



R.W.C.

Volume 36, Number 1

Spring 2025

EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

Escape into Community: Observation and the Enigma of Individuality in Emerson's "Circles" and "Self-Reliance" Joshua Fagan

Viewing individuality in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a stable and fixed force obscures the sheer variety of manifestations it takes, fitting his remark that "foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" ("Self-Reliance" 152).¹ Compared to the conforming, somnolent crowd that Emerson disdains, the solitude provided by individuality can liberate. The individual stands apart from rigid adherence to dogma, from unthinking habit, from the worship of material luxury and the veneration of a glorious, mythologized past. Repeatedly, Emerson condemns the rottenness of baroque creeds and mechanistic conventions because of how they uproot the individual, creating isolating barriers between the individual and direct experience. I thus do not mean to imply that Emerson is altogether ambivalent about individuality, nor do I wish to imply that there are distinct, irreconcilable differences in Emerson's conceptions of the individual throughout his work. Nonetheless, there are two significant threads in Emerson's view of how the individual relates to broader conceptions of community and connection. There is the conception of the individual as resolute and solid, escaping the reductive moralism and prefabricated answers of society by wandering alone and relying on individual observation. Then there is the conception of the individual as protean and amorphous, less of a conqueror than a liquid, constantly transforming based on new environmental conditions. The former view, exemplified in "Self-Reliance," presents the individual as liberated and powerful, creating a distinction between the individual and a broader sense of community. The latter view presents the complete merger of the individual into community: apparent divisions between the self and others are fallacious and reductive. I argue

that only the latter view, best represented in "Circles," fully allows for the metaphysical revitalization of experience that Emerson prizes.

These two views imply differing perspectives regarding the relation between individual and community, but they are not necessarily in opposition. I analyze the conception of community expounded in "Circles," wherein astute observation reveals the inevitable flux of individual identity but comprehends a oneness in all beings through their experience of this flux. Building off this analysis, I examine the conception of the individual in "Self-Reliance." Emerson's emphatic praise of the individual overwhelms "Self-Reliance" and contributes to the understanding of it in the popular consciousness as a simplistic paean to rejecting conformism. Yet viewing it in the context of "Circles" exposes how Emerson tempers his praise of specific heroic individuals by emphasizing that even these individuals exist within a larger network of constant transformation and that the compulsion to act outside of artifice or conventionality exists everywhere, from august scholar-poets to simple roses in a field.

I draw from the scholarship of Kenneth S. Sacks and Stanley Cavell in their emphases on Emerson balancing the impulse toward rebellion and iconoclasm with a focus on community and inter-relationality, yet I also explore how the tension between these two impulses suffuses "Self-Reliance" and "Circles."² Individuals suffer from meekly acquiescing to insular notions of community that require honoring a specific custom or sanctified image of the past, yet Emerson views even the most self-possessed individuals as contained within the prism of history. Eduardo Cadava argues that if "history

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EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

The newsletter of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society
Published at The University of South Carolina

www.emersonsociety.org

Editors: Kathleen Crosby & Mark Gallagher

Book Review Editor: Todd Richardson

Design and Production: Michael C. Weisenburg

Emerson Society Papers is published twice a year. Subscriptions, which include membership in the Society, are \$40 a year. You may subscribe using PayPal by visiting us at emersonsociety.org/membership. Send checks for membership (calendar year) and back issues (\$5 each) to Peter Balaam, Carleton College, 1 N. College St., Northfield, MN 55057

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PROSPECTS



RWES panels for ALA 2025

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will sponsor a panel at the 36th Annual Conference on American Literature, to be held May 21-24, 2025, at The Westin Copley Place in Boston, Massachusetts.

More details about the ALA may be found at:
<https://americanliteratureassociation.org>

Emerson's Like-Minded Transcendentalists
Organized by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society

"Charles Gordon Ames and Emerson," Susan Dunston, New Mexico Tech

Charles Gordon Ames (1828-1912) never met Emerson and only once saw him speak, but he and Emerson knew of each other and even had a bit of correspondence, and Ames was deeply inspired by Emerson's ideas and example. In her epilogue to Ames's autobiography, Ames's daughter Alice Ames Winter quoted peace activist Edwin Mead's words: "Dr. Ames was the last figure of the great Unitarian group ... There was no other quite so Emersonian. A hundred of his sermons were almost Emerson essays. He had Emerson's firm and quiet faith, his penetration and poetry of nature, his wit and sententiousness, his gift for homely illustration, his buoyant optimism and his democracy" (221). She also recalled from her childhood the "many wonderful mornings where there were breakfast picnics on the meadow, caught high up on peaks overlooking the sea, where the broiling of steak on the live coals alternated with the reading of Emerson" (187).

Ordained a minister in 1849, Ames left New England to form a Free-Will Baptist congregation in the Minnesota territory in 1852, but there he underwent a spiritual, political, and moral awakening via exposure to Emerson and other Transcendentalists (an exposure

prompted and enlarged by his wife Sarah's reading of Transcendentalist writers). Like Emerson, he left his Minnesota congregation over a difference about a religious ceremony, in Ames's case baptism. Like Emerson, he turned to nature as a standard and guide instead of civil or ecclesiastical law. He became a Unitarian minister, an abolitionist, and supporter of women's rights.

Ames knew Emerson's work well and delivered a cogent memorial address three days after Emerson died, astutely summing up Emerson's theology: "Revelation is continuous, Bibles are always growing ... All is miracle ... Nature is sacred ... Truth springs out of the earth ... now and here" (*Memorial* 9). Ames endeared himself to me with his effusive justification of teaching Emerson: "To make Emerson better understood is to make everything better understood" (*Memorial* 3). This paper makes the case that Ames exemplifies the man contemporaries who extended Emerson's influence on American life and values.

"Emerson and Seeding Corpses in Nineteenth-Century American Literature," Jessica Elkaim, University of Toronto

As a Transcendentalist, Emerson had a habit of opening caskets: his wife's in 1832, and his son's in 1852. Emerson biographer, Robert D. Richardson, provocatively claimed in 1995 that "virtually all of Emerson's creative life was lived in the twenty-five years between those glimpses" of his dead's material remains. Yet hardly any research since has asked about the integral role of the corpse in the direction of creative and intellectual life in nineteenth-century America. Just a few short years after looking into Ellen's tomb, Emerson writes his foundational transcendentalist essay, *Nature* (1836), in which, paraphrasing Paul's metaphor for the resurrection, he refers to the corpse as a seed—a site of growth, renewal, and transformation. If the corpse is at the root of Emerson's break with his ministry and his cultivation of an "original relation to the universe," what radical ideas did the corpse sprout in the works of writers within the sphere of Emerson's influence, such as Thoreau, Whitman, and Dickinson? If re-reading Emerson through the lens of his desires to be with the corpse gives us glimpses into his materialism, how might tending to the corpses buried in the pages of nineteenth-century American literature uncover other important investments in materialism, revealing a rich corporeal imagination at the heart of Transcendentalism?

“A Good Symbol is the Best Argument’: Emerson, Lincoln, and the Aesthetics of Democracy,” Stephen Snyder, South Dakota State University

In the essay “Eloquence,” Emerson remarks, “The orator must be, to a certain extent, a poet. We are such imaginative creatures that nothing so works as the human mind, barbarous or civil, as a trope. Condense some daily experience into a glowing symbol, and an audience is electrified” (*CW* VII: 45). Emerson posits that for an audience to be fully transformed by a speech, they need a symbol. According to the influential research of Gary Wills, President Abraham Lincoln sought the kind of “trope” Emerson described when he delivered his Gettysburg Address. Lincoln needed a new symbol for America’s founding, and he found it in the Declaration of Independence. Unlike the Constitution’s ugly reminder of our precarious union formulated around slavery, the Declaration provided a simple mantra that all men are created equal with certain inalienable rights. Despite its brevity, Lincoln’s speech would become one of the most memorable moments of eloquence and rhetoric—the kind of symbol Emerson argues for.

While scholars such as Gary Wills and Stephen Cushman offer strong thematic and historical overlaps between Lincoln and Emerson in broad strokes, few have explored in much depth the paramount symbolism in both men’s aesthetic theory of politics (in what I will call “the aesthetics of politics,” in similar conception as Jacques Rancière). Instead of trying to formulate simple causality between reading Emerson and Lincoln’s politics, we might instead consider how Lincoln’s political work and the aesthetic theory of Emerson converge and reinforce each other. Or, in Rancière’s terms, we can trace how the symbolic “make sensible” a reimagined America in both. In short, I will argue that the aesthetic theory of Emerson in essays such as “Eloquence,” “The Poet,” and “Poetry and Imagination” provides a rich foundation to understand the goal of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and, even more importantly, helps foster the emancipatory possibilities of an aesthetic politics in Antebellum America.

“Emerson, The Free Religious Association, and Postbellum Religious Reform,” Todd H. Richardson, University of Texas, Permian Basin

The decades since the publication of Len Gougeon’s *Virtue’s Hero* has seen a great resurgence of interest in Emerson’s engagement with social reform – not only abolition but woman suffrage, labor reform, and temperance, among others. The result of this ascending image of Emerson as social reformer has been a concomitant dismantling of the bland marble-bust image of Emerson as a bland exponent of bland middle-class respectability as originally constructed by such genteel nineteenth-century biographers as Oliver Wendell Holmes. Gougeon and others are largely accurate in their characterization of the competing Emersonian constructions that stretch back to the nineteenth century. As I show in my paper, however, the nineteenth century reformers were every bit as anxious as the genteel biographers to create an Emerson that reflected their conception of American values even when facts from Emerson’s life and oeuvre undercut that conception.

Religious reform in the early postbellum era is the movement of specific interest to my paper. Standard periodization of Transcendentalism has it that the movement’s efforts at religious reform largely ceased in the 1850s with its increasing focus on abolition. The Free Religious Association and two affiliated Transcendentalist periodicals, the *Radical* (1865–72) and the *Index* (1870–1886), which have not received much notice among scholars of Emerson’s reform activity, provide ample evidence of a vibrant Transcendentalist culture striving to define, implement, and celebrate its vision for religious reform, with Emerson as an increasingly iconic emblem of their thought. The readers and activists surrounding the two periodicals, although divided in many respects, achieved something like consensus regarding the development and use of Emerson’s image. Through a near mythical presentation of Emerson as a radical spiritual visionary, the religious progressives strove to flush Christian orthodox thought out of American cultural life. The specific iconic image of greatest use was Emerson’s renunciation of his Unitarian pastorate and subsequent appearance at Harvard to deliver his “Divinity School Address” in 1838.



Thumbnail sketch of the Walden house, attributed to Thoreau, found in Emerson's personal copy of Plato's *Works*. Courtesy of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and Concord Museum.

RWES panel for the 2025 Thoreau Annual Gathering

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will sponsor a panel at the 83rd Annual Gathering of the Thoreau Society (July 9–13, 2025) exploring the themes of “Thoreau’s Revolutions.”

Emersonian Revolutions Today

Panel Moderator: Austin Bailey, Doctoral Lecturer in English at Hunter College (CUNY)

Emerson’s Aesthetic Revolution

Shan Gao, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Soochow University

This paper focuses on Emerson’s nature aesthetics and how his appreciation of nature transforms the aesthetic appreciation tradition in the history of western philosophy. In the history of Western philosophy, nature is usually not regarded as the object of aesthetic appreciation. The reason for this lies in metaphysics. Influenced by Western metaphysics, there are three types of attitudes toward physical nature: (1) Physical nature is in a constant process of change so it is not reality. It is illusion. (2) Physical nature is regarded as the space that is understood by Mathematics, Geometry, or Physics. (3) Physical nature is regarded as a tool for people to achieve happiness. However, Emerson’s metaphysics transformed the traditional metaphysics and therefore initiated the aesthetic revolution. Nature is regarded as the object of aesthetic appreciation. Emerson’s metaphys-

ics has two important features: (1) It is interdisciplinary and it combines philosophy, religion, science, and so on. (2) It has strong value orientation. Emerson integrates truth with goodness and beauty. Due to these features, Emerson transforms people’s aesthetic attitude toward nature. For Emerson, all types of nature are beautiful, which includes agricultural lands, wilderness, and gardens. However, among the different types of nature, he prefers wilderness to humanized landscapes.

Erasmus Darwin’s Vestiges in Emerson’s “Compensation”

Atsuko Oda, Professor Emerita, Mie University, Japan

Erasmus Darwin, a medical doctor and Charles Darwin’s grandfather, is the first person who explicitly expressed the evolutionary theory of life. It appeared in his medical work, *Zoonomia*, in 1794. His poetical works, which paraphrased Linnaeus, were also popular and influenced the German and English Romantics. Emerson is more revolutionary than Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle in his appreciation of evolution, which is implied in his reference to E. Darwin in his journal of 1834 when he concentrated on reading Goethe’s evolutionary idea of metamorphosis of plants. E. Darwin thought that life on earth began from “a single living filament,” a microscopic speck in the seas, and developed under the influence of natural forces over the great length of time. His motto was “E Conchis Omnia” (everything out of shells.) This process of metamorphosis over vast time underpins Emerson’s evolutionary idea of “the secularity [in terms of astronomy] of nature,” which he wrote that he learned from geology in his 1844 essay “Nature.” *Representative Men* shows how he got the idea, identification of plants and animals and correspondence between matter and mind, through Plato, Swedenborg and Goethe. The seemingly moralistic essay, “Compensation,” as Laura Dassow Walls pointed out, is grounded on the scientific doctrine of polarity. My paper argues that Emerson’s conspicuous naming of “natural history of calamity,” a variant of his lifelong theme of “Natural History of Intellect,” reveals that his natural history is a chronology of an evolutionary process in which intellect and morality grows to be suitable for life over vast time. Emerson distinguishes his idea of compensation from the “retribution” taught in church. He reevaluates this earth due to “the secularity of nature.” Emerson is religious, apart from E. Darwin and Goethe, but the climax of the essay presents Emerson as a modern evolutionist.

On Emerson's Revolutionary Ecstasies: Hematological Exuberance and Anti-Slavery Thinking
Ross Martin, Head Preceptor in Expository Writing
Harvard College

Since Richard Poirier began undoing the notion that Ralph Waldo Emerson proposes a mode of individualism that is stable and resists releasing itself into the world beyond it, some influential readers—from Stanley Cavell, to Sharon Cameron, to Branka Arsić—have furthered Poirier's account, reintroducing us to an Emerson who regards life as open and overflowing. My talk elaborates on the Emersonian scholarship of recent decades to discuss overabundance from a cardiovascular standpoint as a surging tide that rushes through concentric expansions, and so the scientific impetus for Emerson's anti-slavery thinking. Augmenting Emerson's scientific abolitionism with archival evidence, I further investigate his study of Emanuel Swedenborg—the Enlightenment scientist turned mystic—whose lost hematology dissolves anatomical boundaries so that the inward intensity of individuality must release itself and transfigure. Briefly reconstructing Emerson's Swedenborgianism, my talk uncovers a vision of ontological fecundity unfurled over his career that merges Swedenborg with an emerging strain of American radicalism exemplified by the Haitian Revolution. Finally, I turn to Toussaint Louverture who for Emerson represents the heart's emancipatory powers, whereby he situates revolutionary change in an overactive heartbeat at the center of a momentous movement. With Louverture, Emerson at last identifies the dawning of a new age, an upheaval in residual experience through an utmost ecstasy.

Emerson and AI
Scott Ennis, Poet and Independent Scholar

I propose a presentation on how Ralph Waldo Emerson's revolutionary ideas about individualism, creativity, intuition, and interconnectedness resonate in the rapidly developing "revolution" of artificial intelligence (AI).

- Emerson championed the value of intuition and the creative spirit, which aligns with AI's ability to aid and enhance human creativity. Generative AI tools allow users to explore new forms of artistic and intellectual expression, expanding the boundaries of creativity much like Emerson envisioned individuals doing through self-reliance and innovation.

- Emerson's advocacy for breaking free from conformity and embracing originality parallels AI's disruption of traditional industries. AI technologies redefine conventional norms in art, healthcare, education, and more, encouraging innovation that reflects Emerson's ideals of challenging established paradigms.

- Emerson's transcendental belief in the unity of all things finds a metaphorical parallel in AI systems like neural networks, which rely on interconnected nodes to solve problems, learn, and adapt. This interconnected design mirrors Emerson's holistic view of existence.

- Emerson's idea of self-reliance is realized in how AI democratizes access to knowledge and tools. From language translation to personalized education, AI helps individuals become more self-sufficient and capable of achieving their goals.

- Emerson emphasized the need for individuals to act in alignment with higher moral principles. Similarly, the ethical development and deployment of AI force us to confront moral questions about fairness, accountability, and the role of human oversight.

- Emerson's concept of the "Oversoul" can be metaphorically linked to how AI systems integrate vast amounts of collective human knowledge and experience, creating a repository of shared understanding. While AI itself lacks Emerson's emphasis on spirituality and intuition as inherently human traits, its ability to amplify human capabilities and encourage innovation echoes many of Emerson's revolutionary ideals. AI, when designed and used ethically, reflects the Emersonian spirit of striving for higher understanding and creativity.



(Continued from page 1)

is a risk for Emerson, it is precisely because the effects of our actions and our thoughts are always unforeseeable” (183). History is not a succession of famous figures or movements to copy. Rather, the unfolding of history is fluid and organic, eroding currently existing identities and transforming the familiar into the strange and unknown. I argue Emerson does not disdain this historical flux. As David Jacobson states, Emerson never adopts a sullen, “essentially critical posture in the world” that lapses into the “negation of meaning and value,” instead welcoming this dynamism (557). Close observation reveals the latent change always occurring, encompassing both forested hills and the processes of history, and even the most laureled individual in “Self-Reliance” embraces this all-linking, omnipresent wellspring of change instead of clinging to a narrow, fixed identity.

The individual in “Circles” is not fixed or static, but in a constant process of change and revision. Here, there is no division between the self and the not-self. All life is fundamentally united, being the expression of the same monistic force, and as such, all life is subject to transformation. Attempting to hold the self above that rushing wildfire process of change is as restrictive and artificial as attempting to conform to a specific set of ideals or values. Emerson writes that the “new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet” (“Circles” 280). What currently exists is not hollowed and sacred, but simply the raw material for expansive, imaginative conceptions of what can be. Abandoning the static self is what cultivates a wider perspective. This is a perspective wherein trees and plants are not separate from the individual. Neither are the people of towns and cities from whom Emerson creates physical distance through his wanderings. They do not truly belong to a different group or category, as purely physical observation asserts. Learned philosophical observation reveals that there is no separation between them, that they belong to a broader sense of fellowship and community that is always united even as it inevitably takes new forms and shapes. The difference between ostensible opposites, like the individual subject and the observed object, exists merely in perception.

Arriving at this realization restores the nourishing meaning and connection lost by a corrupt and materialistic society obsessed with luxury, hyper-competitiveness, and material gain. Succeeding by the standards of profit and productivity is for Emerson hollow, for it is success by the standards of trivial values. Change in

setting or status is for Emerson largely irrelevant, as the individual remains connected to light and shadow, triumph and lament, wherever that individual might be and whatever that individual might do. Believing that a surfeit of societal approval will overwhelm that inevitability is for Emerson fallacious. The individual remains innately linked to all other lifeforms and thus linked to constant change. As “Circles” states, “I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall” (282). There is a humility to this view of the self that inspired later writers such as Henry James. The self is too inconstant and unreliable to be an ordering, clarifying force that dictates concise and absolute statements of being, yet this condition of impermanence and flux does not preclude the establishment of connection and harmony.

Escaping from the constraints of the individual ego allows for access to a wider and more omnipresent conception of community, one that stretches across time and space, for its focus is not on a sectarian set of values or customs but on what Emerson elsewhere calls the “aboriginal abyss of real Being” that exists “under this running sea of circumstance” (“Compensation” 185). Abyss is a meaningful word here, as its connotations of opacity and inscrutability imply an inability to locate complete clarity. As Nuefeldt and Barr write in their analysis of “Circles,” the essay rejects the possibility of “fixing truth and thus fixing perception on definitive truth,” even as “the approximations with which we are left are the stuff from which the future will be made” (108). Observation is not useless as a tool in “Circles,” but its use differs from its use in a perspective that valorizes the individual as triumphant sage and scholar. What interests Emerson here is neither the observation of what is external and quantifiable, nor a conception of metaphysics entirely detached from everyday experience. What interests Emerson is how there is a latent, symbolic significance to observations, conveying truths that are not immediately apparent.

Different people, “Circles” suggests, have different perspectives and value systems. Even the same person can take fundamentally different viewpoints throughout their life, or even between different days. Experience teaches such. Far from viewing himself as a heroic individual soaring above the impressions of passing moments, Emerson presents even this essay as a product of such an impression: “What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday

I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which I now see so much" ("Circles" 282). Recognizing the wispy character of the individual mind is not an obstacle to knowledge, but rather a path toward knowledge. Religious creeds and political affiliations cannot be universal for Emerson. They are rigid conventions that associate goodness with conformism. What is universal are sensations and experiences that leave the individual transformed. The self is always in the process of becoming, transforming. Observation for Emerson reveals that this is the commonality and community that exists between disparate individuals, or between superficially different lifeforms. A tree and a poet are not altogether dissimilar. Changes thus have a symbolic significance, as they are the central root of which, in Emerson's Idealist perspective, living creatures are only the representations. Fellowship and community, the ability to see the sacred, singular essence of existence in another, does not come from any specific, measurable quality, any definite truth, but rather in the recognition of the shared quality of constant transformation:

In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit. No love can be bound by oath or covenant to secure it against a higher love. No truth so sublime but it might be trivial tomorrow in the light of new thoughts. ("Circles" 289)

This process of constant movement and revitalization entralls Emerson not simply because it removes the necessity of adhering to preconceived standards and dictates, but because it is a shared process. Unlike the conformism formed by a shared set of religious or political beliefs, the common experience of transformation is a non-binding form of community. Static, fixed conceptions of community claim to unite groups of people, but this union is for Emerson only superficial, being restrictive to them and contrary to natural processes. The community these rigid conceptions offer is only partial, linking together people based on a measurable likeness, such as that of a shared heritage or political ideology. True community for Emerson not only incorporates the inevitability of flux but depends on it. As Gustaaf van Cromphout asserts regarding Emerson's view of history, the collective Soul "moves from living experience and expression in an institution" to death in dogma and institutions that "the Soul can only escape through revolt" (56). Such dependence on flux characterizes "Circles," lucidly representing the thread of Emersonian thinking

that emphasizes the fluid, liquid-like individual. Both the individual and a broader, more transcendent conception of community flourish through the embracing of transformation and the relinquishing of static identities. Such a nuanced conception of the relation between the individual and the communal undermines the reductive image of Emerson as an arch-individualist, as a woodsy hermit who believes that trees are better companions than other humans. Yet to deny that there is a strain of Emersonian thinking that valorizes the sagacious, triumphant individual would be to create an equally fallacious image. By still clinging to the emphasis on the solitary individual, the view exemplified by "Self-Reliance" limits conceptions of community. The Emersonian project of transcending the constraints of the socially conditioned individual remains incomplete. For Emerson, any institution is merely "the lengthened shadow of one man," and history, despite its complexities, "resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons" ("Self-Reliance" 154). There is a difference in kind, not merely in degree, between these select individuals and all others. They reject the conformist thinking that corrupts the minds of others, and they race into the discovery of the new and unforeseen. Through astute observation of what is and the conscious rejection of preconceived wisdom that no longer suits those observations, the heroic individual creates new paradigms, new frontiers of understanding.

Finding the divine remains impossible when the individual neglects the responsibility to see in specific observations the constant process of change and transformation, the morphing of one form of the universal essence into another. Being aware of that universal essence means seeing the likeness between beings whose external forms appear unlike, such as the animals scurrying in the woods and the routines of the laborers in industrial towns. What unites these representationally unlike forms is their experience of change, the unpredictable unmaking of what appears in the present moment to be solid, as Emerson emphasizes in "Circles." The individual can only find superficial belonging and a tawdry form of spiritual quietude by seeking contentment in the emulation of past sages:

Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away—means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour. All things are made sacred by it—one as much as another. All things are dissolved to their centre by their cause, and in the

universal miracle petty and particular miracles disappear. If therefore a man claims to know and speak of God and carries you backwards to the phraseology of some old mouldering nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. ("Self-Reliance" 156–57)

These statements challenge the divide between the emphasis on the soaring heroic individual in "Self-Reliance" and the emphasis on the constant dissolution and reformation of the individual identity in "Circles." The united, singular essence that manifests into varied physical forms can enter into astute minds, but these minds must be "simple." In this instance, simplicity refers to the organic and non-artificial, the mind freed from conformist pledges to divisive ideologies and rituals. "Self-Reliance," as scholars have asserted, makes a religious argument as much as a poetic or philosophical one, condemning dogma that links spiritual purity to the mechanistic adherence to specific conventions. The immediate physical environment, because it is immediate, carries more meaningful wisdom than centuries-old doctrines.

Emerson indeed neglects to present a single, definitive answer on how to integrate the valorizing of the heroic individual with the understanding that this individual exists as both a representative of a specific era and an incarnation of the ever-flowing singular essence of transformation. In "Self-Reliance," he focuses more on the radiant power of the individual who speaks truthfully and thoughtfully, while in "Circles" and even "Experience," he focuses more on the communal condition of decay and transformation that humbles the individual perspective. Later in his career, Emerson's optimism dimmed into increasing skepticism, and he viewed the individual as more closely bound to a specific age and political situation, as demonstrated by *Representative Men*, published in 1850. Still, these apparently different perspectives embrace the same need to find both individual fulfillment and a broader, non-binding sense of community through the constant process of discovery and growth, believing that no "facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back" ("Circles" 288).

These tensions did not stop an idea of Emerson, stripped of spirituality and metaphysical heft, as a woodland sage preaching the value of seclusion and self-possession, from becoming the dominant cultural image of him in the United States. American figures from John Muir to the countercultural hippies of the

1960s have drawn inspiration from Emerson. Muir even placed a portrait of Emerson on the mantle of his house in California, as though he were a kind of household god, and lapsed into trembling awe when meeting with him.³ Reebok most vulgarly encapsulated the nature of much Emerson worship in the United States through an ad campaign for sneakers that featured quotes from "Self-Reliance" extolling the value of non-conformism.⁴ Despite Emerson's influence in the American literary consciousness, one can more rightly say that the public created an image of Emerson based on pre-existing emphases on self-definition and self-expression than that Emerson's championing of the individual caused the oft-described American preference for the immediate and individual over the communal and historical. Emerson, noted antagonist of commercial fashion, would not be pleased to be featured in a shoe commercial. What the reductive view of Emerson as an ardent individualist misses is his specific conception of individual identity, which is not solid or constant. Astute, unbiased observation is a necessary characteristic of the Emersonian heroic individual. Circumstances change. Experiences occur. The individual must adjust to new, unforeseen impressions.

Such thinking creates a bridge between these two threads of Emersonian thought: that which prioritizes the individual and that which presents the individual as merely a fluid and amorphous representation of a single communal essence. There is not a rigid division between the thinking characteristic of "Circles" and that characteristic of "Self-Reliance," even if the emphases of the two essays are different. "Circles" praises "the great man" who is "not convulsible or tormentable," causing "calamity to fade and disappear" (290). As importantly, "Self-Reliance" is not simply a succession of juxtapositions between the pale, sickly corpse of conformist society and the vigor of hearty individualism, even if reading it as such is easy and common. Emerson's praise of the rose in "Self-Reliance" is far from confidently triumphant, and it frames self-reliance as a shared quality and not merely the domain of singular individuals:

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less. (157)

While this perspective emphasizes impermanence less than “Circles,” it nonetheless pushes against the simplified conception of “Self-Reliance” as valorizing only particular human perspectives. Roses are self-reliant in that they do not conform, do not exhibit paralyzing self-consciousness, do not attempt to fit trends. The individual, in triumphing over rigid conventionality, is not entirely separate or unique, but rather escaping into a broader conception of community than any sect or ideology offers. Non-conformism promotes, rather than precludes, participation in a natural sense of community. The two threads of thinking that define Emerson’s perspective on the individual are thus as separate as shadow and sunlight are for him: that is, they appear dichotomous, but they are in fact manifestations of a larger and more comprehensive whole. Even in the moments when Emerson most valorizes the individual in “Self-Reliance,” there is the subtle recognition that even the most heroic and majestic individual is simply a single piece of an omnipresent community of perpetual evolution and transformation.

Notes

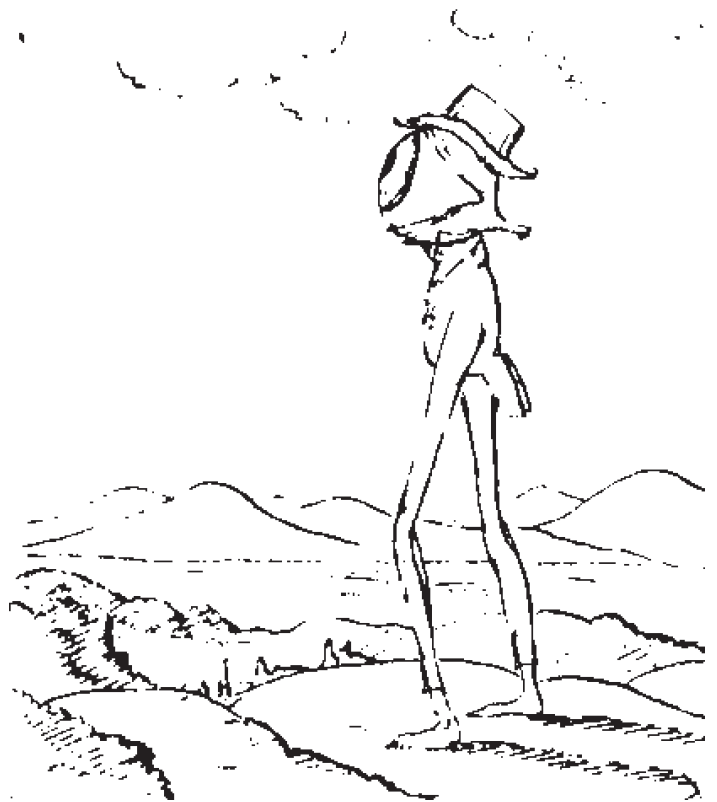
1. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *The Complete Essays and Other Writings*, Modern Library, 1950. All following references to Emerson’s work are from this edition.
2. See Kenneth S. Sacks, *Understanding Emerson: “The American Scholar” and His Struggle for Self-Reliance*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2003, and Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1979.
3. For Muir’s views on Emerson, see John C. Elder, “John Muir and the Literature of Wilderness,” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1981, pp. 375–86.
4. For the Reebok example and its relevance to pop-cultural discussions of Emersonian individualism, see Cyrus R. K. Patell, “Emersonian Strategies: Negative Liberty, Self-Reliance, and Democratic Individuality,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1994, pp. 440–79.

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Old Meeting house at Newton Centre drawn from memory by Sarah Freeman Clarke, 1889. Courtesy of the Joel Myerson Collection, University of South Carolina.

“The Problem,” Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Poems*, 1847)

I like a church; I like a cowl;
I love a prophet of the soul;
and on my heart monastic aisles
Fall like sweet strains, or pensive smiles;
Yet not for all his faith can see
Would I that cowléd churchman be.

Why should the vest on him allure,
Which I could not on me endure?

Not from a vain or shallow thought
His awful Jove young Phidias brought;
Never from lips of cunning fell
The thrilling Delphic oracle;
Out from the heart of nature rolled
The burdens of the Bible old;
the litanies of nations came,
Like the volcano's tongue of flame,
Up from the burning core below,—
The canticles of love and woe;
The hand that rounded Peter's dome,
And groined the aisles of Christian Rome,
Wrought in a sad sincerity;
Himself from God he could not free;
He builded better than he knew;—
The conscious stone to beauty grew.

Know'st thou what wove yon woodbird's nest
Of leaves, and feathers from her breast?
Or how the fish outbuilt her shell,
Painting with morn each annual cell?
Or how the sacred pine-tree adds
To her old leaves new myriads?
Such and so grew these holy piles,
Whilst love and terror laid the tiles.
Earth proudly wears the Parthenon,
As the best gem upon her zone;
And Morning opes with hast her lids,
To gaze upon the Pyramids;
O'er England's abbeys bends the sky,
As on its friends, with kindred eye;
For, out of Thought's interior sphere,
These wonders rose to upper air;
And nature gladly gave them place,
Adopted them into her race,
And granted them an equal date
With Andes and with Ararat.

These temples grew as grows the grass;
Art might obey, but not surpass.
The passive master lent his hand
To the vast soul that o'er him planned;
And the same power that reared the shrine,
Bestrode the tribes that knelt within.
Ever the fiery Pentecost
Girds with one flame the countless host,
Trances the heart through chanting choirs,
And through the priest the mind inspires.
The word unto the prophet spoken
Was writ on tables yet unbroken;
The word by seers or sibyls told,
In groves of oak, or fanes of gold,
Still floats upon the morning wind,
Still whispers to the willing mind.
One accent of the Holy Ghost
The heedless world hath never lost.
I know what say the fathers wise,—
The Book itself before me lies,
Old Chrysostom, best Augustine,
And he who blent both in his line,
The younger Golden Lips or mines,
Taylor, the Shakspeare of divines.
His words are music in my ear,
I see his cowléd portrait dear;
And yet, for all his faith could see,
I would not the good bishop be.

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Emerson's Metaphors, David Greenham. Lexington Books, 2023. 242 pp. \$100.00 hardcover, \$45.00 paperback.

William James in an 1882 lecture referred to the amusing story of the woman who stubbornly claimed that the world rests upon a rock that rests upon another rock, and so on, and that, ultimately, it is “rocks all the way down.” Professor of English literature at the University of the West of England, David Greenham, in his book *Emerson's Metaphors*, has—unknowingly or not—imported this story into Emerson studies and revitalized it. The central issue in studying Emerson as a philosopher is unmasking the “something” that he held to have run “all the way down.” Greenham in his reading, using the versatile and alluring Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), maintains that it is “figurative language” or “metaphor”—not rocks—that runs “all the way down” for Emerson (205). This general view represents one camp in Emerson scholarship. The other camp, finding the universal law to be at bottom, is led by Joseph Urbas whom Green-

ham necessarily confronts in this book. While representing opposite camps, Greenham is together with Urbas insofar as they both wish to reorient Emerson scholarship in their respective ways. For this reason, *Emerson's Metaphors* is a necessary read, offering a formidable counter to the recent volumes of Urbas and other scholars.

The layout and style of *Emerson's Metaphors* are both quite agreeable. The introduction rather nicely relates Emerson to CMT and provides definitions of key terms used throughout the study, such as “target domain” and “source domain” (2–3). In short, the source domain is a simpler and more familiar concept that enables understanding of the target domain. Making the case for applying CMT to Emerson's body of work is in no way a stretch—anyone familiar with Emerson's writings, even the more popular essays and lectures, understands the importance he placed on metaphors. The central argument of the book, derived from the established principles of CMT, is that “metaphor in Emerson's work is a cognitive form rather than a rhetorical or ornamental

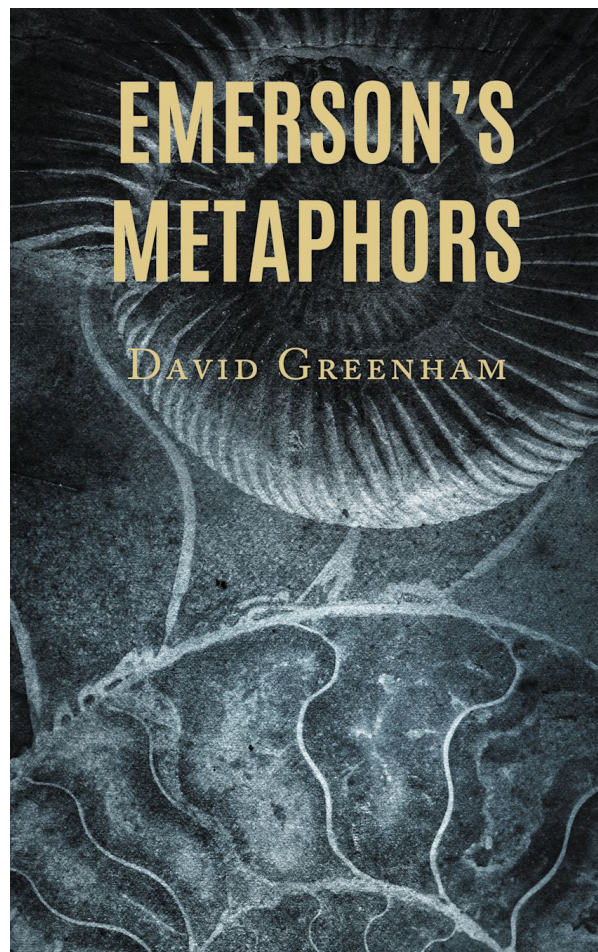
feature” (1). The rest of the book is neatly divided into two parts: (1) Emerson’s Theory of Metaphor and (2) Emerson’s Practice of Metaphor. Throughout both parts, Greenham skillfully handles Emerson’s various metaphors, offering a refreshing sensible perspective. Part I, in particular, serves to prove that Emerson deeply valued metaphors and analogical reasoning. I do not think many Emerson scholars would find this controversial. A great deal of Part I is devoted to the Great Chain conceptual metaphor, which Greenham is right to read all over Emerson’s writings. Greenham’s treatment of Lovejoy’s classic study, as well as many others, is also admirable. I find the method of analyzing particular metaphors, unraveling notoriously difficult passages and separating out the various conceptual metaphors underlying them, to be quite useful and illuminating. I certainly will never encounter another of Emerson’s writings without thinking of Greenham’s conceptual metaphors enumerated in this book.

Now onto Part II. The sections of this Part are broken up so: “Nature,” “Humankind,” and “God,” in that order. This arrangement is, again, quite agreeable. Greenham often mentions Neoplatonism as a core influence on Emerson’s philosophy and he is right to do so. The most momentous section of Part II is, undoubtedly, “God.” Therein, Greenham places his finger upon a long-standing philosophical issue: the debate between realism and nominalism. I find that the principles of CMT require the tenets of realism, and yet Greenham (and perhaps other CMT scholars) seems to promote nominalism, prioritizing language and metaphor, albeit as a cognitive form.

It is known that Emerson attempted to break away from the European intellectual tradition. Applying CMT in the way Greenham has in his book, laudable though it is in many aspects, is, in the final analysis, to hollow out Emerson’s words and expressions. If these words, strung together as a result of arduous thought based in experience, cannot *possibly* signify something real—independent of man—then to what end? Emerson asked the same question of the collection of metaphors America inherited from Europe. To apply CMT to Emerson is to eliminate the underlying unity or identity—the causal first principle of Urbas—that allows for analogical reasoning to have any force: “For Urbas’s Emerson, this combination of metaphors is a consequence of a fundamental unity, which is a metaphysical reality, but CMT tells

us that the identity between streams and causes, between human experience and divine origins, lies nowhere else but in the metaphorical imagination that allows for cross-domain mapping between the spiritual and the material” (195). But if this is true, then all cross-domain mapping, even if derived from embodied experience, would be utterly useless. Repudiating the long-curtained off causal first principle that Urbas strenuously worked out of Emerson is to fill Emerson’s profoundest metaphors with hot air. And yet, despite its shortcomings, I will finish by applauding the efforts of Greenham who has a masterly handle on Emerson’s metaphors and gets excitingly close to the mark when it comes to Emerson’s final position as a philosopher.

Owen Polley
Independent Scholar



Liberty or Justice for All?: A Conversation across the American Centuries, by Philip F. Gura. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2023. 208 pp. \$120.95 hardcover, \$22.95 paperback.

Philip F. Gura, one of our most prolific and influential scholars in American Studies, argues in his most recent book that balancing “individual sovereignty and communal responsibility in a Christian nation . . . [is] a problem that has haunted and befuddled the United States since its foundation and confounds it still” (13). As examples he points to the “starkly opposed moral visions” (163) in John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity,” which stresses “the Bonds of brotherly affection” (164) and “social harmony,” and in Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, which “codifies the sacred rights of the individual” (165).

Gura explores four figures we might call *representative men*—Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and John Rawls—who, over a collective span of nearly three centuries in radically different historical contexts, implicitly faced the same national dilemma and essentially shared a “universality” of ideas that form a *continuing* “braiding of . . . threads . . . some strengthening and some fraying in the warp of history” (12). He suggests that no settled solution to our national dilemma is possible, but that by understanding our history something of greater value in a democracy *can* be achieved: perspective, forbearance, tolerance, perhaps even wisdom.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), with two degrees from Yale and recently married, in 1729 succeeded his esteemed grandfather Solomon Stoddard as minister of First Church of Northampton, Massachusetts. With a “rather reserved constitution,” Edwards’s preaching was “not overly emotional”—certainly not the fiery stuff the English preacher George Whitefield brought to the colonies in the 1740s. But Edwards’s serious manner, clarity, and focus on “God’s sovereignty, man’s utter depravity, and the excellence of Christ” (18) won him a wide following, and he became the leader of a religious revival spreading through the Connecticut River Valley. God’s grace, Edwards thought, would flower in widespread “Christian charity” (23). But inability to discern evidence of one’s own conversion caused despair among many. Gura points to “divisive partisan politics” related to scarcity of “good land,” “the main pathway to wealth” in the Valley, as an underlying regional tension (27–28). And from Charles Chauncy, an establishment

“liberal Christian,” politically Federalist minister at First Church in Boston came a steady barrage of charges against Edwards for inciting emotional excesses and spreading heresy; Chauncy portrayed the “New Lights” of the revival as the latest version of the theologically and socially disruptive Antinomians of the 1630s (24). With the collapse of the Awakening, Edwards in 1750 was released from his Northampton position. In March 1758, shortly after becoming president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), he died from smallpox after an inoculation. Edwards remained influential among nineteenth-century moral philosophers, and his vast writings, such as treatises on *Religious Affections*, *Freedom of the Will*, *Doctrine of Original Sin*, and *Nature of True Virtue*, are still admired for their keen insights and literary value.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) descended from the English Puritan minister Peter Bulkeley, who helped found the town of Concord in 1636. Waldo’s father, William, a politically conservative, civic-minded “liberal Christian,” was proud to be called as pastor of First Church in Boston, the church once served by Charles Chauncy, the nemesis of Jonathan Edwards (56). Only seven when his father died in 1811, Waldo was ordained eighteen years later at historic Second Church, Unitarian, in Boston’s North End (1829–32). Unlike his father, he always professed high regard for Edwards, despite their central theological difference: Edwards’s belief in “God’s sovereign grace,” and Emerson’s in “each individual’s innate divinity” (5). Gura suggests, though, that Emerson expressed his notion of “self-sufficiency” in his essay “The Over-Soul” in “a comment Edwards might have uttered”: “We distinguish the announcements of the soul . . . by the term *Revelation* For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. . . . [T]he power to see, is not separated from the will to do. . . . Let man then learn the revelation of all nature, and all thought to his heart . . . that the Highest dwells with him” (74; see *CW* 2:166–67, 174). Gura nicely captures Emerson’s vocational epiphany when he returned from his 1833 European tour that followed his physical, emotional, and spiritual crisis after his young wife’s death in 1831 and his resignation of the Second Church pulpit in 1832: “the recent popularity of public lecturing . . . provided venues from which to preach the spirit in a new way, not as clergyman or scientist but as a moral philosopher who reflected on the relation between man, nature, and the spirit” (65). (Emerson never formally resigned from the ministry per se.)

Continually alert to new ideas and to personal, social, and political realities, Emerson's thought and writing underwent major transformations: his Unitarian period followed by his idealist manifesto *Nature* (1836) with its ecstatic "transparent eye-ball" moment; his emergence as the center of the Transcendentalist movement; his assertion of "self-reliance," which in his essay "Experience" (1842), a response to the death of his five-year-old son Waldo, collided with the "lords of life"—"those inescapable facts," Gura writes, "that bind us as we struggle to make sense of our lives" (76); and a growing pragmatism—manifested in increasing outspokenness about justice for indigenous peoples, antislavery, political corruption, civic responsibility, education, the cause of Union—all topics he had addressed from pulpits, from his brief tenure at Second Church through the 1830s.

One quibble, given the significance of theology to the book's four profiles, and the importance of Emerson's early sermons for understanding his evolving thought: Gura follows A. C. McGiffert's outdated *Young Emerson Speaks* (1938) as his source for "The Miracle of Our Being" (61, 173 n29). The text for this sermon is superseded by that in the 4-volume *Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Missouri, 1989–92). Moreover, Emerson numbered and headed each of his approximately 180 sermons with a biblical text but rarely titled them. Other than "Astronomy" (written above the body of the sermon sometime after the first of Emerson's four deliveries), the other 24 titles in the 1938 selection were supplied by McGiffert.

William James (1842–1910), Gura suggests, "took up where [Emerson] left off" (88). A polymath never settled for long in any field of study at Harvard and elsewhere, James read Darwin as well as Edwards's *Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (91–92) and, as had Emerson, he discovered the mystic Swedenborg (94). The age's war, social inequities, and rampant materialism led James, Gura writes, to "stress the power of volition" (96). Crushed by the death of his beloved cousin Minnie Temple, he still asserted human free will, even in the face of what "seemed predetermined" (98). In the Adirondacks, James experienced a religious epiphany, which Gura compares to Emerson's "transparent eye-ball" moment (112). He came to insist that "feeling" was as crucial as scientific method to the study of mind and consciousness as well as religious belief (101–2). And in the face of the "varieties of religious experience" in a democracy, James, influenced

by C.S. Peirce and others, embraced pragmatism (119), advocated tolerance, and decried the principle of "manifest destiny" used to justify the Spanish-American War (1898). The massive economic disparities, political corruption, and social inequities of the age underlay what became perhaps James's core moral principle—that in a democracy, the individual—and the community—are responsible for the well-being of others (121).

John Rawls (1921–2002), whom Gura calls "the twentieth century's preeminent moral philosopher" (11), would have been "a kindred spirit" to William James, a predecessor in the Philosophy Department at Harvard. Introducing us to Rawls as a critic of U. S. involvement in the war in Vietnam in the mid-1960s, Gura suggests that Rawls might have written James's *The Moral Equivalent of War* (129). Activist students were roiled by the presence of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) on campus and by Harvard's insensitivity toward needs of non-college neighborhoods. Tensions came to a head on April 9, 1969, when students took over and occupied University Hall. This episode and its long, tangled aftermath, which drew Rawls deeper into university activism, are told with striking immediacy and authority—indeed, as a Harvard undergraduate Gura was an eyewitness to, and participant in, many of these fraught and dramatic events. Rawls's faith in a God who determines our fate already had been shaken by two devastating experiences. As a child he survived two grave illnesses only to see two brothers die, one from each disease. After graduating from Princeton, he joined the Army during World War II. He was wounded in the Philippines; from a troop train witnessed the devastation at Hiroshima; and was haunted by the death of a close comrade chosen over Rawls to "scout Japanese positions." He "never forgot the randomness of his survival" and "rejected 'the idea of the supremacy of the divine will as hideous and evil'" (140). In this "post-Christian world" (161) Rawls came to define an ethical society as "a cooperative venture based in mutual advantage" (142)—an approach Gura sees as coming "from the opposite end of the trench from Edwards and Emerson" (143). For Rawls, what constitutes rights, justice, equality, and fairness would always be debated in pluralistic societies, but principles of "*universal human rights*" (156) must be agreed to by all citizens to redress—as a *societal* matter—significant threats to individuals, groups, or the whole.

Gura suggests that we could cultivate a kind of patience, compassion, even empathy, by recognizing the

historic recurring rhythm of our unresolved deep national divide, the “unfinished” task Lincoln termed “a more perfect union” (162). This book is no abstract, chilly “history of ideas.” Gura is particularly empathetic in presenting the ideas, struggles, failures, and achievements of each of his four central figures. Particularly moving are his accounts of the crushing deaths and mourning that afflicted each man at pivotal points in their lives. Practicing what he preaches, Gura is remarkably tactful in portraying most of the sometimes volcanic ideological conflicts each man had with contemporaneous opponents. Many of these adversaries, he implies, were clinging to what, in hindsight, were clearly outmoded positions—but which they defended according to their lights. Many of his four subjects’ ideological opponents thus come across as honorable. (The generous public benefactor Andrew Carnegie, however, deserves blame for his “Gospel of Wealth,” which in perverting the meaning of Emerson’s notion of “self-reliance,” seemed to give sanction to Gilded Age greed [86-88].) Might *Liberty or Justice for All?* be a welcome tonic for today’s profoundly divided nation?

Each of Gura’s four subjects was affiliated with at least one prestigious college and won a measure of fame not only in academe but also among wider publics. Our age is wracked by our own cultural fractures, with troubling implications for education. Humanities courses have dwindled as students choose majors and electives promising clearer career paths and higher salaries, and administrators have gutted or eliminated many humanities and arts programs in the name of financial necessity. Anti-intellectualism is in the ascendant in our social and political life. The new American President has inflamed the matter, calling college professors “maniacal Marxists.” His Vice President has declared that “to do the things that we want to do for our country, we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities.” *Liberty or Justice for All?* is deeply informed, highly readable, and usefully *provocative* in Emerson’s good sense of the term. Yet I am haunted by a nagging question: *Who* today will teach and read, let alone study and ponder, this book’s timeless and timely lessons?

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