



R.W.E.

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EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

Distinguished Achievement Award Presented to Joseph Urbas

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society is pleased to recognize Dr. Joseph Urbas with its Distinguished Achievement Award, celebrating his extraordinary scholarly contributions to our understanding of Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy and his dedicated service to the Emerson Society. Dr. Urbas's work represents a watershed moment in Emerson studies, fundamentally reshaping how we understand Emerson as a systematic philosopher and metaphysical thinker.

Joseph Urbas has pursued a scholarly mission: the reconstruction of Emerson's metaphysical thought and the restoration of Emerson to his rightful place as a serious philosopher. Since Emerson's "philosophical rehabilitation" began in the late 1970s, scholarship has often emphasized his skepticism and linguistic innovations while downplaying his metaphysical commitments. Working against this current, Dr. Urbas has meticulously examined the full breadth of Emerson's corpus to demonstrate that Emerson possessed a coherent metaphysical vision grounding all other aspects of his thought.

Urbas's landmark monograph, *Emerson's Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes* (Lexington Books, 2016), represents the first complete, fully historicized account of Emerson's metaphysics. Urbas characterizes Emerson as a "causationist," arguing that the principle of causation, understood as a dynamic and creative first principle, lies at the heart of Emerson's worldview. This interpretation challenges decades of postmodern, anti-metaphysical readings. The book traces the development of Emerson's thought within the intellectual culture of the Transcendentalist period, demonstrating extraordinary erudition in its engagement with transatlantic philosophical conversations. Todd Richardson

called the book "an outstanding contribution to our understanding of Emerson's philosophy."

Building on this foundation, *The Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Routledge, 2021) offers a fuller account of Emerson's philosophy. Covering metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, religion, and politics, this study represents a monumental achievement in Emersonian scholarship that Nicholas Guardiano has called essential reading for establishing "the professional credentials of future scholarship on Emerson's philosophy." What makes Urbas's approach particularly valuable is his engagement with an exceptionally wide breadth of primary material, synthesizing Emerson's major essays with his lectures, private journal musings, and public pronouncements. The book also makes important contributions to our understanding of Emerson's global significance, demonstrating his impact on late nineteenth-century European letters and opening new possibilities for comparative work between Emerson and world philosophies.

Throughout his career, Urbas has engaged thoughtfully with influential interpretations of Emerson. His articles "Cavell's 'Moral Perfectionism' or Emerson's 'Moral Sentiment'" (2010), "'Bi-Polar' Emerson: 'Nominalist and Realist'" (2013), and "How Close a Reader of Emerson Is Stanley Cavell?" (2017) exemplify his willingness to challenge even the most prominent voices in Emerson studies when he believes they have misunderstood the historical Emerson. While acknowledging Stanley Cavell's extraordinary contribution to restoring Emerson to philosophical respectability, Urbas insists on the importance of reading Emerson on his own terms rather than appropriating him for contemporary philosophical projects. These interventions demonstrate

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ESP welcomes notes and short articles (up to eight double-spaced, typed pages) on Emerson-related topics. Manuscripts are blind refereed. On matters of style, consult previous issues. We also solicit news about Emerson-related community, school, and other projects; information about editions, publications, and research in progress on Emerson and his circle; queries and requests for information in aid of research in these fields; and significant news of Emersonian scholars. Send manuscripts to the editors, Kathleen Crosby (Elon University) and Mark Gallagher (Chapman University) at emersonsocietypapers.editor@gmail.com (email submissions are much preferred).

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

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PROSPECTS



Emerson Sightings/Citings

Earlier this year the Syracuse University Art Museum put on an exhibition titled inspired by a line from Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Hamatreya." "The Earth Laughs in Flowers," which ran from January 21st to May 10th, was curated by Romita Ray, associate professor and director of undergraduate studies in art history at Syracuse as part of a senior seminar. According to the *Daily Orange*, the exhibit intended to show how plant life is intertwined with art. "Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem is such a powerful reminder that we are connected to the earth, which is a living entity," Ray said. "We are part of it, we are not separate from it."

The *Guardian* selected "Quatrains" as the poem of the day for May 19th. The UK-based publication says "These epigrammatic verses compress the great essayist's philosophy with a beauty that echoes Keats and might have pleased Wordsworth."

The July 2025 newsletter for Project Pericles, a non-profit organization that supports community-engaged learning among a consortium of colleges and universities, invoked Emerson as a touchstone for efforts aimed at strengthening civic engagement and democratic participation. Echoing the American Scholar's call for an "intellectual Declaration of Independence," The *Periclean* reflected upon "Emerson and Engagement," contending that "Emerson argued that true nationhood depends not just on sovereignty but on cultivating autonomous thinkers: individuals capable of original thought, civic responsibility, and moral courage."

Emerson's poetry once again received renewed attention this summer when the Academy of American Poets featured "Fate" as their Poem-a-Day selection for August 17th.

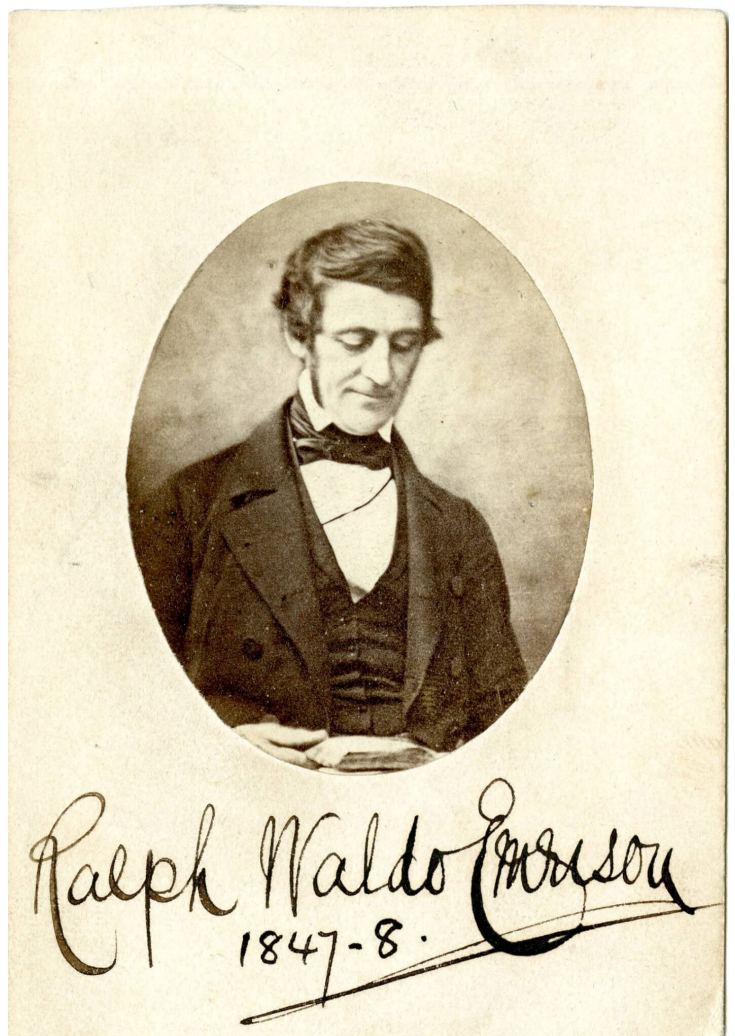
Finally, Emerson's journals provided the compass for a

six-week series on the self-development-focused Read Well Podcast. Taking Emerson as a model of intellectual discipline, creativity, and personal growth, the series invites its audience to adopt Emerson's method of keeping and indexing journals to create "a savings bank" of ideas.

A New Image of Emerson

The William Munroe Special Collections of the Concord Free Public Library recently announced a remarkable addition to the Emerson iconography: the rediscovery and acquisition of a carte-de-visite (CDV) of Ralph Waldo Emerson derived from an 1848 daguerreotype that, until now, had been previously unrecorded.

The CDV surfaced among hundreds of miscellaneous nineteenth-century photographs purchased by a collector who noted the absence of this Emerson image from



Courtesy of William Munroe Special Collections,
Concord Free Public Library.

the 2016 iconography *Picturing Emerson*. Drawing on the work of Joel Myerson and Leslie Perrin Wilson, curator Anke Voss confirms that this CDV represents one of the earliest extant photographic likenesses of Emerson, belonging to a set of images taken during Emerson's 1847–48 English sojourn. Its emergence expands the corpus of known Emerson portraits—an important addition to the small number of images from the 1840s.

What distinguishes this image more than its rarity is its character. Rather than the austere, contemplative poses associated with the later studio portraits, this photograph captures Emerson reading, his expression notably relaxed, even genial, as seen in the faint smile noted by our friends at the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association's online "Lyceum." It is a likeness that suggests an unguarded interiority to match Emerson's literary persona as it reveals, in its softened contours, a gentleness in Emerson's personality in sharp contrast to the caricature of him as a "Greek head on right Yankee shoulders" (Lowell).

While the original daguerreotype was most likely produced at the same time as the other known portraits from that 1848 sitting, this carte-de-visite, which the verso indicates was made by an "E. Cox Walker" in Liverpool, was most likely produced in the 1860s.

Call for Papers, ALA 2026

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society invites proposals for one panel at the American Literature Association 37th Annual Conference, May 20-23, 2026, in Chicago. Any topic related to Ralph Waldo Emerson, transcendentalism, or related figures is welcome. Please send 300-word abstracts by email to Bill Scalia (bscalia@alumni.lsu.edu) and John Min (john.min@csn.edu). The deadline for proposals is Wednesday, January 15, 2026.

Thoreau Society Annual Gathering, July 2026

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society invites submissions for a panel at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering, July 8-12, 2026:

"Give Me Health and a Day": Emerson and Health, Illness, and Unity

Emerson writes in *Nature* (1836), "Give me health and a

day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous." Emerson's writing frequently invokes good health as a means (and sometimes metaphor) of personal and spiritual unity. As he writes in "Self-Culture," "what is sickness, but the forerunner of death." As well, Emerson's continual use of eyes and seeing as indicative of individual and spiritual well-being constitutes a major motif of his writing. Emerson also experienced ill health as well as that of his family, including the early death of his first son Waldo and his first wife Ellen, and the mental breakdowns of his brothers Charles and Bulkeley, which Emerson described to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson as the "constitutional calamity" of the family. Also, in 1825 Emerson began to lose his eyesight, which cost him a year's worth of reading and study; his recovery spurred a more invested use of healthy vision, perception, the individual self, and self-culture.

Papers for this panel, in keeping with the Thoreau Gathering's theme, might consider Emerson's work relating to health, illness, and, as he describes in "Self-Culture," "living well." Please submit abstracts of 300 words, along with a brief (100 word) bio to Bill Scalia at bscalia@alumni.lsu.edu by January 31, 2026.

Call for Graduate Student Works in Progress Online Symposium

Graduate students are invited to submit abstracts for a Ralph Waldo Emerson Society Graduate Student Works in Progress Online Symposium, to be held on Friday, April 3, 2026, 10:00-12:00 p.m. CST. The Emerson Society welcomes graduate students at all levels and in all fields of study to present their works in progress. The works can be a dissertation, thesis, journal article, term paper, or other creative academic work related to Emerson or transcendentalism broadly conceived. Each participant will have approximately 10 minutes to present their work, followed by an open discussion. Presentations are welcome to share outline sketches containing rough ideas, full drafts, portions of works, or proposals for future projects. This is a great opportunity to discuss your current projects with professionals and peers in your field and to learn about the current projects of others. Submission Process: Submit an abstract of your proposed presentation (maximum of 500 words) with a title. Indicate your name, graduate student status (MA, PhD, ABD), program, and school affiliation. Send

to Bill Scalia (bscalia@alumni.lsu.edu) and John Min (john.min@csn.edu). Deadline for submission: Monday, March 2, 2026.

2026 Barbara L. Packer Fellowship

The Barbara L. Packer Fellowship is named for Barbara Lee Packer (1947-2010), who taught with great distinction for thirty years in the UCLA English Department. Her publications, most notably *Emerson's Fall* (1982) and her lengthy essay on the Transcendentalist movement in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1995), reprinted as *The Transcendentalists* by the University of Georgia Press (2007), continue to be esteemed by students of Emerson and of the American Renaissance generally. She is remembered as an inspiring teacher, a lively and learned writer, and a helpful friend to all scholars in her field—in short, as a consummate professional whose undisguised delight in literature was the secret of a long-sustained success. In naming the Fellowship for her, the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society offers her as a model worthy of the attention and emulation of scholars newly entering the field. The Barbara L. Packer Fellowship is awarded to individuals engaged in scholarly research and writing related to the Transcendentalists in general, and most especially to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Ph.D. candidates, pre-tenure faculty, and independent scholars are eligible to apply. Application deadline is January 15, 2026. For more information, please visit the American Antiquarian Society website: www.americanantiquarian.org/fellowships.

2026 Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellowship

Applications for the Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellowship at the Houghton Library are open. The Visiting Fellowship program offers scholars at all stages of their careers funding to pursue projects that require in-depth research on the library's holdings as well as opportunities to draw on staff expertise and participate in intellectual life at Harvard. The Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellowship supports research on Emerson and his circle. The deadline for applications is January 16, 2026. For more information, please visit the website: <https://library.harvard.edu/grants-fellowships/houghton-library-visiting-fellowships>

RWES Awards

Please check the website and look for an email on the membership listserv for award announcements, submission instructions, and specific requirements.

Graduate Student Conference Paper Award

Provides \$750 of travel support to present a paper on an Emerson Society panel at the American Literature Association Annual Conference or the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering. All proposals should address the CFPs posted on the Emerson Society website.

Research Grant

Historically, recipients have received \$500-1,000 in support of scholarly work on Emerson. Preference is given to junior scholars and graduate students. A confidential letter of recommendation and carefully crafted 1-2 page single-spaced project proposal are required.

Pedagogy or Community Project Award

Historically, recipients have received \$500-1,000 to support projects designed to bring Emerson to a non-academic audience. A confidential letter of recommendation and carefully crafted 1-2 page single-spaced project proposal, including a description of projected expenses, are required.

Subvention Award

Provides \$500 to support costs for the publication of an upcoming scholarly book or article on Emerson. A confidential letter of recommendation from an academic mentor or colleague and a 1-2 page single-spaced proposal, including an abstract of the forthcoming work and a detailed description of expenses, are required.

Undergraduate Student Essay Prize

Undergraduate students are welcome to submit 1,000-1,500-word academic essays on any topic relevant to the study of Emerson—his life, work, national and transnational reception, importance within and beyond U.S. literature and culture, and/or contemporary relevance. Winning essays will demonstrate originality, clarity, and rigorous engagement with Emerson. Selected essays may be returned to applicants with suggested revisions. The winning essay will be published in *The Emerson Society Papers* and the writer awarded \$100.

The Borrowed Estate: “Experience” and the *Consolatio* Tradition

Gary Ricketts

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s rapport with the classical Stoic tradition has been well-documented, most recently in Jacob Risinger’s *Stoic Romanticism and the Ethics of Emotion* (2021) and Mark Matousek’s *Lessons from an American Stoic* (2023). The Stoic corpus is littered with adages about dead relatives and loss. Marcus Aurelius, who lost nine of his thirteen children, stands as a prime example. In “Experience” (1844), Emerson elegizes his son Waldo two years after his death, anthologizing him among the ranks of dead literary sons: “In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me” (W 3:48). His claim that “grief can teach me nothing” (W 3:49) is a nod to the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, meaning equanimity or a detachment from the passions, or *pathē*, grief (*penthos*) being one of them. In commenting on Emerson’s “Experience,” Risinger notes that “Emerson ventured a wrenching adaptation of Epictetus’s claim that nothing external to the self defines the self,” adding the observation that commentators have not noticed “Emerson’s indebtedness to Epictetus in the *Enchiridion*” (207). Emerson’s *apatheia* in *Experience* does indeed align with Epictetus’s insights on externals in the *Enchiridion* (125 CE), yet his approach to mourning Waldo appears to have additional unrecognized Stoic antecedents in the classical *consolatio* genre, especially Seneca’s *De Consolatione Ad Marciam* (circa 45 AD).

Founded by Zeno of Citium, Stoicism combined elements of Platonism, Megarianism, and Cynicism. Stoicism is typically defined by three pillars: logic, ethics, and physics. Stoic Logic (*logikē*), established by Chrysippus, is propositional—a reaction to Aristotle’s syllogistic term logic—and can be separated into two categories, the dialectic and the rhetorical. Zeno and subsequent Stoic school leaders taught that physics (*phusis*) constitutes an active principle (*logos* or God) as the causal force pervading all things and matter (*ousia*), which is passive and acted upon; this ontological relationship fosters a causally deterministic existence for mankind. Stoic ethics (*ethikos*) is informed by classical virtue ethics: if man lives in accordance with nature habitually cultivating wisdom, moderation, temperance and justice, then he will achieve *eudaimonia*, translated as happiness or the good life, with *apatheia* as remuneration. The negative passions (appetite, fear, pleasure

and distress) are then irrational and deter man from what should be his objective: “To suffer a passion is to be in conflict with nature—to experience ‘fluttering’ rather than the ‘good flow’ of the happy person (Stobaeus, 65A; cf. Stobaeus, 63A)—and is therefore a vicious action *par excellence*, one that frustrates the agent’s progress toward the *telos*” (Durand et al.). Within the negative passions, grief (*penthos*) represents a specific form of distress (*lupē*)—an emotional misjudgment born from valuing external losses (such as death or misfortune) as genuine evils rather than indifferent events within nature’s causal order.

Emerson’s Stoicism is evident throughout his career, appearing in direct references to the movement and its philosophers as well as in philosophical borrowings from its three pillars. His exposure to Stoic philosophy began at Harvard where he read the works of Cicero and Seneca. His later admiration for Michel de Montaigne, known as the French Seneca, deepened his affinity for Stoicism. With the same derision and emphatic voice that he uses in “The American Scholar” (1837) and “The Harvard Divinity School Address” (1838), an older Emerson decrees an American adaptation of Stoicism in “The Sovereignty of Ethics” (1878): “It is true that Stoicism, always attractive to the intellectual and cultivated, has now no temples, no academy, no commanding Zeno or Antoninus. It accuses us that it has none: that pure ethics is not now formulated and concreted into a cultus, a fraternity with assemblings and holy-days, with song and book, with brick and stone” (W 10:209). Emerson praises the Stoic tradition for its secular propriety and mourns its absence in America while elevating Zeno and Marcus Aurelius—a well-referenced character in Emerson’s work—to his catalogue of representative figures who inculcate virtue.

Emerson’s dispassionate response to Waldo’s death in “Experience” can be easily misapprehended as indelicate if the reader is unacquainted with Stoic criteria. Louisa May Alcott recounts Emerson’s initial reaction to Waldo’s passing: “his father came to me, so worn with watching and changed by sorrow that I was startled and could only stammer out my message. ‘Child, he is dead’ was the answer. ‘That was my first glimpse of a great grief’” (Alcott 90). The night Waldo died, he wrote to Margaret Fuller: “Shall I ever dare to

love again?” (Emerson 3:6). Two years lapsed between Waldo’s death and the publication of *Essays Second Series* (1844), where Emerson transforms anguish into acceptance. After Waldo’s death, Emerson’s earlier uninhibited individuality and buoyant Romanticism gives way to a more mature and pragmatic tone, with “Experience” ruminating on tragedy, temperament, and the ultimate triumph of self-trust: “Never mind, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power” (W 3:86). “Experience” concludes with Emerson himself upholding the request in “Self-Reliance” (1841) for a Stoic exemplar or what the first generation of Stoics called the Stoic sage, a man who is godlike and of *logos* because he is indifferent, free from vanity and grief: “Let a stoic open the resources of man and tell men they are not leaning willows but can and must detach themselves: that with ‘self-trust,’ new powers shall appear . . . and that teacher shall restore the life of man to splendor and make his name dear to all history” (W 2:76). At the conclusion of “Experience,” Emerson is now among the “great men” like Zeno and Marcus Aurelius because his philosophy is no longer

aspirational. It is useful.

Stoicism is by nature historically practical, and its participation in the *consolatio* tradition proves this applicability because all are affected by death. Not all classical philosophers who compose *consolatio*s are formally Stoic, but the school’s mindset on bereavement is undeniably sensible in that loss is inherent to existence. *Consolatio* literature contains an array of mediums from orations to epistolary and verse. Its genre is elegiac, mourning the loss of someone or something (resulting from exile or punishment), and didactic as seen in the works of Seneca and Plutarch, who instruct mothers and friends on how to cope with the loss of a child.

Consolation literature in Emerson’s time was noticeably Romantic in verse and prose, inheriting the looming Gothic’s preoccupation with death and emotional expression. This sentimental allure permeated popular culture in diminutive and illustrative publications for grieving families like Richard Cecil’s *A Friendly Visit to the House of Mourning* (1791) or Rufus Griswold’s *The Cypress Wreath: A Book of Consolation for those who Mourn* (1844). A plethora of parlour songs like “Near the Lake Where Droop’d the Willow” (1839) and sentimental songs such as “Nelly’s Grave” (1858) and “Mary’s Grave” (1845) demonstrate the American public’s fascination with pathos and death. Contemporary verse writers of Emerson’s time, including Longfellow and Poe, crafted elegies that stirred the passions instead of nurturing a natural indifference toward death. By amplifying sentiment and prolonging grief, such works may have prompted Emerson’s philosophical turn toward Stoicism in the face of loss.

Jacob Risinger’s *Stoic Romanticism and the Ethics of Emotion* contends that scholars of “Experience” may have “overlooked an acclaimed passage from Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* Chapter 11 that bears intertextual qualities with ‘the beautiful estate’ analogy: ‘Never say anything, ‘I have lost it’; but, ‘I have restored it.’ Is your Child dead? It is restored. Is your Wife dead? She is restored. Is your Estate taken away? Well: and is not that likewise restored?’” (207). Emerson’s acquaintance with Epictetus is observable through allusions from



Daguerreotype of Waldo Emerson.
Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University.

1. Classicist Hans Baltussen traces the origins of the *consolatio*: “Death is, after all, an inescapable part of the human condition, as is our awareness of our mortality and how we undertake to deal with it. Some passages in Homer dealing more specifically with grief (5.381-415; 77.24) may have guided orators who in the fifth century B.C.E. wrote funerary speeches, thus developing the more focused discourse for exhortations and advice to those who are left behind” (70).

“The Oversoul” (1841) and *Society and Solitude* (1870) in which he references “the sentences of Epictetus” (and Marcus Aurelius) as “such other books as have acquired a semi-canonical authority in the world, as expressing the highest hope of nations” (Emerson 208). While Emerson may have taken the word estate (ἔστιάριον) from the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus’s chapter appears to be purloined from Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), the forefather of the Stoic *consolatio*. Emerson’s engagement with Seneca and Epictetus does not merely mark imitation but situates him within the continuum of Stoic reflection, revealing his place in the transhistorical tradition of ethical self-possession and respect for the *logos*. To see more concretely how this lineage surfaces, it is worth turning to the very consolatory texts that shaped Emerson’s response to grief, especially Seneca’s early *Dialogi*.

Seneca’s *Dialogi* includes three consolations: *De Consolatione Ad Marciam*, *De Consolatione Ad Polybium*, and *De Consolatione Ad Helviam Matrem*. *De Consolatione Ad Marciam* (40–45 CE), Seneca’s earliest surviving work, is a desperate venture for the author to remedy the chronically grieving mother Marcia from her “incapacity to acquiesce to what had been ordained” when her son Metilius died three years prior (Manning). Robert Richardson reveals that Emerson “read the Roman Stoic Seneca’s *Letters*” (43) in the early 1820s, and an 1832 journal entry references Seneca’s *Letters* 90.34: “Potentiissimus esset qui se habet in potestate” (508). However, as there is no evidence that Emerson read the *Dialogi*, it may be assumed that he read *De Consolatione Ad Marciam* because of his interest in the philosopher and remarkable resemblance of “Experience” to the letter. At minimum, Emerson would have encountered an allusion to *De Consolatione Ad Marciam* in Charles Cotton’s translation of Montaigne’s “That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die” from *Essays* (1685), a book that he inherited from his father’s library (W 4:162).

Seneca deploys *apatheia* from the onset of *De Consolatione Ad Marciam*. He argues that because Marcia successfully overcame the death of her father, her current inability to cease grieving her son represents a failure of previous interventions. He therefore resolves to “battle” her sorrow, warning: “if you disprove of my efforts... then you must continue to hug and fondle the grief which you have adopted as the survivor of your son” (164). While touting that “Grief too will make idealists of us,” Emerson integrates idealism with the corporeal Stoic tradition in fashioning Waldo as the consummate “not me” and deliberately paraphrasing

Seneca’s *De Consolatione Ad Marciam*’s Chapter 10 into an essay that is otherwise reliant on idealist convictions regarding phenomena and temperament. Seneca catalogues the gifts that we obtain from fate (“children” and “large halls”) as material externals like “furniture” and then references “properties” that are “borrowed,” writing

My Marcia, all these adventitious circumstances which glitter around us, such as children, office of the state, wealth, large halls, vestibules crowded with clients seeking vainly for admittance, a noble name, a well-born or beautiful wife . . . are but furniture which is not our own, but entrusted to us on loan: none of these things are given to us outright: the stage of our lives is adorned with properties gathered from various sources, and soon to be returned to their several owners: . . . We have, therefore, no grounds for regarding ourselves with complacency, as though the things which surround us were our own: they are only borrowed: we have the use and enjoyment of them for a time regulated by the lender, who controls his own gift: it is our duty always to be able to lay our hands upon what has been lent us with no fixed date for its return, and to restore it when called upon without a murmur: the most detestable kind of debtor is he who rails at his creditor. (174)

Using a similar banking discourse to Seneca’s “*pessimi debitoris est creditori facere convicium*” (Marciam 6.10.2), Emerson commences his analogy by materializing Waldo as “borrowed” property; therefore, when he loses his estate, he is not “the debtor . . . who rails at his creditor” because he understands his son, like his property, is an external and cannot harm him: “it would leave me as it found me neither better or worse” (W 3: 48). For the Stoic philosopher, perfection is living in accordance with nature (man’s teleological end), so when Emerson takes on the persona of the American Stoic sage, he can articulate to his readers that grief, being a negative passion, is irrational, and *eudaimonia* is obtainable even in the worst happenings. Epictetus’s passage may encourage the transience of individual entities and their continual governance by the *logos*, but Seneca’s *De Consolatione Ad Marciam* precedes the *Enchiridion*

by approximately 80 years, making it a more plausible antecedent for Emerson's "beautiful estate." Moreover, Epictetus would have likely experienced Seneca's works due to his notoriety and the former's shared history with Musonius Rufus, Epictetus's teacher. Notwithstanding, Epictetus, unlike Emerson, may be reticent on identifying Seneca's contribution to his works, presumably due to the predecessor's notoriously hypocritical lifestyle or because Roman Stoics from Epictetus's generation eschewed the ungodly Nero's accomplices.

Since Emerson's intellectual career is espoused to subordinating representative scholars to his own thought, "Experience" may contain the latent narration of other esteemed philosophers who represent virtue and share concurrent interests in Platonism and Stoicism, movements that are not mutually exclusive (Stoicism derives from Platonism) and important to Transcendentalism. Historian and Middle Platonist Plutarch (46 CE–119 CE), the subject of Emerson's biographical sketch, composed *Consolatio Ad Apollonium* (late 1st century–early 2nd CE) and *Consolatio Ad Uxorem* (circa early 90s CE). Emerson would have read these works because, according to his son Edward, "Mr. Emerson loved the racy English of Morgan's edition of the *Morals* of 1718" (540). The Christian Platonist Boethius is enumerated in Emerson's "Plato; or, the Philosopher" (1850) "among every brisk young man who says in succession fine things to each reluctant generation" (W 4: 39). Boethius's allegoric *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (523 CE) is broadly acknowledged as a work replete with Christianity, Platonism, and Stoicism, featuring Lady Philosophy who instructs a wrongfully imprisoned Boethius, now awaiting death, on how to comprehend the deceptive Fortuna, the Roman goddess of fortune: "If then, thou art master of thyself, thou wilt possess that which thou wilt never be willing to lose, and which Fortune cannot take from thee" (46). Plutarch's and Boethius's influence on Emerson may not function the same rhetorically as does Seneca's *De Consolatione Ad Marciam*, but the content of "Experience" reveals that Stoicism can be employed alongside the works of Platonic philosophy as a prevailing method to dissipate unnecessary grief, mediate trauma, and live virtuously.

Emerson's great contribution to American thought comes through his pluralism: his emphasis on individuality and a cosmopolitan worldview. Emerson was no stranger to death with his father dying in 1811, his wife Ellen in 1831, his brother Edward in 1834, and then his brother Charles in 1836. After Ellen's death,

Emerson was disconsolate—or by Stoic terms unsound—because his value judgement was misaligned with nature: "He was in a strange frame of mind, compounded of shock, unnatural calm, and 'grief sharpened into anguish by the 'complete wreck of earthly good,' as he later called it" (Richardson 109–110). Like Cicero, who in his *Consolatio* (45 BCE) envisioned his deceased daughter Tullia to be deified among the gods, Emerson resorted to another world theory (Christianity) to make self-gratifying ethereal claims about Ellen: "My angel is gone to heaven" where he saw her as an "intercessory saint" (Richardson 109). Spiritualizing Ellen's afterlife did not aid his grief because substantial affection led him to inspect Ellen's tomb and her decaying body in 1832. Although residual Calvinism, Unitarianism, and idealistic Romanticism are melded to create Emerson's great works of the 1830s, when faced with presumably his greatest tragedy in the 1840s, empirical insight brings Emerson to the pragmatic self-trust bred from classical Stoicism, so he honors his own philosophy's utility in an Americanized consolation.

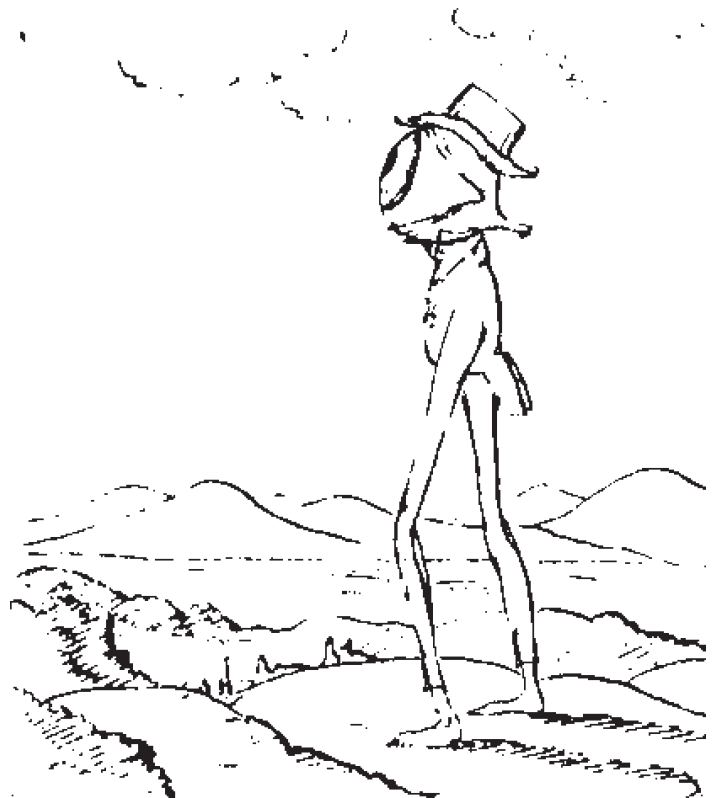
As Emerson concludes his meditation on Waldo, he ratifies Manning's definition of the Stoic consolation by harmonizing the personal and cosmic will through a *momento mori*, embracing an attitude akin to *amor fati*: "Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is reality that will not dodge us" (W 3:49). Here, the former Unitarian minister chides his previous unsuitable reactions to grief and utters a maxim that reads like a grim parody of the Calvinist sermon's discriminatory application. By using "we," Emerson universalizes our musings with death not as a temporal Romantic escapism but as what should be an inevitable and favorable part of the human condition. The denouement follows, and Emerson shelves his maudlin Romantic affiliations to teach us how to grieve righteously as he assumes his sapient role among the voices of Seneca and Epictetus: "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition" (W 3:49).

Emerson thus resurrects the classical *consolatio* for an increasingly secular age by incorporating the Stoic grammar of loss into his emerging American intellectual narrative. In "Experience," sorrow is not indulged as in other Romantic works but seen rationally and converted into a strenuous apprehension of order, a philosophical schooling of emotion in the service of insight. When Stoic resilience meets Transcendental

optimism, Emerson teaches that resignation need not negate nature's goodness and that wisdom emerges only when grief is accepted as nature's own instruction. To "live in agreement with nature" becomes at once an ethical practice and a poetic ideal: loss is not meant to be borne emotively but to be mastered, transfigured into a practical vision, an act of loving consent to fate—an *amor fati*.

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DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

(Continued from page 1)

his commitment to careful and historically grounded interpretation that respects the integrity of Emerson's thought.

Beyond his scholarly publications, Urbas has been a dedicated servant of the Emerson Society itself. As a member of the Advisory Board, he has helped guide the organization's direction. As Program Director, he solicited proposals for panels at major conferences including the American Literature Association Annual Conference and special symposia along with sessions for the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering. His work was characterized by intellectual ambition and inclusiveness, encouraging scholars to explore Emerson from diverse perspectives while inviting methodological innovation. He organized roundtables addressing pressing questions about the current state and future directions of Emerson studies, fostering dialogue about the proper relation between the historical Emerson and current cultural and political issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Urbas was a great supporter of graduate student scholarship, helping to organize and promote two virtual graduate research panels. In helping to create space for future scholarship during a tumultuous and uncertain time speaks to his generosity of thought and concern for the future well-being of the field.

Urbas brings to Emerson studies a perspective shaped by his position at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne in France, where he serves as Emeritus Professor of American literature and philosophy. This transatlantic vantage point has enriched his work, allowing him to situate Emerson within broader currents of nineteenth-century thought and trace Emerson's influence across national and linguistic boundaries. As a member of the philosophy research group SPH (Sciences, Philosophie, Humanités), he embodies the interdisciplinary approach that Emerson himself championed.

What distinguishes Urbas's scholarship is its combination of philosophical rigor, historical depth, and interpretive boldness. He advances strong theses about Emerson at a time when many scholars prefer

more tentative approaches, yet his arguments are always grounded in painstaking attention to textual evidence. The result is scholarship that is both provocative and persuasive, opening new avenues for research while remaining deeply respectful of historical context.

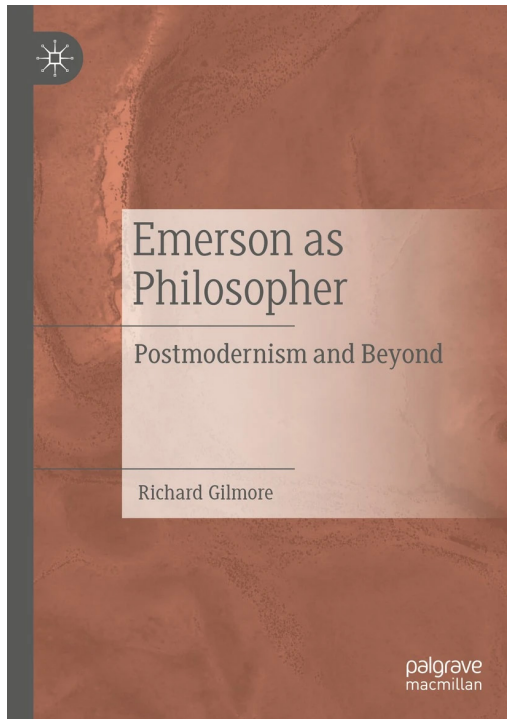
The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society is profoundly grateful to Dr. Joseph Urbas for his many contributions to our collective understanding of Emerson's thought and for his service to our scholarly community. His two major monographs will stand as essential resources for Emersonians for generations to come, and his articles have enriched important debates about how we read and teach Emerson. His work with programming and panels helped ensure that the Society remained intellectually vital and inclusive.

In honoring Dr. Joseph Urbas with the Distinguished Achievement Award, we recognize not only past accomplishments but also the ongoing influence of his scholarship. His reconstruction of Emerson's metaphysics has fundamentally altered the landscape of Emerson studies. Scholars working on epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, religion, and politics in Emerson must now contend with Urbas's demonstration of how these areas rest on metaphysical foundations. Those interested in Emerson's global influence and

in comparative philosophy have been given new tools and frameworks.

We thank Dr. Urbas for his dedication to scholarly excellence, for his courage in challenging prevailing interpretations when the evidence demanded it, and for his generosity in service to the Emerson Society. His work embodies the kind of intellectual integrity and passionate engagement with ideas that Emerson himself exemplified. The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society is honored to recognize Dr. Joseph Urbas as a truly distinguished scholar whose contributions have enriched our understanding of one of America's greatest thinkers. This award is a token of our immense gratitude for his service to Emersonian scholarship and to our community of scholars.

*Michael C. Weisenburg
University of South Carolina*



EMERSON AS PHILOSOPHER: POSTMODERNISM AND BEYOND. RICHARD GILMORE. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 222 pp. \$129.00, hardcover.

“I do not propose to get Emerson ‘right,’” Richard Gilmore makes explicit in his introduction to *Emerson as Philosopher*. “I do not present what follows as Emerson ‘scholarship,’ although I have done a lot of scholarship on Emerson over the course of the last thirty years” (1). What Gilmore “is doing” with Emerson “is Thinking” (3): “thinking Emerson’s philosophy with other philosophers...finding similar ideas, finding similar ways of expressing different ideas, exploring the proliferation of ideas that the conjunction of Emerson’s philosophy with other philosophers produces” (11). Accordingly, reading this book involves being with Gilmore “in thought” (an idea from Peirce) as he investigates Emerson’s ideas “popping up in the work of all sorts of other philosophers” (viii).

For example, Gilmore shows how “[Simone de] Beauvoir’s artist is Emerson’s Man Thinking” (47). He shows how Emerson describes “the same processes, the same logics, that [Gilles] Deleuze and [Félix] Guattari and [Slavoj] Žižek are describing, although in with [sic] a different vocabulary” (92). He shows how Emerson and Luce Irigaray offer “a postmodern solution to the

problem of sexual difference” by insisting that “we must internalize the looping chiasmus of the poles of male and female” (146, 150). And he shows how “Using Emerson’s epistemology of circles enlarges [Jacques] Derrida’s concept of the trace” (181). In effect, *Emerson as Philosopher* recounts the “reverberations of Emerson’s philosophy” in the work of other thinkers and, in turn, uses their work “to recover the philosophy of Emerson” (103).

The book consists of an introduction and three parts. In “Part I: Emerson as Philosopher,” Gilmore pursues his “own work to reappropriate Emerson as a philosophical writer” (3). Charles Sanders Peirce “is a major touchstone” (12), evident in the way Gilmore reads Emerson “not as a metaphysician but as a semiotician” (11) and in the way he often uses Peirce’s more “explicitly philosophical” (24) vocabulary as a mediator between Emerson and other thinkers. Like the book as a whole, this part includes a variety of connections, close-readings, speculations, and concepts (ranging from Žižek’s “ambiguous obscene” (61) to Harold Bloom’s *Zimzum* “from [his] discussion of the Lurianic Kabbalah” [44]). Consequently, familiar Emerson lines, ideas, and essays appear in new contexts and with new aspects. For instance, Gilmore likens Emerson’s sense of “reception”—or receptivity—to Beauvoir’s concept of “allowing disclosure”: “to allow the being of other things, other beings, to reveal themselves to you” (43).

“Part II: Postmodern Emerson,” which approaches postmodernism not as a specific “temporal period” but a “mental attitude” (66), explores how Emerson shares “attitudinal stances” (67) with thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Deleuze and Guattari, and Žižek. While Emerson, in Gilmore’s reading, articulates “postmodern existential despair” (70), he “is not doing a hermeneutics of suspicion. He is doing a hermeneutics of joy” (71), practicing, Rorty-like, “a certain relativism” (80) that requires ever drawing new circles as the “truth” or “the discourse of any drawn circle becomes normalized” (81). “I find,” Gilmore writes, “that there is no postmodern wildness of ideas that is wilder than the ideas that are already there in Emerson” (92).

The book’s longest section, “Part III: Emerson and...,” pairs Emerson with Žižek, Octavio Paz, Luce Irigaray, Derrida, and Martin Heidegger, and it concludes with “A Brief Reading of ‘Fate’: Thinking about ‘Fate’ after Cavell, Bloom, and Rorty.” Though one could read (and teach) these chapters and others as stand-alone chapters, one would miss the experience of

accumulating meanings (or “traces”) along the way. For instance, Gilmore’s reading of “Fate,” near the end of the book, concludes with this joyful synthesis:

The double consciousness resolves itself into a third thing, a thinking thing. In the process of thinking we are in the process of transforming the world’s potential into our own actual which can become the actual for other[s] as well. We are walking khôra, receptacles, schemata, transition spaces, chiasmus, movements between extremes of difference, difference between the ME and the NOT ME, between sexual difference of female and male, between past me and prospective me, past us and prospective us as a community... Nature solicits us, that is what Heidegger means by ‘that which calls for thought,’ and we can respond to that call by thinking, thinking which is a collaboration with Nature that will feel like a fiesta and end in joy. (205)

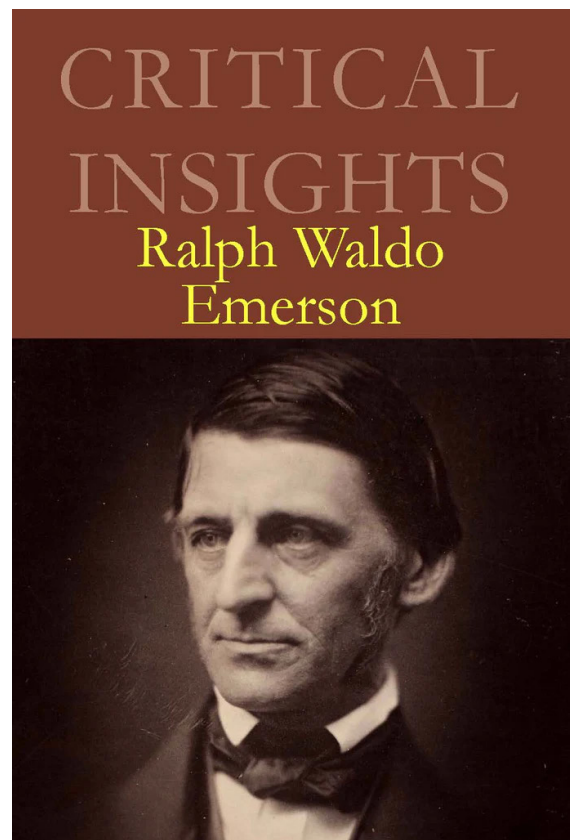
This intertextual weave exemplifies what Gilmore does throughout the book and what he describes in his account of a Derridean deconstruction understood via Emerson’s “epistemology of circles” (181): “What one discovers in reading a Derridean deconstruction of a text is a wonderful expansion of concepts one thought one understood, or maybe did not understand or did not think were so important... This is a form of liberation. This is a breaking free of literal narratives that are essential expressions of metanarratives” (182). One might say this is also what *Emerson as Philosopher* performs. This book is conversational, creative, smart, and attentive to detail despite occasional distractions such as a few notable typos, including the repeated misspelling of Cornel West’s name, which unfortunately appears in the book’s closing provocation: “My argument in this work has been that Emerson is funny, playful, emotionally deep, intellectually expansive, operating at the very highest level of human intentionality, and, most important of all, extremely *useful* in this, as Cornell West puts it, ‘our postmodern moment’” (206). *Emerson as Philosopher* celebrates this useful postmodern Emerson with a fruitfulness perhaps best measured by the fact that it leaves one in a thinking mood.

Prentiss Clark
University of South Dakota

CRITICAL INSIGHTS: RALPH WALDO EMERSON. EDITED BY JERICHO WILLIAMS (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2023), 252 pp. \$105.00, hardcover.

Readers of these pages may recall David M. Robinson’s review of Albert J. von Frank’s *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Poetry* (2015), in which he noted that Emerson’s poems had previously been “a somewhat neglected child.” However, Robinson suggested that von Frank’s edition (along with his variorum edition of Poems with Thomas Wortham) might “initiate an overdue reconsideration of Emerson as a poet” (ESP, 27.1, p. 13). In *Critical Insights: Ralph Waldo Emerson*, we see the fruits of von Frank’s labor as its best contributions focus on Emerson’s verse, though the book offers plenty of insights into his prose as well.

The *Critical Insights* series (Salem Press), which offers literary criticism distilled for student readers, has published monographs on early American stalwarts such as Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, and Louisa May Alcott. The volume on Emerson is capably edited by Jericho Williams, who also contributes an introductory essay on Emerson’s engagement with reform movements. Reflecting on two lesser known Emerson essays – “New England Reformers” and “Farming” – Williams writes that in an age of social



media influencers and “screen culture,” reform efforts which lack “a deep and pressing personal commitment” will flounder” (xx). Emerson’s approach, Williams concludes, is an antidote to the increasing entanglement of individualism and consumerism, which prevents us from “witnessing the first-hand consequences of environmental disregard” (xvii).

Joshua Boyd also explores Emerson and social reform, particularly as expressed in “Self-Reliance.” While Boyd acknowledges the essay’s appeal to “punk rockers and progressive educators alike” (3), he warns against quoting lines out of context. Readers must understand the religious and historical dimensions of “Self-Reliance” to grasp Emerson’s fundamental idea that “societal reform starts with personal reform” (19). After Boyd’s piece, the typical starring cast of Emerson’s essays – “Self-Reliance,” “The American Scholar,” “Experience” – plays a supporting role in the rest of the book. That is because, as Williams explains in his introduction, one of the intentions of the book is to inspire “a new generation of readers” to encounter Emerson beyond “Self-Reliance.”

While that is an admirable aim, some contributions could have been more intentional in nudging readers toward good scholarship. For instance, Christopher Allan Black’s analysis of Emerson’s influence on Margaret Fuller would be more beneficial if it referenced major works on Fuller by Megan Marshall or John Matteson. Trevor B. Williams’s piece on Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” only vaguely connects Emerson’s skepticism of Jesus’s divinity to “our contemporary language about ‘secularization’ and disaffiliation” (104). Both pieces do well to correct misreadings of Emerson’s influence on women’s rights or American religious beliefs, but they may not resonate with student readers who do not have foundational knowledge in these areas.

At the book’s center are essays by three “pillars of Emerson studies” (Williams viii): Sue Dunston, Len Gougeon, and Albert von Frank. Dunston’s piece superbly weaves details from Emerson’s life and writings to explain how Emerson could simultaneously advocate for solitude and individualism while remaining deeply tied to his friends and community. This piece will resonate with readers who feel increasingly disconnected from their friends and the natural world. Gougeon delivers his usual stalwart defense of Emerson’s antislavery writings, highlighting his radical stance by quoting from the anti-abolitionist congressman Samuel Cox, who correctly noted that Transcendentalists wanted Emanci-

pation because they believed in “No matter, no color, nothing but the soul in man; he is all; it is all” (qtd. in Gougeon 121). Von Frank’s essay also tackles Emerson and abolition, venturing a cautious, “Subjunctive Investigation” of William Lloyd Garrison’s possible influence on Emerson in the 1830s. Von Frank’s piece models the kind of conscientious scholarship we see in his indispensable *Chronology* and his editions of Emerson’s poetry. In his essay, von Frank quotes from Emerson’s journal entry of May 18, 1831: “The poet casts his eyes on no object soever, not on a tub or shore but it grows poetical in his eyes. The whole world is a poem to him” (JMN 3: 253).

Emerson’s “democratic-egalitarian aesthetic” – a lens that allows us to see that “things and persons begin to matter” (Von Frank 134) – underpins many of the essays in this volume. Benjamin Crawford pits one of Emerson’s antislavery poems, “Boston Hymn” (1863), against Henry Timrod’s ode to the Confederacy, “Ethnogenesis” (1861). Crawford skillfully reveals that while both authors embraced expansionism at the expense of Native American rights, Timrod’s piece ignores slavery altogether, but Emerson’s poem affirms the human dignity of black Americans, asking, “Who is the owner? The slave is owner, / and ever was. Pay him” (155). Dalicia K. Raymond offers much needed clarity on Emerson’s cryptic Merlin poems, explaining not only Emerson’s lifelong fascination with the Arthurian magi but also his own aspirations to be a visionary “bard and prophet” (176). And Robert C. Evans traces various critical readings of Emerson’s “Hamatreya” through the last sixty years, helping readers understand the power of Earth-Song’s enduring vision.

But the hidden jewel in this volume is Charles Rowe’s superb study of Emerson’s nature poetry. Emerson uses poetry as a tool, Rowe writes, to explore “the affinitive relationship between humans and nature” (179) and, as Wordsworth did, counter “the scientific impulse to sever and analyze” the natural world (180). It is the “process of seeking” that most captivates Emerson, rather than “the quicksilver character of fulfillment” (181). Thus, Emerson’s nature poetry forces us to acknowledge “our imperfect, mediate vision” (186) as well as our own finitude, yet encourages us to return to the natural world “in hopes of arriving at similar moments of heightened perception” (181). Rowe’s analyses of “Each and All,” “The Snow-Storm,” and “Threnody” are insightful and inspire us to seek fresh insights from Emerson’s poetry. Indeed, as Rowe concludes, for Emerson “The poet is a

maker. He does not ‘stop’ or ‘rest’ in any one ‘meaning’ for long. The ‘tidal flow’ continues, and he continues to adjust to its flow” (189). The same might be said for readers of Emerson’s verse.

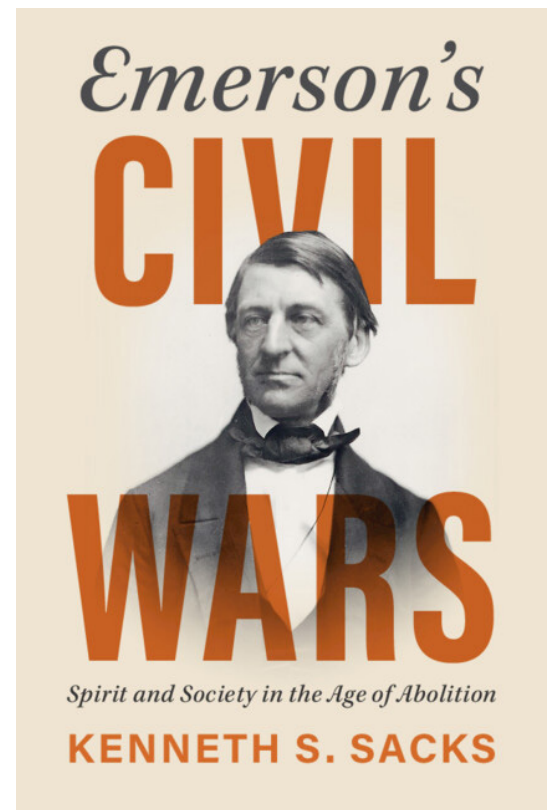
The volume concludes with two essays discussing Emerson’s posthumous legacy: one by Stephen M. Mercier discussing Emerson’s impact on John Burroughs, and the other by Jeff Westover, exploring how Mary Oliver engaged with the Transcendentalists in her poetry. Even though Emerson’s rhetoric was “often more high-flown” than Oliver’s (206), she took to heart Emerson’s call to “look – for that is the liquor of life, that brooding upon issues, that attention to thought even as we weed the garden or milk the cow” (qtd. in Westover 206). Westover’s lovely essay reminds us that both Oliver and Emerson viewed the world as a gift, and “the point is to accept the gift with thanks, humility, and love” (219).

Though this volume does not always blaze new trails, it certainly paves a smoother path for readers to encounter Emerson not merely as an essayist or philosopher who wrote poetry on the side, but as a writer who, in the words of von Frank, believed that “poetry and philosophy comprise in fact a single pursuit” (*The Major Poetry* xi). We may hope for further opportunities for students and scholars alike to bequeath to this “neglected child” of Emerson studies its overdue inheritance.

Clark T. Moreland
The University of Texas – Permian Basin

“Here is a statute which enacts the crime of kidnapping,—a crime on one footing with arson and murder. A man’s right to liberty is as inalienable as his right to life.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson
“The Fugitive Slave Law”(1851)



EMERSON’S CIVIL WARS: SPIRIT AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF ABOLITION. KENNETH S. SACKS (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 268 pp. \$39.99, hardcover.

Kenneth S. Sacks presents a fresh new perspective on Emerson’s status as an abolitionist. As America enters into another period of intense political division, Sacks’s assessments of the motivations and perspectives of one of America’s most prominent thinkers during the Antebellum period feel especially timely. Sacks draws on Emerson’s journals, speeches, and private correspondences to track Emerson’s attitudes on slavery and abolition across his life. *Emerson’s Civil Wars* paints a refreshingly critical and realistic picture of Emerson, examining the ways that Emerson prioritized his personal convenience and social status over the moral considerations of slavery.

Sacks’s previous work on Emerson, his 2003 book *Understanding Emerson*, focuses on an extended analysis of Emerson’s speech “The American Scholar.” In this follow-up work, Sacks expands his analysis to include a wider range of Emerson’s writings to assess the author’s implicit stance on slavery. Sack’s central observation in his book is best summarized by the final sentence of his introduction: “Emerson fit abolition into his life, not his life into abolition” (12). After establishing that Emerson could not be considered an abolitionist until 1856, Sacks asks: why was his move toward abolition-

ism so late, and why did his perspective change? Sacks structures his book into six chapters. Chapter one establishes that Emerson was reluctant to speak on slavery, with chapters two, three, and four giving the reasons why (reputation, spirituality, and views on race). Chapter five then explains the process by which Emerson's mind was changed toward abolition, with chapter six presenting the resulting philosophy on which he landed.

Through his analysis in his first four chapters, Sacks shows that Emerson did not express concern about enslaved people until it impacted him, citing his reaction to the Fugitive Slave Law as a prime example. As Sacks notes, Emerson felt that "White people, too, had lost their liberty" through having to catch and return people to slaveholders (44). Further, even when Emerson did express concern about slavery, he asserted that slavery would disappear through the natural progression of human morality, so therefore neither he nor anyone else needed to take any action against it. Similarly, Sacks shows that as Emerson gained greater and greater degrees of celebrity status, he was more and more concerned with only pleasing audiences. Sacks notes that "Emerson's lyceum talks established his celebrity" and as a result "money and fame mattered" to him (67). As his fame grew, Sacks notes that so too did the reputation of the lyceum as "a medium of entertainment," and as a result "Emerson's speaking style grew increasingly folksy and the substance of his talks became commensurately more cautious" (61).

Sacks goes on to highlight the ways that Emerson's faith in Neoplatonism and gradualism influenced him to express non-concern about slavery. Emerson's belief in gradualism led him to assert that a gradual move away from slavery was divine and inevitable. Further, his belief in Neoplatonism led to his understanding that any social action taken against slavery would be imperfect and thus could be detrimental to its gradual decline. Emerson's faith relied on the Neoplatonist idea that "the ineffable One or Good is the source of all existence," and that "immutable cosmic forces such as fate" were the cause of real change rather than people (90-91). Sacks notes that it was this devotion to Neoplatonism that led Emerson to his ideas on self-reliance, as the collective is not a concern when social change always comes from a divine power.

Sacks then pivots to a specific discussion of Emerson's racism. He notes that his perspectives on race were unpredictably wide reaching, with Emerson sometimes making claims rooted in scientific racism, and

other times arguing that racial categories are artificial. Sacks notes that Emerson also wrote a large volume of racist comments in his private journals but considers that these "may have been his attempt to test his own moral sensibilities" rather than his true beliefs (107).

In the last two chapters of the book, Sacks explores Emerson's final conversion to abolition. Sacks argues that it was "not the violence...done to Black bodies as much as the violence done to White abolitionist bodies" that caused Emerson to start questioning his beliefs (118). Though Emerson continued to struggle with his idea that one's views should never solidify, the increase in violence against other White Americans ultimately began to sway Emerson's view, including the beating of his friend Charles Sumner. As Emerson began to grow concerned about this violence, his perspective on Neoplatonism also began to shift. Rather than seeing the divine as impeded by human actions, he began to see human social action as a gift from the divine to aid in the cause. After this shift in logic, Emerson decided to use his humanity to aid in the gradual move toward abolition that he saw as inevitable.

The evidence that Sacks presents throughout the book gives a full and clear picture of Emerson. However, at times the structure of the book makes it difficult to track Sacks's arguments. The book is structured at once both chronologically and thematically, making it difficult at times to identify the timeline of events overall and the causal links between ideas. It can be difficult to track the themes of race and spirituality across the two halves, as Emerson's philosophy, for example, is outlined in chapter three, but not returned to until chapter six, while some concerns, like Emerson's preoccupation with fame, are never returned to in the second half. While the discussions of why Emerson did not take up abolition are strong, the discussions of why and how Emerson became an abolitionist are not given the same depth of consideration.

Scholars of Emerson are likely to find this book a staple text for its insightful assessment of Emerson's motivations and character across time as it provides essential context to the moral and ethical perspectives of Emerson's writings. Further, historians will find this to be a useful case study on the ways that celebrity, self-interest, and religious belief influenced American perspectives on slavery leading up to the Civil War.

*Anna McAnnally
University of Missouri*