata and, in my turn, were staring upward at that strip of sky which the ages were carrying farther away from me beneath the tumbling debris of falling mountains" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 5). Eiseley's skull might have well winked or nodded in subtle acknowledgement of their shared origins, further suggesting an "occult relation" or a "consanguinity" (Emerson 11 and 41) between humankind and nonhuman nature, a philosophical insight that Emerson made central to his own inaugural text, *Nature*. The experiential and scientifically informed sense of oneness takes on greater metaphysical registers in Eiseley's second chapter, "The Flow of the River." There he describes his memorable experience of floating down the shallow waters of the Platte River in Nebraska, its effluences intermingling with others, jointly feeding a continental watershed. "For an instant, as I bobbed into the main channel, I had the sensation of sliding down the vast tilted face of the continent. It was then that I felt the cold needles of the alpine springs at my fingertips, and the warmth of the Gulf pulling me southward.... I was streaming alive through the hot and working ferment of the sun, or oozing secretively through shady thickets. I was water and the unspeakable alchemies that gestate and take shape in water" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 15). This is the "transparent eye-ball" of a paleontologist at work on the range evoking Emerson's famous words: "I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (10). It is also our ticket to an "immense journey," a natural history of millions of years of evolutionary processes containing the story of profound continuities between myriad life-forms of the past, present, and future. So "let the bones lie here with their message, for those who might decipher it, if they come down late amongst form the stars" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 7).

2. The Emergence of Mammals in an Ecstatic Universe

In the early chapters of *The Immense Journey*, Eiseley applies his vast cosmic perspective across space and time to ponder what it is that powers the radical migrations of organisms on the planet and the transformations of species over time: "one of life's strangest qualities [is] its eternal dissatisfaction with what is, its persistent habit of reaching out into new environments and, by degrees, adapting itself to the most fantastic circumstances" (26). Immanent in nature is a fundamental drive to overcome boundaries and go beyond pre-established norms. Eiseley sees as evidence for this the incredible fact that organisms have come to populate various (seemingly) inhospitable places from the deep ocean to mountain summits, deserts, and polar-ice regions. The decade following the publication of *The Immense Journey* (1957) witnessed life even reaching out into the deadly vacuum of outer-space.

As life travels to remote places so does it transform itself in novel ways. "It gives one a feeling of confidence to see nature still busy with experiments, still dynamic, and not through nor satisfied because a Devonian fish managed to end as a two-legged character with a straw hat. There are other things brewing and growing in the oceanic vat. It pays to know this. It pays to know there is just as much future as there is past. The only thing that doesn't pay is to be sure of man's own part in it" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 33). The chapter "The Snout" explains how a Devonian fish radically crawled out of the sea onto land, and in that act would one day become a distant ancestor of humankind. Such great crawlings and great gaspings are also *leaps* of nature propelling evolutionary change—and there were many, like when the extinction of the dinosaurs "left a hundred uninhabited life zones and a scrambling variety of newly radiating forms" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 7). Moreover, they are biological evidence for an Emersonian universe that is "ecstatic" (Emerson 126) in its creativity. As featured in "The Method of Nature," "Circles," and "Nature" (1844), nature is incessantly productive emanating outward and organizing into a multiplicity of new forms. The Neoplatonic cosmology further resonates with the evolutionary cosmology of the scientist-pragmatist Charles Peirce, who, like Emerson of the generation before him, made a substantial impact on philosophical and scientific modes of inquiry in the United States. Peirce passed away when Eiseley

was a young boy, and by then had committed much of his career to extending and working out the implications of Darwin's ideas to various subjects. For instance, as a metaphysical parallel to Darwin's phenotypic variation, he postulated the reality of an inherent spontaneity in nature that would serve the indefinite production of new forms and processes. For Eiseley and his philosophical progenitors of the transcendentalist line there is no final terminus to evolutionary growth, the future indefinitely remaining open to new possibilities. Therefore, life "has no image except Life, and life is multitudinous and emergent in the stream of time" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 40).

3. Transcendentalist Excesses of the Human Brain

While making his final decisions on the line-up of essays to include in his manuscript for *The Immense Journey*, Eiseley was compelled to comment on the recent exposure of the famous Piltdown Man Hoax. A few decades earlier the amateur archaeologist Charles Dawson had falsely led scientists to believe that he found skull fragments serving as a missing evolutionary link in the fossil record between apes and modern humans. Among other things, it was an attempt to support a brain-centric paradigm of human evolution and to further shore up Darwinian natural selection as the primary mechanism driving the transformation of species across nature. The argument went that the brain first increased in size, then, as a consequence of the practical needs of the organism and its struggle for existence, essential traits of human anatomy were born. For Eiseley, the exposure of the hoax spoke to the core of his philosophy of evolution, because it highlighted the futility of rigid physicalist and overly utilitarian accounts of evolution. The human being is vastly "more than the product of a dog-eat-dog competition with his fellows" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 58); rather, it is part and parcel of a "world of ideas" (ibid.), including theoretical, ethical, and aesthetic ideas. Consequently, we humans awake to find ourselves as the privileged "Dream Animal" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 69). That is, we witness *homo sapiens* take on the role of *homo narrans* who can dream back into deep past dreams and forward into deep future dreams of evolutionary life.⁴

4. The chapter "The Dream Animal" in *The Immense Journey* theoretically converges with the recent articulation of *homo narrans* by Simon Conway Morris in his *From Extraterrestrials to Animal Minds: Six Myths of Evolution*. See Morris chapter five on "the myth of animal minds" in contrast with the uniqueness of the human mind and its implications for a Platonic ontology of mind.

Out of these puzzling times in the history of paleontology, thus, Eiseley sensed that the complexity of the human organism, and more fully the stunning complex array of natural forms across eons, could only be adequately accounted for by an idealistic principle of cosmic proportions. "No utilitarian philosophy explains a snow crystal, no doctrine of use or disuse. Water has merely leapt out of vapor and thin nothingness in the night sky to array itself in form. There is no logical reason for the existence of a snowflake any more than there is for evolution. It is an apparition from that mysterious shadow world beyond nature, that final world which contains—if anything contains—the explanation of men and catfish and green leaves" (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 20).⁵ With Emerson, who also celebrates the inner life of spirit animating nature and the human soul, Eiseley discerns an important remainder in the study of life on Earth—what we might call the transcendentalist significance of things, and what in *The Firmament of Time* becomes part of the not so natural miracle of life. Such a transcendentalist idealism had important ripple effects upon Emerson's and Eiseley's convergent world-views. For instance, an anti-utilitarianism informs their mutual appreciation of beauty as an incorruptible quality pervading the universe. Hence, no theory of natural selection can touch the minute sublimity of the snow flake, nor likewise, the ever-expanding capacity of the human intellect to contemplate the whole. The truth of this resonates with us today whenever we experience a deep sense of wonder in our environment and a passionate effort to understand our place in the world. One palpable example occurs in the thorough-going excitement over the astronomical images captured by the James Webb Telescope, showing the remote galaxies and nebulae on the very fringes of space-time.

4. The Continuity of Hearts Across the Biosphere

In the final chapters of *The Immense Journey*, Eiseley makes evident that further integral to the journey of life on Earth is a call to be ethical. In this regard, Eiseley's sentimentalism, the deep appreciation he felt for nature's inherent beauty, aligns him with the ethical and normative dimensions of Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy. Of course, the historical context to Emerson's and Eiseley's ethical views varies. The American 5. Eiseley's near contemporary and fellow neo-transcendentalist Wallace Stevens expresses throughout his late-career metaphysical poetry such similar declarations as: "It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade" (Stevens 489).

Emerson knew and even helped shape was undergoing a religious revolution, questioning slavery, fought a civil war over that, and expanding its territory westward. Meanwhile, Eiseley's America at the time of *The Immense Journey* had just endured two World Wars, the Korean War, and was beginning the arduous fight over expanding civil liberties. Despite these differences in circumstance, Emerson and Eiseley both offered their general readership—the “young Americans,” in Emerson's words⁶—a way in which to deal with the pressures of the time, as well as a progressive moral outlook for a relatively young country. Emerson's part contributed the resolute guidance of the “moral sentiment,” a sense for the divine immanently dwelling in our everyday lives and a metaphysical ground for the shared continuity between all beings “everywhere and always”—the human and nonhuman, mind and matter.⁷ Eiseley expressed a similar view of our ethical relations while founding it on his subtle metaphysics. As alluded to earlier, that metaphysics minimizes the distinction between mind and matter, such as appearing in the evolutionary forebears of humankind dating back into the remote eras of geological time.

With these kindred metaphysical underpinnings, and especially in responding to the pressures of their times, as well as to its scientific developments, Eiseley and Emerson propose an analogous call to be ethical. Emerson's famous call, uttered in the age of burgeoning young capitalists, occurs in several public addresses, including “The Method of Nature” where he declares: “Let there be worse cotton and better men” (116). By this Emerson intends that cotton is worthless if we find ourselves to be spineless, immoral men failing to live up to our moral potential. Similarly, Eiseley's ethical call comes in response to an age of revitalized materialism with its unqualified championing of scientific progress and technological machines. While Eiseley does not wish to hinder the inquiries of science, he does say that “the supreme epitome of the reaching out” (*The Immense Journey* 31)—that is, the highest form of evolutionary processes breaking new ground—is the reaching out of one heart to another, an ultimate perceiving of continuity or connaturality across beings. Another of Eiseley's calls, this one more closely paralleling Emer-

son's quote above, applies equally well to our current age: “The need is not really for more brains, the need is now for a gentler, a more tolerant people than those who won for us against the ice, the tiger, and the bear” (*The Immense Journey* 88). In our current situation of unremitting judgement lacking all remorse and forgiveness, we might take the nod from Emerson and Eiseley. With Eiseley, our American-born naturalist, we might attend to a different judgment at the heart of nature, or what he called, “the judgment of the birds” (*The Immense Journey* 103). There we may glean from his having released a captive, young sparrow hawk to his mate longingly hovering in the sky (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 119–20) that love and forgiveness are essential elements of the life of a civilization, should it want to continue its legacy.

5. The Not-So “Natural” Naturalism of *The Firmament of Time*

Eiseley concludes *The Immense Journey* on a theme he carries over into *The Firmament of Time*. The human species and others are the outgrowth of mysterious “seeds,” emergent forms deriving from “the secret of life” (Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* 123). So, in the words of *Firmament*, life is not as “natural” (Eiseley 219) as it now looks, its essence remaining hidden to direct scientific inquiry. Eiseley explains how his professional agenda took the direction of rejecting Darwin's “warm little pond” (*The Immense Journey* 124) as alleged mother of life, with its physicalist presupposition that life's origins are recoverable somewhere amongst the chemical make-up of cells. After biologists failed to find evidence on Darwin's behalf, Eiseley notes, “science found itself in the unenviable position of having to create a mythology of its own: namely, the assumption that what, after long effort, could not be proved to take place today had, in truth, taken place in the primeval past” (*The Immense Journey* 125). Eiseley staked his scholarly reputation on rejecting here what he saw as—quoting the British biologist Joseph Woodge—Darwinism consisting of a “simple dogmatism—asserting that what you want to believe did in fact happen” (*The Immense Journey* 126). Consequently, Eiseley moved to foreground in his second volume the idea that *miraculous life is not as natural as it looks*. Once again, while writing as a highly accredited paleontologist, historian and philosopher of science, he conspicuously prefixes its collection with a transcendentalist motto, now a romantic poem of Percy Bysshe Shelley.

6. See Emerson's eponymously named address “The Young American” (211–30).

7. On the moral sentiment, see Emerson's “The Divinity School Address” (73–92). The phrase “everywhere and always” appears in both the essays “Fate” and “Worship”; see Emerson 958 and 1065.

The splendours of the firmament of time
 May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not;
 Like stars to their appointed height they climb,
 And death is a low mist which cannot blot
 The brightness it may veil. When lofty thought
 Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,
 And love and life contend in it, for what
 Shall be its earthly doom, the dead live there
 And move like winds of light on dark and stormy air.
 (Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* 134)

Shelley's "splendours" that crystallize the "lofty thought ... and love and life" of past and future times leap verbatim off the pages of Plotinus. In so keynoting his essays of *Firmament*, Eiseley thus continues to locate the evolutionary journey of *homo sapiens* amongst the reaching out of an ecstatic cosmos.

Now in the first essay of his second publication, "How the World Became Natural," Eiseley reaffirms his transcendentalist perspective while again supporting a Thoreauvian agenda to "look through and beyond" nature, which is essentially an onto-semiotic perspective interpretive of the metaphysical significance of natural signs.⁸ He states: "Man has always had two ways of looking at nature.... a belief in the seen and unseen nature. He is both pragmatist and mystic" (Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* 135). Early *homo sapiens* were pragmatists, dauntingly adapting to their changing environmental conditions. "The other aspect of [their] mind, the mystical part seeking answers to final questions, clothed this visible world in a shimmering haze of magic" (Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* 135–36). Even in the *kairos*

8. We do not refer to modern linguistic semiotics and its variants, such as those derived from Ferdinand Saussure's semiology. Rather, Eiseley, via Emerson and Thoreau, sows the seeds of an onto-semiotics or transcendentalist semiotics having its further provenance in Charles Peirce's metaphysical writings on a universe of signs (see Guardiano). For example, in his eight Cambridge Lectures delivered at Harvard in 1898, Peirce develops his tritistic categoriology of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness as component functions of a cosmic "energizing reasonableness" of Thirdness (*The Essential Peirce* 68), the modal category of *in futuro* legisignificant generality, ergo of real continuity, growth, and evolution in the "Logic of Things" (*Reasoning and the Logic of Things* 108). Peirce's onto-semiotics, which broadly applies to the entire range of the heuristic sciences of discovery (the mathematical, philosophical, and special sciences), philosophically consummates F. W. J. Schelling's *Ages of the World* (*Die Weltalter*), which theorized the three metaphysical ages of deep past, present, and deep future in analogy with a trinitarian symbolism.

of Eiseley's mid-twentieth century of scientific inquiry into visible nature, he observes that "when science progresses, it often opens vaster mysteries to our gaze" (*The Firmament of Time* 136). Accordingly, Eiseley declares the philosophical goal for *Firmament*: "I hope to venture some comment upon the world we now call 'natural' [and] to look at this natural world both from the empirical point of view and from one which also takes into account that sense of awe and marvel which is part of man's primitive heritage, and without which man would not be man" (138). The book's accumulative series of essays ring the changes in its headings "How Death Became Natural," "How Life Became Natural," "How Man Became Natural," "How Human is Man?," and the grand finale, "How Natural is 'Natural'?" In crucial answer to this last blockbuster question, Eiseley pointedly uses a line from Emerson's career-capstone essay "Poetry and Imagination" for his chapter's epigraph: "The very design of imagination is to domesticate us in another, a celestial nature" (*The Firmament of Time* 219). And then in his own provocative words, he adds: "In so many worlds, I thought, how natural is 'natural'—and is there anything we can call a natural world at all?" (Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* 221).

We leave to the reader to investigate the full philosophical range of Eiseley's deliverances on the historical and scientific issues across the essays of *The Firmament of Time*. Here we only indicate that their metaphysical trajectory contributes to a venerable bottom line of objective idealism (or ideal realism) from Plotinus, whose "Alexandrine" system accomplished a synthesis of Plato and Aristotle, on through such major thinkers as Goethe, F. W. J. Schelling, Emanuel Swedenborg, and the American tradition of objective idealism, Emerson, Thoreau, and Benjamin and Charles Peirce. As our veritable twentieth-century philosopher in this tradition, Eiseley can be appreciated as adding to the modern discovery of humankind as evolutionary co-participant in the universal vector of metaphysical time—of the splendorous firmament of the deep ages of the past and the deep prospects of the future. "We forget that nature itself is one vast miracle transcending the reality of night and nothingness," he declares (Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* 229). "We forget that each one of us in his personal life repeats that miracle" (*ibid.*).

Eiseley concludes *Firmament* by reverting to a final affirmation of Thoreau: "'With reference to the near past', Thoreau once shrewdly commented, 'we all

occupy the region of common sense, but in the prospect of the future we are, by instinct, transcendentalists” (235). For our twentieth-century transcendentalist, this means: “The imagination of man, in its highest manifestations, stands close to the doorway of the infinite, to the world beyond the nature that we know” (Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* 229). Into the 1960s and 1970s, Loren Eiseley continued to articulate his reflection on the role of humankind in evolutionary time in four more free-wheeling collections of first-tier philosophical essays, *The Unexpected Universe* (1969), *The Invisible Pyramid* (1970), *The Night Country* (1971), and the posthumously released, *The Star Thrower* (1978). As suggested above, the significance of his career writings consists in their carrying forward an Emersonian tradition of transcendentalism into the twentieth century.

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REVIEWS

The California Days of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Brian C. Wilson, University of Massachusetts Press, 2022. 240 pp. \$90 hardcover, \$26.95 paperback.

In the spring of 1871, railroad magnate John Murray Forbes invited Ralph Waldo Emerson to take a transcontinental journey from Massachusetts to California with a group of family and friends, including Emerson's daughter, Edith Emerson Forbes and her husband, William Forbes. As Emerson approached his 68th birthday, the esteemed scholar was tiring and struggling in his ability to deliver a planned course of Harvard lectures. Emerson had always wanted to see more of the country, and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 made western travel more accessible. This California trip would be for leisure, though, not a working trip, and just a few weeks before the planned departure, Emerson accepted the invitation, reporting to friend Thomas Carlyle that Forbes would soon "carry me off to California, the Yosemite, the Mammoth trees, and the Pacific" (5).

Aside from the brief meeting with John Muir in Yosemite, the story of Emerson's 1871 westward trip does not feature largely in most Emerson scholarship, including biographies. There is generally less interest in Emerson's later, less productive years. But it is also the case that Emerson himself did not record details of the trip, and the trip did not result in any new lectures or writings (daughter Edith packed a few prepared manuscripts in her father's trunk for the inevitable situation in which he was asked to speak along the way). It was James Bradley Thayer, a Boston lawyer and member of the Forbes party, who recorded the most thorough account of the trip, which he published as *A Western Journey with Mr. Emerson*, in 1884, two years after Emerson's death. Thayer's account is the main source used by author Brian C. Wilson, who also mined for clues about the trip in the personal papers and letters of Emerson's fellow travelers, in newspaper reports of Emerson's public appearances while on the trip, and in Muir's later recollections of meeting Emerson. The author draws on Emerson's earlier writings to fill out context for his views on travel, nature, customs, and the West, and makes use of guide books and tourist pamphlets from western sites to fill out details of what Emerson must

have seen and experienced.

The relatively short trip took just a month and a half and Wilson's book is organized as a "travelogue," tracing the journey from East to West and back again. The first two chapters cover the railroad trip from Boston to New York and Ontario to see Niagara Falls, on to Chicago and through the midwest, across the desert plains of Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada, and finally arriving in Northern California. The elder Forbes spared no expense in making sure that the party, Emerson in particular, was as comfortable as possible. In Chicago, George Pullman personally saw to the staffing and provisioning of a Pullman Palace car for the esteemed group. Wilson points out that the travel and tourist infrastructure in the trans-Mississippi West still hardly existed in a way that it would even a decade or two later. Even with the Pullman special treatment and fine dining options, the party had to switch rail cars at several stops to connect lines, and faced long delays and sometimes rustic accommodations in smaller towns along the way.

Emerson met with friends and prominent figures along the way, notably seeking out a meeting with Brigham Young in Salt Lake City. Farther west, the group encountered native Americans at several stops, most likely the Shoshones or Paiutes. Trip chronicler Thayer made racist observations on being struck by "the picture and contrast" of "uncultivated humanity" existing alongside a Pullman car carrying Emerson (61-62). The truly striking picture is the short-sightedness of the New Englanders toward these groups being pushed further and further westward by the very technology and forces that brought them together in that location at that moment in time. Throughout, Wilson highlights the group of white travelers' romantic-progressive view of westward expansion. Everywhere they stopped they met and celebrated a surprising number of what Emerson termed "New England's best" shaping and settling the West in what Wilson calls "the Yankee diaspora" (24).

The train finally reached the summit of the Sierra Nevadas and descended down into California on April 21st, just ten days after leaving Boston. The bulk of the book, as the title indicates, traces Emerson's brief stay in the San Francisco Bay Area and surroundings. The group stayed at the luxurious Occidental Hotel, which had every modern amenity available at the time, despite the fact that the city in the early 1870s was, in many ways, still a rugged frontier outpost. The Reverend Horatio Stebbins called upon him to speak to his congre-

gation, formerly led by Emerson devotee Thomas Starr King. On Sunday, April 23rd, Emerson gave his lecture on “Immortality” (later published in his 1875 collection, *Letters and Social Aims*) at the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco to a full crowd, an event covered in the next day’s papers with mixed reviews (77-78).

Word spread that Emerson was in California, and out of “sheer desperation,” a young John Muir wrote to Emerson, asking him to come “worship with Nature in the high temples of the great Sierra crown beyond our holy Yosemite” (131). That a face-to-face meeting between the author of *Nature* and the future great naturalist ever happened seems almost mythical in nature, a generational passing of the torch from the Transcendentalism of Concord and Walden Pond to the preservation of California’s wilderness. But Muir was frustrated that Emerson’s “sadly civilized friends” (141), worried that the older man would catch a cold, declined an invitation for the old man to sleep outside under the redwoods in what Muir hoped would be an “immortal Emerson night” of spiritual communion with nature and the stars. Emerson returned home and Muir continued to write to him, urging him to visit California again: “You cannot be content with last year’s baptism. ‘Twas only a sprinkle, come be immersed...I can’t understand the laws that control you to Concord” (173). Emerson countered by inviting Muir to come east, but the two men never met again.

There can be no real analysis of the trip’s effect on Emerson or on his later intellectual commitments because he left no record of the journey. Thayer’s 1884 account of the trip has its own biases and limitations, and has been little referenced by Emerson scholars. But Thayer and the others who joined Emerson on the trip or met him along the way understood the magnitude of Emerson’s presence in the West, and Wilson shows how they engaged him in conversation and made their own interpretations of the trip through Emersonian ideas. What Wilson offers the Emersonian reader today is a unique story of Emerson in motion, having a particularly American experience in looking westward, a chance to join in on an older Emerson’s movements and conversations in real time.

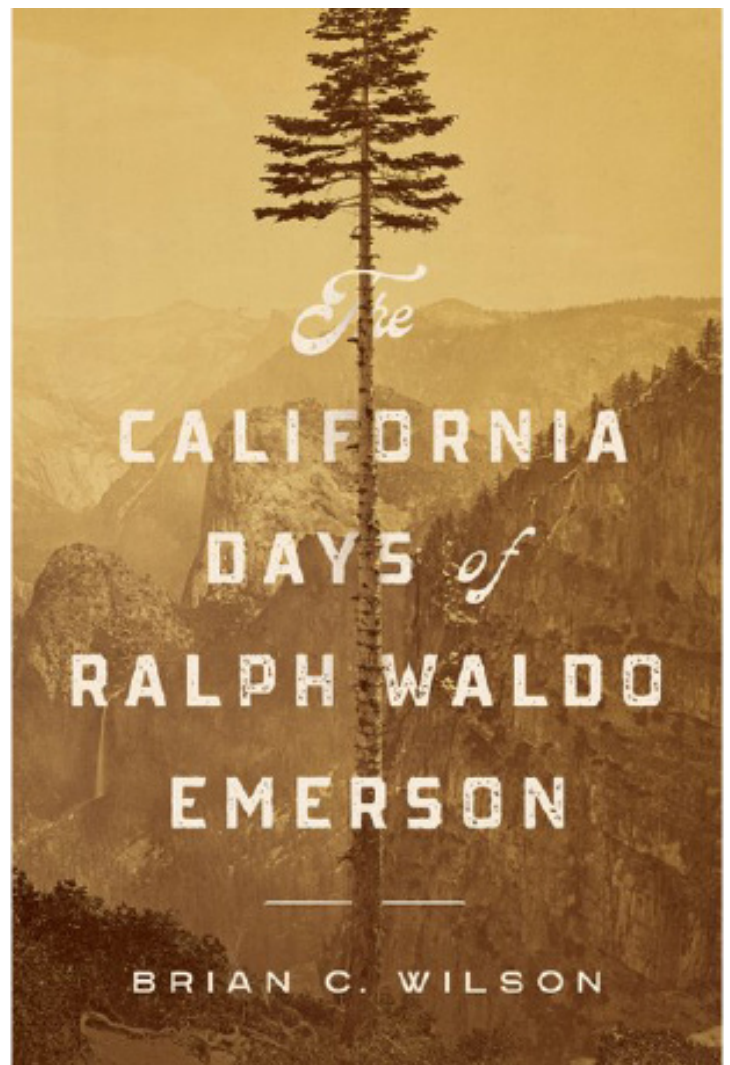
In a rare surviving letter Emerson wrote home to his wife Lidian about the allure of the good life in California:

We live today & every day in the loveliest climate...If we were all young, - as some of us are not, - we might each claim his quarter-section

& plant grapes & oranges & never come back to your east winds & cold summers, - only remembering to send home a few tickets of the Pacific Railroad to one or two or three pale natives of Massachusetts Bay (95).

The journey must have been physically demanding for a man in his late sixties, and Emerson embarked upon it in the first place because his intellectual and speaking powers were waning as well. But, as seen in this letter to Lidian, Wilson invites us to see what the trip meant to Emerson at that particular time in his life: “California allowed Emerson to reconnect with something fundamentally buoyant in his psyche, something more resilient than mere optimism, an element of his character that allowed him to confront with some dignity and aplomb the coming “storm of time” (192).

—Tiffany Wayne,
Independent Scholar



THREE ROADS BACK: HOW EMERSON, THOREAU, AND WILLIAM JAMES RESPONDED TO THE GREATEST LOSSES OF THEIR LIVES.

Robert D. Richardson, Princeton University Press, 2023. 128 pp. \$22.95 hardcover

Robert D. Richardson's scholarship is well-regarded within Emerson studies. His *Mind on Fire* (1995), a seminal account of Emerson's life, minutely traces Emerson's intellectual development; an accomplishment book-ended by Richardson's biographies of Henry David Thoreau and William James. In *Three Roads Back*, Richardson returns to these three subjects, intimately examining a common formative experience in their lives.

Compared with Richardson's monumental biographies, *Three Roads Back* is a small book. Measuring roughly seven and a half inches high, with a width shy of five inches, and just over half an inch thick, it is a slight volume. But the subject is considerable: grief, as experienced by three of nineteenth-century America's most iconic intellectuals.

Three Roads Back views the grief process as a catalyst for Emerson, Thoreau, and James's individual intellectual growth and future careers. In each case, Richardson focuses on a single traumatic loss in early adulthood — the death of Emerson's wife, Ellen; Thoreau's brother dying in his arms; and James's cousin succumbing to tuberculosis. Instead of examining these thinkers' philosophies on death, grief, or the afterlife, this book focuses on grief as a transformative life event and a creative opportunity. What interests Richardson is how Emerson, Thoreau, and James survived despairing loss, and how grief was a creative force that shaped their ideas, and contributed to their later becoming celebrated American thinkers. For Richardson, resilience is the quality that links the three men's formative encounters with death.

Grief is intimately individual, and yet also a universal human experience. Richardson invites his readers to consider Emerson, Thoreau, and James not as extraordinary thinkers, but "as fellow human beings" (xviii). Rather than adopting the detached approach often synonymous with academic rigor, Richardson's methodology is storytelling, a practice he calls "documentary biography," which relies on his subjects' personal experiences, as evidenced in their own words, carefully chosen and interpreted by Richardson. His objective is to help readers personally connect with these individu-

als and their historical experiences. In daring to bring feeling to discipline, Richardson humanizes Emerson, Thoreau, and James, revitalizing these icons as relatable and living people. Indeed, in her foreword, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Megan Marshall shares how she related to Richardson's manuscript through her own personal mourning work. Yet, in Richardson's appeal to Emersonian self-reliance and a Jamesian interest in "human experience" (xvii), his research and arguments retain their scholarly integrity and keen insight. Accessible, affecting, and astute, this is a book to be enjoyed by the lay-reader, arm-chair historian, and professional scholar alike.

"Part One" focuses on Emerson's grief following the death of his nineteen-year-old wife Ellen in 1831, with a cursory mention of his brother Edward and Charles' subsequent deaths, in 1834 and 1836 respectively. *Three Roads Back* revisits, in shorted form, the work Richardson did in *Mind on Fire*, but with a changed interest. This not only traces Emerson's intellectual evolution, but demonstrates the honing of his personal resiliency. Succinct, and less bogged down in Emerson's readings and intellectual influences, Richardson herein focuses more closely and immediately on Emerson's grief journey.

In Richardson's telling, Emerson's path to resiliency is a literal grief journey that takes him to Europe and then back home again. With a confrontation of his Unitarian religion, Emerson's grief is examined by Richardson as a catalyst for Emerson's critical thought, leading to him defining faith as a communal relationship and a living revelation. In opening his wife's coffin months after her death, Emerson directly encountered Ellen's corporeal decay and nature's decomposition. Yearning for re-connection, he began to realign his thoughts on the relationship between the physical and spiritual matters, focusing on the active and present state of nature. Following his resignation as the Second Church of Boston's minister, Emerson embarked on a European tour. In particular, his visit to the Jardin des Plantes and its natural history galleries is depicted as the turning point in Emerson's healing, finding in the classified ordering of natural specimens "the principle of life" (14). Emerson's reading of Carlyle in 1832 and his meeting with the author abroad, as well as his tour of Wordsworth's Lake District, further impacted Emerson's literary inclinations.

Richardson finds that Emerson reconnected

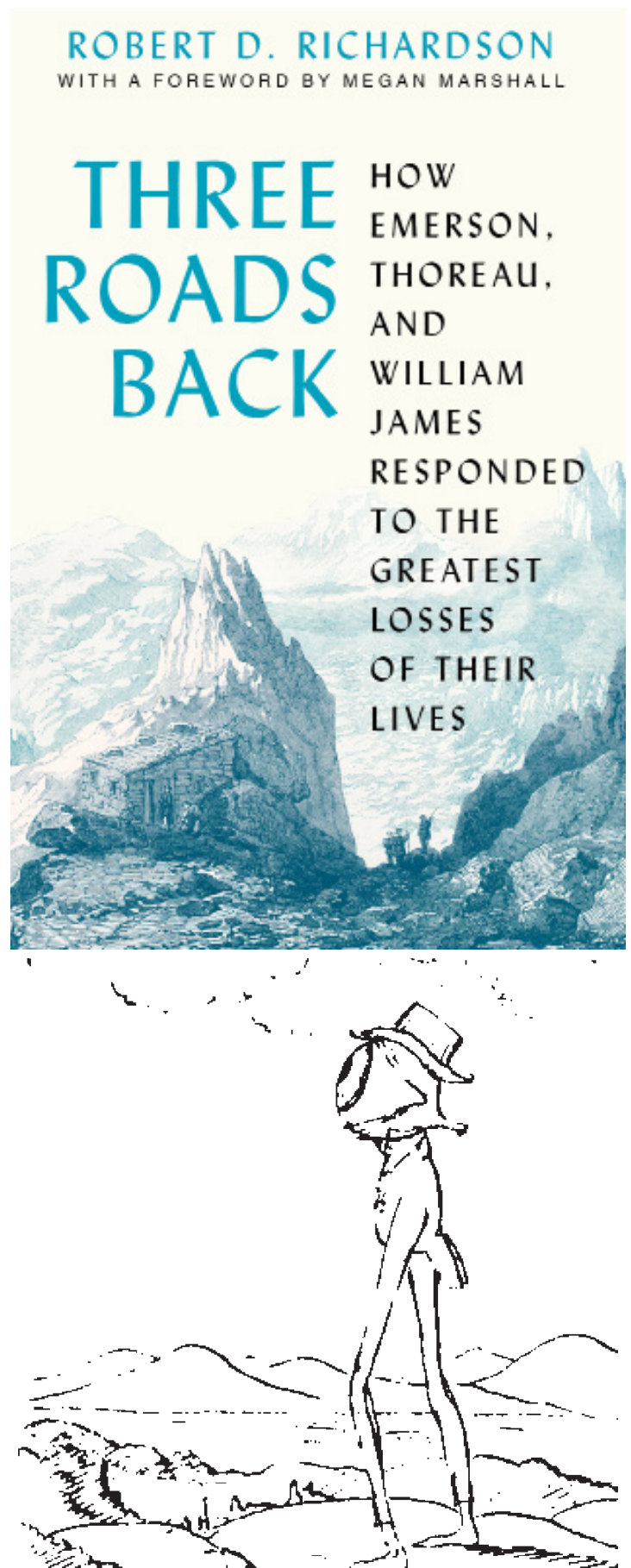
to himself, but also returned to Boston changed by his grief. As he turned further away from conventional religious beliefs in the resurrection, and toward a regenerative Nature-based faith, the shift grief wrought in Emerson's sense of the world culminated in his writing and publishing *Nature* (1836).

Emerson's grief story continues within Richardson's telling of Thoreau's double loss in the January 1842 deaths of his own brother John and the Emersons' five-year-old son, Waldo. In this event, Richardson finds that Emerson most immediately turned his grief "outward" (34) and sought distraction from a loss he was not yet ready to encounter fully, while Thoreau withdrew. Richardson's attention to Thoreau's grief is updated and expanded from the account in his biography, contributing new analysis. He demonstrates Thoreau's grief recovery through his intellectual engagement with his journal, his reading, and the world around him, as contrasting with Emerson's prolonged "breaks" (61) with his former life and reconstitution of self. Richardson observes, "It is as though Thoreau was reaching back to pick up a dropped link" (54) and rebounded to embrace death as integral to Nature's vital healthfulness. He also finds that Thoreau's grief recovery significantly defined his friendship with Emerson, who is adopted as Thoreau's "real brother" (51).

Richardson draws on the interconnected lives of his subjects, noting that William James was born on the same day that John Thoreau died, and the newborn was soon after visited by Emerson, a grieving father. "Part Three" examines William James psychological and emotional distress surrounding the death of his cousin Minny, and James' epiphany realizing free will's power to overcome adversity, which underlay his resilience philosophies.

Among his three subjects, it is Emerson, Richardson concludes, who "had the most profound and nuanced understanding of ... resilience," which Emerson referred to as "compensation." (96). Resilience, Richardson asserts, is not a unique quality characterized by an Emerson, Thoreau, or William James; it is a natural resource accessible to us all.

— Kristi Lynn Martin, PhD
Independent Scholar



As an American thinker, Bronson Alcott is perhaps the best exemplification of Emerson's famous adage "[t]o be great is to be misunderstood." Like the paradoxical statement, Alcott was underestimated throughout his life all the while embodying causes pertinent to the modern progressive. In 1843—three years prior to Thoreau—Alcott refused to pay his poll tax for two years and spent two hours in jail due to John Tyler's plan to make Texas a slave territory (Dahlstrand 194). The same defiance that made Thoreau famous is little known in the annals of American history. The failure of Fruitlands, one of America's first veganic communities, in 1843 was an honest attempt to revive Eden and redeem history of its "slaughter bench" in promulgating natural rights to all sentient beings.

Indeed, Alcott's most lasting resonance comes as an educator in spite of the continual failure of his schools; however, the effects of his legacy were greatly posthumous and oftentimes overlooked by academia. According to biographer Dorothy McKuskey, "Bronson Alcott was the man who swept out of the classroom the Calvinistic ideas of the nature of children with the consequent repression and harsh discipline...He left behind no dogma, no system. He left only the observations of a philosopher who could penetrate better than most to the spirit of childhood" (169-170). Alcott's consecration of the child is not unique to the American Renaissance and its response to Calvinism's "young viper" child; rather, it is the synthesis of pedagogical influences ranging from Plato's innatism to Rousseau's *Emile*, and ultimately Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, which culminates in social activism, most notably his acceptance of Susan Robinson, a black student, and the criticism that followed. In this light, Alcott's role at the nexus of debates about progressive education anticipates the conflicts that still resonate today about how questions of justice should interact with education.

Bronson Alcott was born into a rural family in Wolcott, Connecticut in 1799. In spite of little formal education, as an intellect and social reformer in the 1830s, Alcott anticipated both educational reform and the Civil Rights Movement by upholding Romantic ideals in action unlike his peers who often espoused progressive causes in their words but not their deeds. Emerson followed an established lecture circuit but did not found a

school of his own; Thoreau put his principles into action for personal civil disobedience but did not take the leap of bringing questions of justice into an educational enterprise. As a young man, Alcott was raised to become an Episopcial minister but separated himself from the faith and then took to the South to peddle wares, eventually landing a school teaching position in Cheshire, Connecticut in 1823 (Dahlstrand 50). He attempted to establish a school in Bristol in 1827 but "the backlash to progressivism was even swifter and more decisive...it was time to move to Boston" (Matteson 50). In 1827, he created the Salem Infant School; once it closed, he established a school for boys. After teaching stints in Germantown and Philadelphia, Alcott returned to Boston to open the Boston Temple School in 1834 with the help of Elizabeth Peabody. The institution was "an attempt to consolidate the theories of Transcendentalism in a functioning educational system" (Sommer 200). Alcott moved away from physical discipline and rote learning and engaged the students in active learning, virtue ethics, Socratic dialogues and even gymnastics in the frame of the New England Romantic ethos.

In the Romantic tradition, Alcott believed in innatism: the divine spirit resided in the child and the educational process should be a means to finding that divinity through the Socratic method. Once the child understood that divinity, the home would be illuminated by their virtue. Putting those ideals in action, he opened his Temple School with thirty pupils with the population peaking at forty but it fell to ten in 1837 (Sanborn 227). Alcott's publication of his methodology regarding biblical exegesis in the classroom "Conversations with Children on the Gospels" was too forthright, too liberal a stretch of Christianity, for the genteel consumer, especially when passages about procreation were exposed. The work, based on Alcott's curriculum, was scandalous and the reaction, in part, led to the cessation of the Temple School in June 1838: "At the urging of a few loyal constituents, he tried teaching one more time, opening a school for the poor in his own parlor at 6 Beach Street, the less fashionable home to which the family had recently moved" (Matteson 112). The parlor school offshoot eventually closed when, according to biographer Franklin Sanborn, "The immediate occasion of closing it then was the unwillingness of Mr. Alcott's patrons to

have their children educated in the same room as a colored child" (227). Despite the liberal sentiments in the Boston expanse, the intellectual elite could not accept this cultural difference in the classroom. Alcott, however, was unfazed. Only Alcott's children, the child of politician William Russell and the African American Susan Robinson stayed, proving a contradiction in an apparent shift in American ethics from the confines of Calvinism and the so-called evolutionary Enlightenment along with Alcott's place in America as a true reformer.

As a testament to his ideals, Alcott admitted the 13-year-old African American girl with certitude: "History has little to say about the parents of Susan Robinson—little more than that, in the first half of 1839, they asked to enroll their daughter in Alcott's school and they were black. Most teachers of Alcott's time would have dismissed the Robinsons out of hand. Alcott welcomed Susan" (Matteson 113). Alcott was forced into a disjunctive position: retain Susan and lose his school or reject her and lose his rectitude. He chose the former and in doing so "Alcott had at last committed professional suicide. However, he at least had the satisfaction of knowing that the end had come, not under a cloud of disgrace, but in a small but significant blaze of courage" (Matteson 113). Alcott's overlooked ostracism for Susan Robinson places him among the early American paragons of civil virtue with a behavior that confirms Emerson's quote "Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying." Despite losing his school, the Robinson conflict was a victory for Alcott's educational pedagogy and early Transcendental thinking. As was the case for Pythagoras, Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Copernicus, Galileo and Alcott, society judged the righteous unreasonably. He was a defender of childhood's divinity, pragmatically confirming his success as an educator and authenticating the trajectory of his philosophical influences on modern education.

Alcott was a Platonist in all facets of life and the great delineator of Platonic idealism to the Transcendental circle. Daughter Louisa May even referenced her father as Plato in her journals (Matteson 278) and Alcott kept a bust of Plato in his classroom. Emerson said, "I shall write on his tomb there lies a reader of Plato" (Warren 6). The fervent idealism of the early 19th century which Alcott inherited was Platonism turned into Neoplatonism then revived by Enlightenment thinkers such as Berkeley and Kant. The direct line of idealism to the American Transcendentalists was Samuel Taylor

Coleridge. Alcott said Coleridge formed "the union of the Christian the Platonic" (Warren 6). Coleridge scripted Kant's pure reason, the basis of interpreting phenomena, into intuition, making Kant marketable to popular romantic artists like Emerson who then saw reason unlike the Enlightenment but as a super faculty, vision. In fact, Emerson, who once visited with Coleridge, never liked the word Transcendentalism and preferred the term idealism, connoting philosophy over spirituality: "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842" (Emerson 92). By viewing the American Renaissance from the more philosophical term idealism, Alcott's contribution to the movement, especially Emerson, increases due to his vast knowledge and application of Platonic thought in the context of idealism and virtue. Emerson wrote in his Journal that the Platonic world I might have learned to treat as a cloud land had I not known Alcott, who is a native of that country, yet I will say that he makes it as solid as Massachusetts to me" (Warren 9). Alcott's ability to bring these lofty ideals into focus makes tangible the abstract and can be best viewed educationally.

The foremost disciple of Socrates, Plato (428/427 BC-348/347 BC) crafted an epistemology built upon idealism and innatism; the basis of this system is best represented in the two contrasting worlds expressed in "The Allegory of the Cave" from book five of *The Republic*. The world of becoming (the cave) is the world of senses, illusory and unreliable, oftentimes misinterpreted as reality because it is our physical world. The world of being (the outside world), on the other hand, is the true world, the realm of ideas where Platonic forms reside, the highest of all forms being the form of the good. It is the world of being where reality lies in thought; and, after extensive training, once the philosopher (he who recognizes the sun) is able to obtain the form of the good (as represented by the sun), all other forms are obtainable. The limitations of the natural world and empirical thought led Plato to recognize that all forms are located innately. For Plato, the soul descends from the world of being, preprogrammed, so that all knowledge is innate, preceding existence, and therefore recollected as we learn. According to Franco Cambi in his *History of Pedagogy*:

Human formation is to Socrates maieutics (operation from inside to outside) and a dialogue which is done by a master (so be it Socrates or an inside daimon), which awakens, raises doubts,

requires research, drives, problematizes etc. by dialogue, which opens to dialectics (to unification through opposition, constituting an unity which tends to become richer more and more)... Thus, it is done the “bringing out” of the personality of each individual who has as objective the “know thyself” and its realization according to the principle of freedom (Batista 153).

Alcott’s methodology in the classroom focused on a similar innatism, maintaining a trace of residual spirituality from American Calvinism yet liberalizing it. Alcott, who like Plato believed in preexistence, utilized the dialogical Socratic method to obtain the child’s inner spirituality, the reality akin to Plato’s world of being with a tinge of Wordsworth, casting a divine and virtuously quality on the child. To Alcott, “The conversation of Socrates was intended, not to teach wisdom, but to raise men out of this false persuasion of wisdom, which he believed to be the natural mind, into that mental condition which he called philosophy” (Alcott 234). His assistant Elizabeth Peabody, the mother of the American Kindergarten, readily noticed “Mr. Alcott’s sole purpose in the mental way during the first two months seemed to be to bring out clearly in the children’s consciousness the perception of their spiritual existence, as being the most real and permanent” (Roberts 503). With Alcott as philosopher teacher, replacing the minister, his congregation of children could visualize a spiritual idealism with the child as central to the doctrine and therefore the ultimate reformers in America.

A more immediate influence on the work of Bronson Alcott was Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who wrote as an Enlightenment thinker with ideals that foreshadowed the emergent American Romantic movement. Oddly enough, Alcott claims to have never read Rousseau despite living a lifestyle that seems to imitate his work. Kristen Proehl writes, “Bronson claimed to have never read the work of French Romanticist Jean Jacques Rousseau...but his library included copies of *Confessions* and *Emilius and Sophia*” (42-43). If Alcott did not directly read Rousseau, it is apparent that the similarities between the two thinkers derive from Alcott’s interest in the Swiss educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi who was deeply inspired by Rousseau’s innatism and the inherent goodness of children. Additionally, Alcott’s main supporter Emerson read Rousseau’s *Emile* in 1828 (Richardson 86) and Rousseauian themes on the child, nature, religion and egalitarianism

would have been popular topics in the Concord intellectual aether. The similarities between Rousseau and Alcott are so clear that it is easy to speculate why Alcott might deny reading such a foundational figure in early American thought. Due to the effects of Rousseau on the Romantic movement, and the breadth of Alcott’s philosophical knowledge, if Alcott did not read Rousseau, he would have been aware of the thematic content of his work.

Alcott’s resistance to Calvinism and its effects in the classroom, and in culture, bears resemblance to Rousseau’s reaction to his Calvinistic upbringing. Rousseau was born in Huguenot Geneva in 1712 and raised within the middle-class environs of strict Calvinism and abundant mercantilism. In 1728, he converted to Catholicism but reverted back to Calvinism to regain his hereditary status as a citizen of Geneva. Perhaps as a reaction to the religious turmoil in his early life, Rousseau developed a civil religion that intertwines religious purpose with the advancement of the state, warranting pluralism and religious toleration (Bertram). To understand Rousseau’s effect on the American Renaissance, one must understand Rousseau’s vision of man in a state of nature: a time prior to the existence of society. Rousseau reacts to the Hobessian view that in the state of nature life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” and Calvinism’s total depravity by seeing primitive man as inherently good with society to blame for his corruption. Evil is then contingent upon society. Rousseau contrasts the self in nature (*amour de soi*) with the self in society (*amour propre*): “[t]he self in the state of nature is self-sufficient, having needs in proportion to its abilities to satisfy them, the desires and needs of the social self are developed without restraint in response to social pressure” (Chazan 342). Once man claims ownership of property, civil society subsequently develops and so does the secular fall of man with crimes, wars and murders (Rousseau 63). *Amour propre* is then the societal man in his degenerate state: “Man in civil society is unfree since he is at the mercy of his own passions which beckon him to procure a never-ending list of items--property, fame, honor and superiority--that can never be properly satisfied” (Chazan 342). For Romantic writers like Alcott, Rousseau in action manifests Utopian styled endeavors as an attempt to reestablish man in a state of nature—the restorative third tier in the synthesis of nature’s perfection and the declinatory effects of society. Man’s perfectionism is no longer dependent upon the grace of god, or bourgeois

society, but rather regression—a return to primitivism and the childlike simplicities of youth. The sanctity of the child then emerges in the Romantic movement as a stock literary character and an emblem of epistemological advancement.

The inaugural Romantic child, emblematic of child-centered education, is Rousseau's *Emile* from his 1762 treatise *Emile, or On Education*. Rousseau opens the piece which is one part philosophical treatise and the other bildungsroman with the lines "GOD makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil. He forces one soil to yield the products of another, one tree to bear another's fruit" (5). The thought experiment features the "imaginary pupil" named Emile who is empirically educated in five books, each representing a different stage of development, by a tutor who personifies Rousseau's ideals and aids his student through a benevolent cuticular manipulation so that Emile can maintain innocence in a corrupt society. Rousseau states, "Men are devoured by our towns. In a few generations the race dies out or becomes degenerate... Send your children to renew themselves ... send them to regain in the open fields the strength lost in the foul air of our crowded cities" (26). Rousseau's instruction is not ethereal Romanticism but is rather terse and practical: the child's education in infancy (0-5 years) is sensory and Spartan in an attempt to make the child self-reliant. For Rousseau, "A feeble body makes a feeble mind... I do not know what the doctors cure us of, but I know this: they infect us with very deadly diseases, cowardice, timidity, credulity, the fear of death" (26). Here, he condemns the societal institution of medicine and its constructive diagnoses that weaken man; instead, Rousseau advocates for an acclimation to nature's hardships, active play, impulsivity and the freedom to face consequence. With maturity, Emile's natural education broadens to pragmatically incorporate themes like emotive morality, rational judgment and aesthetics. The educational goal for the adult Emile is virtue and self-trust as a rebuttal to civilization's "amour propre." Rousseau succinctly states the moral child's telos in a timeless adage: "The only moral lesson which is suited for a child—the most important lesson for every time of life—is this: 'Never hurt anybody'" (69).

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), the Swiss pedagogue, took Rousseau's instruction to heart and was Alcott's most immediate educational forefather. Both Pestalozzi and Rousseau shared a similar view

of nature highly marketable to educators like Alcott: "Pestalozzi, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, thought that society was corrupt, and that it should be rectified. The principal means for the improvement of society was, for both Rousseau and Pestalozzi, an education according to Nature" (Takaya 80). Pestalozzi recognized that all classes deserved an education, and all children possessed an innate wisdom: "Pestalozzi believed in the innate intelligence of human beings. He contended that the best education sought to bring these latent powers to the surface, instead of cramming information into the student" (Matteson 42). Pestalozzi's empirical pedagogy emphasized emotional security in the classroom and addressed "[t]he balanced development of 'head, heart and hand,' this is intellect/intelligent, morality (including religion) and body (health and useful skills)" (Takaya 83). He advocated for active learning and abolished physical punishment for misbehavior. Alcott read Pestalozzi in translation: "Lacking the expertise in languages that would have made Pestalozzi's original work available to him, Alcott made extensive use of a series of English pamphlets based on Pestalozzi's doctrines, titled *Hints to Parents*" (Matteson 43). He also corresponded with the English educator James Pierrpont Greaves who worked directly with Pestalozzi and approved of Alcott's methodology: "I regard this expression of confidence of in my purposes and theories, from an associate and confidant of Pestalozzi, as a fact of more importance than any which has transpired since the opening of my career, as an educator" (Carlson 113). Alcott's educational practices, starting in Connecticut, mimicked those of Pestalozzi's and William Russell published two essays by Alcott: one on the Cheshire School and another on Pestalozzian education (Matteson 54). The celebration of such progressive methods so familiar to modern education in actuality, rather than print, would soon prove fatal to his educational career.

Alcott's pedagogy challenged not only traditional educational methods, but religious convention as well. He published "Conversations with Children on the Gospels" in 1836, Transcendentalism's annus mirabilis, exposing his Temple School classroom to the public. The text is structured like a Socratic dialogue and includes 22 classroom conversations—recorded by Elizabeth and Sophia Peabody—about The New Testament: "Convinced that children were more God-like than adults and every bit as able to reason and comprehend as deeply as adults, Alcott used the Socratic Method to encourage

his students to explore the full meaning of the life of Christ, however iconoclastic their conclusions might be judged by society” (Carlson 452). In “Conversation 1,” Alcott addresses his class with Socratic openness and ignorance:

We are, all of us, going to study the life of Jesus Christ. As often as it is studied, it is better understood, and suggests new thoughts. I do not know what I am going to say, for I shall have new thoughts that I never had before. Still less do you all know what you are going to say; for you have not thought of the subject as I have. But if we all think, and all say what we think, not repeating the thoughts and words of others, we shall teach each other. (Alcott 2)

Humanizing Christ and making the child central to biblical exegesis was rebellious enough; however, when the topic of sex and birthing was revealed, reviewers and the public recoiled, destroying Temple School enrollment. Alcott clearly had to anticipate the public backlash but his imperative fidelity to the conviction that children were able to “reason and comprehend as deeply as adults” (Carlson 452) is confirmed in practice and publication without fear of consequence like his hero Socrates. His last attempt at schooling came when he opened a parlor school at his home on Beach Street. It was there he committed his greatest act of educational reform and abolition.

Although Alcott recovered from the drop in enrollment in his school, his commitment to integration would prove the last straw, even in the progressive circles of Concord. His success as an educator had outlived the controversy of “Conversations” until he readily admitted the black student Susan Robinson. Controversy immediately ensued again and Alcott succinctly responded to the disjunctive threat: “My patrons, through Dr. John Flint, urge dismissal of the Robinson Child. I decline” (Matteson 113). Alcott’s unwavering support for Susan, along with a deontological self-trust, elevates his legacy to a representative man of the Transcendental movement—a true “American Scholar” who values nature and scholarship but above all else action. By upholding the civil rights of the child, “He is the one who raises from private considerations and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts” (Emerson 63). Through Alcott’s delineation of the past, the Platonic “dry bones of the past” are revived to show how the romantic vision of innatism can be extended to purify

the child’s vision as uncorrupted, seraphic and valuable to reform man. Such a vision demystifies the corruptive effects that society and religion have projected upon the child allowing for an educational pedagogy that idealizes the natural world and negates the cruel effects of amour propre and therefore constructive prejudices. To alienate any child from education would be an act of sedition to nature’s laws and a concession to a degenerative state of being. If Alcott were to concede to the demands of his patrons to save his career, he would defy his own educational intent. In an 1839 journal entry he states, “Organizations must be transcripts of the family and the teacher must feel himself a parent thereof (Carlson 196). In “Observations on the Principles of Education of Infant Instruction,” he shows how such educational sentiments begin at the onset of learner’s life:

All things the teacher should strive to be, what to the apprehension of the children, they ought to become. By the kindness of his manner; his love of truth and right above all things; by his obedience to the rules of action which he presents; by appeals to the dictates of conscience, principle, and revelation; by patient, constant forbearance; by the desire in all things to improve and bless; by illustrations of virtue, in stories, in pictures, in descriptions; by remarks on infant character, motives, habits, the teacher will endeavor to reach their minds, impress duty on their conscience, and lead them to its practice (21).

Alcott, by action, is the Platonic fulfillment of his own definition, the paradigmatic teacher---“the father of man”--- who must adopt a realist attitude toward “the dictates of conscience” so that his progeny may also “love the truth,” especially when his contemporaries cannot see it.

Alcott’s legacy in American history is oftentimes overlooked, overshadowed by his daughter’s fame or even ridiculed due to his failures. While it is easy to deride him for believing he could sustain *The Fruitlands*, it is ennobling to envision him armed and ready to take on a pro-slavery mob. But Alcott, typically a pacifist, achieved his greatness by contributing more to the educational Geist of progressivism: he liberated the classroom from rote memory, physical punishment and prejudice. His hallowed child is not unlike those celebrated in literary works by Wordsworth or Emerson, just more realistic. Alcott’s faith that diverse children could be in the same classroom studying sophisticated content

challenged educators and parents in his time and calls upon us today to honor the ability of all children to learn together— regardless of race, creed and class.

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Many Thanks and a Fond Farewell!

Emerson Society Papers has had six editors over the years, but there has only been one production designer: Peggy Isaacson. Since *ESP*'s first issue, in 1990, Peggy has over seen the layouts, caught the errant typos, and offered suggestions and guidance. The Emerson Society acknowledged Peggy with a Distinguished Service Award on July 28, 2018, and as Wes Mott once pointed out, Peggy has served “essentially as a bonus editor” and has saved “us all from countless oversights and errors” (*ESP*, Spring 2019). After 33 years, Peggy is stepping away. We offer her our most heartfelt thanks and best well-wishes for the future.

THE JOEL MYERSON ANNUAL LECTURE SERIES



From Left to Right: Phyllis Cole, Daniel Shealy, Greta Little, Megan Marshall, Michael Weisenburg, Sandy Petrulionis, Heather Parkin, & Noelle Baker.

After Joel Myerson's death in 2021, the William Munroe Special Collections at the Concord Free Public Library, along with representatives from the Louisa May Alcott Society, Margaret Fuller Society, The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society, The Thoreau Society, and The Association for Documentary Editing, launched the Joel Myerson Annual Lecture Series. Representatives from each society gave brief introductory remarks, Megan Marshall gave the inaugural lecture on “After Lives: Bringing Una Hawthorne Home”.

The Joel Myerson Annual Lecture Series will engage the public in the study of American literature and literary history, focusing on writers associated with Concord, Massachusetts, and American Transcendentalism, with an interdisciplinary outlook. The series will highlight the work and ideas of emergent scholarship, drawing on the values Myerson personified as a generous mentor, teacher, and public speaker and amplifying the diversity of representation that Joel Myerson exemplified in his textual scholarship and editorial initiatives. The series will promote lifelong learning and the recovery of primary source materials that teach us about the future as well as the past—beginning in Concord and radiating outward to American literature and culture as a means to engage with current events, conservation, and reform. The series is generously sponsored by the Concord Free Public Library Corporation.

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Many thanks to Emily Clark for redesigning the Emerson Society Website and to Michael Weisenburg for more than a decade of service as web editor.

We invite you to check out the site and we welcome feedback. What would you like to see?

The
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A handwritten signature of Ralph Waldo Emerson, written in a cursive script.

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