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EMERSON AND THE VISION OF THE CHILD

by

Matthew McClelland

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Introduction

“All my Questions are usually started in the infancy of inquiry...”<sup>1</sup>

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

On May 28, 1820, a seventeen-year-old Ralph Emerson sat in his room at Harvard College and began writing in his journal. Emerson had been keeping the journal—what would be his only life-long literary project—for a mere five months. “I am now sitting before the Pedagogue’s Map of Europe,” the teenage Emerson began,

& am startled almost to behold the immense region which Alexander governs. The ample domains of the emperor of Russia are nearly equal to the rest of Europe. One man is insignificant in the extremest degree set down in this mighty land; yet all the millions of population planted in this stretching territory & seemingly bound by no ties but the eternal bands of their common earth bow to the despotism of an individual like themselves. One would think his mind would dilate, “expand with strong conception” to meet the grandeur of circumstance with which God has surrounded him & accommodate himself to his vast commission. The bell rings.<sup>2</sup>

The Alexander to whom Emerson refers was the first of three Russian Tsars all bearing that name. Known for his startling political ambition and youth as he commenced

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Letters of RWE*. Ed. Ralph L. Rusk. 6 vols. New York: Columbia U Press, 1939. Vol. I, 137. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as *L*, followed by the volume and page number.

<sup>2</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. William H. Gilman et al., 14 vols. Cambridge: HUP, Belknap Press, 1960. Vol. I, 16. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as *JMN*, followed by the volume number and page number.

to rule, by 1820 the nineteen-year old Alexander had already guided Russia through the chaotic period of the Napoleonic Wars. Alexander had succeeded to the throne after his father, Emperor Paul I, was murdered in a coup orchestrated in 1801. By contrast, Emerson's own young life was beset with a mundane poverty, due largely to his father's death as Emerson approached eight years old. He had little hope that he would have anything more than a "freshman's seat in the world,"<sup>3</sup> and an Alexander I, young Emerson undoubtedly thought to himself as he responded to the Harvard school bell, he would never be.

But consider the mind of this teenage Emerson as he looked at the map. This shy, socially awkward seventeen-year-old boy measured territory (and History itself) by the magnificent man. Young Waldo tells us, "one man is insignificant in the extremest degree set down in this mighty land" that the map represents, and yet he still wonders, with obvious adolescent awe, how "one man" could make "millions...bow to the despotism of an individual like themselves?" Emerson's eventual answer to this implicit question, pitched upon a sense of his personal inadequacies as he compared himself to young Alexander, would not come until many years later, when as a fifty-one year old man he would write in the pages of *Representative Men*, "It is natural to believe in great men...The search after the great man is the dream of youth and the most serious occupation of manhood."<sup>4</sup> Examining precisely how and why Emerson developed this

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<sup>3</sup> (*JMN* 5: 58).

<sup>4</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, and Douglas Emery Wilson. 6 vols. to date. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971—. 89. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as *CW*, followed by the volume number and page number.

particular “will to believe” is one aim of the following pages.<sup>5</sup>

Like most appeals to what is “natural,” Emerson’s mature belief in “great men” was predicated upon his earliest recollections of his personal past. (“Natural” and “Nature” are etymological relations to *nasci*, which means, “to be born.”)<sup>6</sup> But the trouble with examining the origins of any of Emerson’s ideas resides in the fact that he frequently rejected the past on what appeared to be aesthetic literary grounds. “Our age is retrospective,” he insisted in his first book-length publication, *Nature*, “It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism.”<sup>7</sup> Two years later, working the same thought in his private journal, he put the rejection more urgently, “Forget the past, be not a slave to your own past.”<sup>8</sup> Both public and private literary rejections of the past continued throughout Emerson’s career, but what the following study proposes is that Emerson’s self-conscious literary rejection of the past occurred because forgetting the past helped him to efface the actual reality—the *nature*—of his own upbringing.

The nature of Emerson’s experienced past is best read in his journals and correspondence, where the origins of what would become Emerson’s literature, as well the origins of what would become Emerson the man, are most readily revealed. Of course

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase belongs to William James, who tells us, “Desire, wish, will are states of mind which everyone knows, and which no definition can make plainer. We desire to feel, to have, to do, all sorts of things which at the moment are not felt, had, or done. If with the desire there goes a sense that attainment is not possible, we simply *wish*; but if we believe that the end is in our power, we *will* that the desired feeling, having, or doing shall be real; and real it presently becomes, either immediately upon the willing or after certain preliminaries have been fulfilled.” James, William *Psychology: The Briefer Course* Ed. Gordon Allport. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985. 283

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Carlyle’s *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) played an important role in elevating Emerson’s natural disposition towards the “great man” into a theory.

<sup>7</sup> (CW 1:7).

<sup>8</sup> (JMN 7:25).



it has long been known that Emerson's journals were the private proving ground for his public lectures, published essays, and poems. But less known and less understood are the personal psychic sources that support and sustain Emerson's public literary project—Emerson's "inner life," as Stephen Whicher once put it.<sup>9</sup> Confessional moments of introspection are as scarce in Emerson's mature journals as they are in his public works. Rarely does Emerson confess or confide in his journal, though when he does, it is often in the context of vocation, role, or sometimes, admissions of emotional coldness. In his mature journals, Emerson's interests are typically extroverted—*personal* in the sense that it is always the Emersonian *I* looking at the world. Yet this isn't true of his early journals, which are often concerned with personal despairs and psychological insecurities. Throughout his early journals, Emerson openly struggles with what W.J. Bate called "the burden of the past,"<sup>10</sup> and historical figures like Alexander, along with what Harold Bloom has called "literary precursors" often serve as anxiety-inducing measuring posts for the adolescent Emerson.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, Emerson's mature position regarding his belief in Great Men benefits from recovering the personal past that he often sought to publicly efface in his published work.

Yet unlike much of Emerson's mature career, Emerson's earliest years have received very little scholarly attention, a fact that has hampered our understanding of

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<sup>9</sup> Whicher's version of Emerson's inner life was based upon the premise that Emerson "came to terms with conflicts as they developed...by dramatizing them," and maintained that his own book was "intended to 'produce' that drama." Whicher, Stephen E. *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1953. vii.

<sup>10</sup> Bate, W. Jackson. *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the University of Harvard, 1970.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, Harold *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Emerson's inner life.<sup>12</sup> In part, this relative dearth in Emerson scholarship is due to what Evelyn Barish recognized as the lack of "any real conscious schema" in Emerson's early journals. "Emerson's early years alone," Barish noted, "number some two thousand printed pages with notes and apparatus... Yet for all its fullness, the material resists reading."<sup>13</sup> Stephen Whicher has written, in an observation that almost entirely dismisses Emerson's youth: "Emerson came late into his force. The years recorded in the first two volumes of his journal—those before his resignation from the Second Church—show little distinction of style or thought."<sup>14</sup> More recently, Lawrence Buell: "for the first thirty years of his life, Emerson did little to distinguish himself from respectable mediocrity."<sup>15</sup>

Understandably, Emerson scholarship has leaned towards the adult half of Emerson's career, as it was during these years that Emerson made his greatest cultural and literary impact through lecturing and writing.<sup>16</sup> But as the following study hopes to

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<sup>12</sup> Notable studies include: Ralph C. LaRosa' "Emerson's Search for Literary Form: The Early Journals." *Modern Philology*, 69 (August 1971. 25-35.; Richard Lebeaux, "Emerson's Young Adulthood: From Patienthood to Patiencehood" *ESQ*, vol. 25, 4th quarter, 1979. (pp.203-210).; Albert J. Von Frank, "Emerson's Boyhood and Collegiate Verse: Unpublished And New Texts Edited From Manuscript." *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1983. (pp.1-19); Evelyn Barish, *Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy* (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1989). Mary Kupiec Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England 1800-1845* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Barish, Evelyn *Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989. 4 Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Barish.

<sup>14</sup> Whicher, Stephen *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Buell, Lawrence *Emerson*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003. 13. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Buell, *Emerson*.

<sup>16</sup> Emerson's most recent biographer, Robert D. Richardson Jr., like Stephen Whicher before him, characterizes the youthful Emerson with a few brisk strokes: "Emerson's college writings show him for the most part to have been a surprisingly conventional young man." "His own ideas were commonplace." "[He] wrote endless poems and sketches full of the schoolboy sublime." Richardson's estimations lack an etiological sensibility, a broader, more developmentally attuned way of viewing Emerson's youth that demonstrates how Emerson's early propensity for what

make clear, this is a deracinated view of Emerson, and much of how he became *Emerson* can be traced to his earliest years, when he first began the visionary process of rendering the experiences that would become his lectures, essays, poems, and journals.

What my study calls, Emerson's *vision of the child* appears throughout his oeuvre. In his first major publication, *Nature* (1836), Emerson establishes his claim of nature as a place where "a man casts off his years" and is "always a child." For the thirty-three year old Emerson who wrote *Nature*, the natural world is depicted as a place for recovering "the spirit of infancy," and throughout *Nature*, Emerson writes of joining the affective quality of the child's vision to the adult's intellect. *Nature* begins as an announced rejection of the cultural past, demanding "an original relation to the universe" that is akin to how "foregoing generations" experienced it.<sup>17</sup> But as Chapter One will show, Emerson's *Nature*-era rejections of the past are inherently biographical, rooted in Emerson's own past, and evidenced by his creation of a representative child that he developed in order to compensate for his actual childhood. Young Emerson's interest in Wordsworth, which moved from disdain, to eventual admiration and imitation, helps to show, in lieu of direct evidence,<sup>18</sup> how Emerson's frequent rejections of the cultural past are actually rejections of a personal past that was likely too painful for him to remember.

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Richardson calls the "schoolboy sublime" eventually overmastered his "surprisingly conventional" young mind.

<sup>17</sup> (CW 1:19).

<sup>18</sup> The inquiry into Emerson's beginnings is troubled by a paucity of resources. His mature work has the benefit of a large body of primary texts: sixteen volumes of journals; eight volumes of correspondence; and a collected edition of his works that are illuminated by a formidable and intensely informed scholarly apparatus. But only a few letters, some records from the Latin School, and several scraps of juvenile verse remain from Emerson's earliest years. The absence of textual evidence surviving from Emerson's youth, coupled with the fact the Emerson obscured and revised his childhood story requires that one begin at the imaginal end of the story: with the literary, figurative *vision of the child* that Emerson presents in his published works.

Chapter Two begins a series of chapters that are developmentally organized around the child theme. “The Child as Student” addresses Emerson’s schoolboy years, when literature gave the boyhood Emerson a psychological vocabulary for the relations between his self and his surroundings that he seems not to have been able to get through interaction with another person. Drawing together two sides of Emerson—the personal, and the public—by examining what Virginia Woolf, in an early review of Emerson’s youthful journals called the “schoolboy” and the “sage,” Chapter Two attends to several of Emerson’s student discoveries about his own mission as a writer, some while he attended Boston’s Latin School from the ages nine to fourteen, others while he attended Harvard from ages fourteen to eighteen. Providing a close reading of Emerson’s 1850 essay, “Montaigne, Or, The Skeptic,” the chapter emphasizes *original images*, giving a brief, and hopefully useful, explanation for how Emerson the writer originated from a tradition that is not quite Romantic in its concern for feelings, nor is it Modern, with its corroborative concern for finding the faults of a felt Romanticism. Emerson’s literary approach is closest to Montaigne, but limited in its auto-biographical thrust. Unlike Montaigne, Emerson lacked ability for personal disclosure, and this inability, part cultural, and part temperamental, has its truest source in his childhood and early youth, when he learned to compensate, mostly through journal writing, for a personal condition he called, quite suggestively, a lack of “power of face.”

Chapter Three, “The Child as Teacher” shows how beginning around the year 1821, Emerson initiates an interrogation of his own, primarily recent, personal past. Not yet a problem of vocation,<sup>19</sup> but more like the psychic orientation that would eventually

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, Henry Nash. “Emerson’s Problem of Vocation,” *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. Milton Konvitz and Stephen Whicher, (Prentice-Hall: New Jersey, 1962. 60-71)

cause it, the years 1821-23 show an Emerson who began to recognize the psychic disappointment caused by reckoning with personal history. Here the Emersonian boyhood foreground I present aims at a reading of Emerson's 1841 essay "History," where Emerson's own inability to reckon with personal history led to his more mature conflation between history and biography. Ultimately, Emerson learned to compensate for his experienced history by conflating it with a generalized History that he presents to his readers in a teacherly literary guise.

Chapter Four, "The Child as Preacher" posits the psychological persistence of what I call Emerson's *secret self*. The chapter provides a reading of Emerson's late adolescent era letters to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson. Emerson's insistence in keeping his childhood secreted away stimulated conflict with his early the public role of preacher. Here I show how, in 1835, after Emerson had "left" the Church but still served as a supply preacher, his life-long interest in Montaigne reappeared. The reappearance of Emerson's interest in Montaigne, coupled with Emerson's own ambivalent, and temporary, acceptance of the ministerial role, helps to establish some psychological context for a peculiar fantasy Emerson records in his journal in 1835: "When I write a book on spiritual things, I think I will advertise to the reader that I am a very wicked man, & that consistency is nowise expected of me."<sup>20</sup> Emerson never entirely explored this conscientiously Montaignean path of literary presentation. Yet, as my chapter argues, the fact that Emerson entertained the "wicked writing man" fantasy as early as 1835 shows how necessary it was for him to think of his developing writing career as a counterpoint to his life as a minister. The fantasy was a long running, enabling fiction for his writing life.

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<sup>20</sup> (JMN 5:40).

Chapter Five, “The Child as Lover” moves into what Albert J. von Frank has called Emerson’s “intimate sphere.”<sup>21</sup> Examining both Emerson’s first marriage to Ellen Tucker, and his second marriage to Lydia Jackson, the chapter aims toward a close reading of Emerson’s 1841 essay on “Love.” Here, what Emerson himself recognizes as a conscientious revising of experience in “Love,” is read in relation to his less conscientious, and perhaps less conscious, revision of his childhood. In “Love,” Emerson observes how “in looking backward,” the lover, “may find that several things which were not the charm have more reality...than the charm itself which embalmed them.” But it is the resentment caused by Ellen’s death, coupled with the domestic situation in which Emerson lived during his second marriage, which combined to make his melancholy feelings of aloneness into a philosophy of self-reliant solitude. Emerson responded to the death of his first wife by committing all the more to the self-image of the poet-orator. The inner aspect of Emerson’s own self, which he had begun to chart and track in his own journals, was beginning to be outed by his developing relationship with Ellen. But with Ellen’s early death, as my chapter argues, Ellen became Emerson’s representative lover, the gauge by which he would review and revise all future romantic relations.

A similar fate would befall Emerson with his son Waldo, who in his youthful death would become Emerson’s representative son. Chapter Six, “The Child as Father” examines Emerson’s depiction of his son’s death in his 1841 Essay “Experience,” which he also discussed in terms of its representative qualities. Like the death of his first wife Ellen, Waldo’s death returned Emerson to his own childhood, making him face certain forces of grief and pain that he had not allowed himself to face, or did not yet know how

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<sup>21</sup> Von Frank, Albert J. “‘Build Therefore Your Own World’: Emerson’s Constructions of the ‘Intimate Sphere.’” *Emersonian Circles: Essays in Honor of Joel Myerson*, edited by Wesley T. Mott and Robert E. Burkholder. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997. 1-10

to face. Precisely why the death wrought such a dramatic change in his philosophy—moving it from “Self-Reliance’s” “trust thyself,” to “Experience’s” “the individual is always mistaken”—involved the particular kind of hope Waldo seemed to represent to Emerson. Named after his own poetic personality (the middle name Emerson adopted for his *nom de plume* in his adolescence), Emerson imagined Waldo’s life as a potential for correction, on both the personal and social planes; and because of his early death, Waldo did not catch the negative projections of Emerson’s unmastered childhood suffering as his other living children would. Instead, like Ellen, Waldo became a representative of Emerson’s mastering strategy of obviating reality through literary representation.

Emerson’s strategy is further explored in Chapter Seven, “The Child as Friend and Mentor,” which focuses on several of Emerson’s mature relationships. Here, the self-confessed spectral quality regarding friendship that Emerson felt in his youth is read against Emerson’s 1841 essay “Friendship.” As a youth, Emerson had developed a childhood enabling myth that he used to maintain a sense of personal integrity amidst society. Mainly, the myth involved what he called in his journal a wish to “be independent of the control or will” of “fellow children.” But as the promise that he had made to himself in his own youth of becoming that central poet-orator remained unfulfilled, a tone of unkept promise began to dominate Emerson’s sense of youthful friends, acquaintances, and humanity more generally. Often projecting the promises of his own youth onto his friends—especially the younger ones—Emerson learned to face the fate of youth—that it is always ending—with the only defense he knew: writing.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, “Emerson and the Eternal Child,” Emerson’s literary methodology of *secret selfhood* and *representative selfhood* are examined in his 1844

essay “Character.” Comparing Emerson’s idea of character to theories of self ranging from Locke to Freud and Jung, the chapter shows how Emerson’s occulted sensibility regarding character development—what he calls, in an early teenage essay, the “daemon”—is at the root of one of Emerson’s original contributions to ideas: his vision of the privileged child guided by the daemonic tutor which helped Emerson to create his therapeutic fantasy called Self-Reliance. The irony, as the chapter argues, is that the daemonic trope is no example of self-reliance at all. Rather, it is a fine explanation for a man in his later years to summon to account for the difference between his youthful ambitions and his actual accomplishments, of which Emerson was perpetually dissatisfied. Not only did the fantasy fail to satisfy Emerson, there have also been long-term consequences of adopting Emerson’s vision of the child into American Culture.

Throughout *Emerson and the Vision of the Child*, the child symbol receives the principal emphasis. This approach takes its cue from Emerson’s 1841 essay “The Oversoul,” in which he suggests that his own natural belief in the genius of Great Men was born out of his childhood:

In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all. Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal. In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> (CW 5:147).



Emerson's childhood fascination with larger-than-life figures had an ambivalent effect upon him. Being "mad for persons," as Emerson himself was throughout his youth, inspired in his maturity an archetypal orientation to the concept of individuality that enabled him to impersonalize what was essentially the most personal kind of entity at all: the individual. Yet Emerson's psychic strategy of impersonalization—third-partying God as an impersonal result of the "conversation between two persons"—was itself born out of Emerson's vision of (and as) the child. This fact explains the title of my work, as well as the perceptible tilt towards Emerson's youth that is a feature of the following pages.

## Chapter One: The Representative Child

“Forget the past. Be not a slave to your own past.”<sup>23</sup>

*Emerson’s Journal, June 19, 1838*

In 1847, a forty-four year old Ralph Waldo Emerson refused to talk about his childhood in response to a letter from Mary Howitt, an English literary agent who was soliciting him for a biographical sketch. Howitt wrote to Emerson that she “wanted above all to know about his childhood and early home” so that she might introduce him to the English audience for whom he was preparing a lecture tour.<sup>24</sup> Oddly, for a writer who was himself so heavily invested in biography,<sup>25</sup> Emerson quailed: “With regard to the very flattering proposition you make it is my thanks but no such thing can be greatly considered me of giving my name & poor history a place in your Journal.” Emerson then wrote to Howitt (in the only version of the letter available, itself a heavily revised first draft),<sup>26</sup> “no anecdotes no connexions no experiences no fortunes concerned to say I have

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<sup>23</sup> (*JMN* 7:25).

<sup>24</sup> As quoted in footnote 170 from the notes. (*L* 3:417-18).

<sup>25</sup> See Harris, Kenneth Marc. “Transcendental Biography: Carlyle and Emerson”, *Studies in Literary Biography*. Ed. Daniel Aaron, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978, 95. Harris argues that both before and after Emerson was a transcendentalist, he was a biographer. Ronald Bosco has traced the progression of “Emerson’s Theory of Biography” arguing that the “study of his literary progression discloses that, instead of being a consequence of his idealism, from the mid 1830’s through the end of his career in the 1870’s, Emerson’s rejection of Plutarchan Formalism in the conception and execution of biographical and historical writing is very much a constituent element in his idealism.” Bosco, Ronald “Emerson’s Theory of Biography” From *Emersonian Circles* 78.

<sup>26</sup> On Emerson’s letter-writing practice, Harmon Smith notes, “Emerson employed two distinct styles in writing letters. Most of the time he wrote in a straightforward, business-like matter, but when he was corresponding with someone he wanted to impress, he used an elevated tone, often drafting the letters first, the copying them.” Smith, Harmon. *My Friend, My Friend: The Story of Thoreau’s Relationship with Emerson*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). 48. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Smith, *Friend*.

no history to write Really my course of life...would make the smallest figure in a narrative.” The discussion, Emerson hoped, would come to an end with these final words on the matter, “We will really say no more on a topic so sterile.”<sup>27</sup>

Emerson’s claim about the sterility of the topic of his childhood and early home has been partially ignored by those who have previously considered Emerson’s response to Howitt. Joel Porte observes how “Emerson was being extremely self-effacing (and undoubtedly also purposely secretive about his biography)” with Howitt, putting her off “not so much because nothing of interest happened to him as because he believed that the ordinary chronicle of a literary life for which he was being asked to supply facts would tell the reader little about the qualities of mind and spirit that informed the work.”<sup>28</sup> As a statement of what Emerson believed about chronicling his biography, the observations are accurate. As Porte asserts, Emerson did have “a theory of literary biography with which [his] remarks are perfectly consistent.”<sup>29</sup> But what this assessment leaves unresolved is how Emerson came to harbor this biographical belief in the first place. Porte speculates, “Emerson himself seemed to think that the story of his life would not make very interesting reading for the usual kind of devotees of biography.”<sup>30</sup> But Emerson did not necessarily have such thoughts about the story of his life. Rather, what Emerson did with Howitt, and what he did throughout his work, was engage in a conscientious attempt to sterilize childhood, putting in its place what might be called a representative childhood.

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<sup>27</sup> (L 3:418).

<sup>28</sup> See Porte, Joel. *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. pp. 10-11

<sup>29</sup> Porte, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Porte, 10

The replacement of Emerson's actual childhood with his representative one begins with his first book-length publication, *Nature* (1836), which opens with a clear rejection of the past, accompanied by an idealized childhood. Published some eleven years before Emerson's letter to Howitt, and published, as we sometimes forget, anonymously, *Nature's* first chapter invokes an Emersonian myth of the child's visionary capacity, setting it sharply against an adult who cannot see what the child sees:

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least, they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, —he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me.<sup>31</sup>

As *Nature* was published more than a month prior to the birth of his first child, the child that Emerson depicts in this passage is inspired by something more ideal than actual. Likely, it is the memory of himself as a child. Emerson claims that it is the "spirit of infancy" he wants to retain in this passage, but he does not depict the reality of childhood. Instead, he frames *Nature's* child-like spirituality as a compensation—it is "a wild delight" existing "in spite of real sorrows."

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<sup>31</sup> (CW 1:19).

For reasons that are both personal and literary, Emerson's real sorrows are not addressed. Nineteenth-century American propriety, unlike the twentieth-century's, did not approve of disclosures of difficult childhood stories—they are “impertinent griefs” in Emerson's circle, out of place.<sup>32</sup> But in his depiction of Nature as a comforting figure—a kind of loving mother who recovers him from an unnamed grief with glad acceptance—Emerson made something very close to a confession that his idealization of nature compensated for a sorrow-infused childhood.

This compensation has two sources, and both lead to the representative childhood Emerson would depict in *Nature*. The first is the poverty that began for the Emerson family after his father's death in 1811, and the second is the particularly remote relationship Emerson had with his mother throughout his childhood. However, the impulse to posit nature as a comforting mother was also a nineteenth-century literary commonplace, and this matter must be addressed before it can be shown that Emerson's own childhood stands behind the vision of the child he presents in *Nature*.

Evident in nineteenth-century English Romanticism, as well as the German romantic tradition informed by Goethe, Mother Nature was a literary figure that provided a more poetic and humanistic origin story than the patriarchal trope of Judeo-Christian God. Mother Nature seems to have served the function of a nurturing, compassionate foil to the capricious God whose ways could not be known. For English Romantics like Wordsworth, nature became a vehicle for self-awareness and a salvational *topos*—what

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<sup>32</sup> Even Charles Dickens (the writer perhaps best known for how “the trauma of his childhood stung him into bestsellerdom”) did not reveal to his adoring public that his fictions were, in part, wrought from his own biography. More than a year passed after Dickens's death in 1870 before the first volume of John Forster's *Life of Dickens* was published and the facts of Dickens's childhood became known. As the recent Dickens biographer Michael Slater observes, “The vast majority of Dickens' readers, so many of whom felt themselves to be on terms of personal friendship with him” had no idea at all about how the facts of Dickens' early life fed his fictions.

M.H. Abrams called “the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking.”<sup>33</sup> Emerson’s *Nature*, as Abrams also showed, shared this orientation.<sup>34</sup> Yet Emerson also participated in this literary tradition in a suggestively un-romantic way. Pitting the reasoning Father against the feeling and comforting Mother of his impertinent grief passage, Emerson also wrote in *Nature*, “That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language, as the FATHER.”<sup>35</sup> As Camille Paglia writes, this “is an irregular emphasis for Emerson, and the benign father-god whom it enshrines has no business in a Romantic work.”<sup>36</sup> Yet the gesture does have antecedents in Unitarian works, specifically William Ellery Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity” where God is very much the benevolent Father and the epitome of something like Reason.<sup>37</sup> Precisely when Emerson is being influenced by Unitarian theology, and when he is being influenced by Romantic philosophy is a tantalizing problem for the reader of Emerson, unsolvable if attempted in an exclusively ideological manner.

But the riddle of origins for Emerson’s ideas, while difficult on ideological terrain, is still enigmatic on biographical terrain. One of the difficulties of reading Emerson is that stories of the ideal childhood he presents in *Nature* often stand in for what might be more actual and accurate childhood stories. Emerson, like many

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<sup>33</sup> Abrams, M.H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973. 12.

<sup>34</sup> Abrams, pp. 412-414.

<sup>35</sup> (CW 2:11).

<sup>36</sup> Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nerfertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage, 1991. 601.

<sup>37</sup> Channing’s sermon was delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks in The First Independent Church of Baltimore on May 5, 1819. See, *William Ellery Channing: Selected Writings (Sources of American Spirituality)* ed. David Robinson. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.

nineteenth-century writers, favored the representative childhood story over the actual one. “Recourse to the vision of the child,” observed M.H. Abrams, “was not limited to English and American writers,” but is present too in Baudelaire, who in 1863 claimed that “genius is no other than *childhood recovered* at will.” For Baudelaire, a childhood endowed with the expressive “powers of manhood” was mandatory, for what the recovering genius required was an “analytic mind which enable[d] him to order the sum of materials which he had involuntary accumulated” in his childhood.<sup>38</sup> Emerson adheres to a similar program in *Nature*, when he claims “infancy is the perpetual Messiah.” He longs to bring the Messianic insight of childhood into adulthood. Yet his own real childhood sorrows inform most of Emerson’s representative stories, including the one he tells about Nature. Rather than “order the sum of materials he had involuntary accumulated” in his childhood, Emerson appears to use his own expressive powers of manhood to obscure that childhood which he withheld at will.

Much of Emerson’s obfuscation of his actual childhood is measurably intentional, as in the case of the Mary Howitt request of 1847. With Howitt, Emerson chose to control his public image. By 1847, Emerson had published both collections of his essays, as well as his poems, and he was set to begin his British lecture tour. The idealized childhood which he presented in works like *Nature* thus became the *de facto* substitute for his actual childhood story, which, despite the fact that it was solicited, Emerson would not share.

Emerson’s conscientious refusal to share the story of his own origins has long confused his critics, particularly those who read *Nature* as a work that is principally interested in Nature as a philosophical *topos*, or, as it has been more recently read, as a text that “recover[s] a way of seeing championed in an earlier age--a way of seeing...akin

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<sup>38</sup> Abrams, 414.

to that theorized by Joseph Glanvill in his speculations *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661).”<sup>39</sup> Julie Ellison has written how, in *Nature*, Emerson tries to produce an “ordering of natural history by the cultured mind.”<sup>40</sup> Ellison further observes that “*Nature* is an investigation of theory” that has its “partial genesis in Emerson’s excited visits to the Musee Nationale d’Histoire Naturelle and the Jardin des Plantes during his 1833 visit to Paris.” But for Ellison, “an organized interpretation of natural history, visibly demonstrated in the arrangement of zoological and botanical miscellanies, was to him, proof of the modern mind’s interpretive power.”<sup>41</sup>

Attention to Emerson’s own images proves otherwise. In *Nature*, Emerson explicitly champions an *uncultured* mind, the mind and vision of the child. “To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature,” Emerson emphasizes. “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man,” he insists, “but shines into the eye and the heart of the child.” With *Nature*, it is as if Emerson’s dismissiveness of his childhood and his own real sorrows confuse the very meaning of the work. Why does Emerson champion the child’s vision in *Nature*, only to sterilize his personal story when asked about his own childhood and early home?

Emerson dismisses the cultural past in *Nature*, because he can’t confront the reality of his personal past. I draw on a passage that Emerson wrote in his journal twelve years before he rebuffed Howitt. Here, couched in the language of forgiveness, Emerson pardons an ideal child, but as with *Nature*’s “impertinent grief,” there are personal registers that are buried beneath the passage:

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<sup>39</sup> Windolph, Christopher J. *Emerson’s Nonlinear Nature* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010. 9

<sup>40</sup> Ellison, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Ellison, 85.



I forgive desultoriness, trifling, vice even in a young man so long as I believe that he has a closet of secret thoughts to which he retires as to his home & which have a sort of parents' interest in him wherever he is. At the sight of them he bows.<sup>42</sup>

During this moment from his journal, Emerson turns from ridiculing his peers in the previous paragraph to forgiving this imaginary desultory young man with his “closet of secret thoughts.”<sup>43</sup> The turn is a testament to the psychological truism that one never leaves one's first friends (or enemies) behind, as the occasion that sparks this entry is July 15th, 1835, when Emerson is attending Divinity School exercises, which included some three hundred students and alumni—Emerson's past, present, and future preaching peers. Importantly, Emerson provides two images to ponder in this journal entry: one of secret space of thought, and the other of a loving, unconditionally-interested parent.

Throughout Emerson's writing, he consistently shows a reserved tenderness for the child figure, whom he forgives in his journal, and elsewhere imagines as a lone child whose inner world is unknown to adults. We have already seen this forgiven child figure in *Nature*, and we see him again in 1841's “Self-Reliance,” where Emerson's principal model for the self-reliant individual is, rather oddly, the “nonchalant boy” who alone is capable of giving an “independent, genuine verdict.” “You must court him, he does not

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<sup>42</sup> (JMN 5:59)

<sup>43</sup> Emerson's own period of “desultory youth,” couched within the paradigm of Eriksonian Psychology, has been marvelously discussed in Joel Porte's *Representative Man*. “Emerson fretted continually,” Porte writes, “over what he conceived to be his own tendency to linger in ‘the tardy years of childhood’ and feared that he might be the ‘dupe of hope,’ fated to die before completing his task.” See Porte, pp. 295-309

court you,” Emerson writes of this boy, while “the man,” with whom Emerson compares the “nonchalant boy,” “is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness.”<sup>44</sup>

Emerson’s comparison between the unrestrained naturalness of the child and the self-consciously restricted tendencies of the adult was a common one among writers of the Romantic era. It is apparent in Wordsworth’s verse, which Emerson knew, and Blake’s, which he did not. But for Emerson, it was not so much the celebratory innocence of the child, as it had been for Blake. Nor was it the strikingly authentic imaginative preserve that childhood held for Wordsworth that appealed to Emerson. Rather, it is, quite literally, the *vision* of the child that Emerson reveres. How the child sees, and, most importantly, how the child acts because of this seeing, represents the admirable quality. The possessor of an irreverent remoteness, Emerson’s child has the self-sustaining confidence that Emerson characterizes as heroic and visionary. Yet his child is wholly impersonalized. He is imagined without a father or mother. In *Nature*, he is literally a “spirit,” an archetypal figure, and as with his sterilizing exchange with Howitt, the actual child is disallowed a personal figuration, a story.

Following a line of argument first advanced by Henry Nash Smith, who “noted the appearance of a ‘hero’ in many of Emerson’s essay’s and lectures,” Eric Cheyfitz has observed that “throughout his journals, the child is [Emerson’s] metaphor for that original innocence, the identity with the Father, which fallen man heroically seeks.”<sup>45</sup> Cheyfitz sees a child-hero figure “as a drama of” Emerson’s “education in manliness.”<sup>46</sup> But

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<sup>44</sup> (CW 4, 56).

<sup>45</sup> Cheyfitz, Eric *The Trans-Parent: Sexual Politics in the Language of Emerson*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981. 4-5. See also, H.N. Smith, Henry Nash, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Cheyfitz, xiv.

Emerson's own image of origins does not precisely privilege innocence, as much as it privileges secrecy. In his journal, Emerson writes:

Every man supposes himself not to be fully understood or appreciated; and if there is any truth in him, if he rests at last on the divine soul, I see not how it can be otherwise: the last chamber, the last closet, he must feel, was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, unanalysable.<sup>47</sup>

This positing of a "last chamber, a last closet, he must feel, was never opened" is a telling figuration, bent as it is on alienation as a necessity for the truth of "the divine soul" of the individual. It is akin to Emerson's child, "bowing" to his "secret thoughts." Emerson's own insistent "I see not how it can be otherwise" cinches the importance of the figuration for his imagination. Precisely why Emerson insists upon this hidden resting place of the divine soul has to do with those "real sorrows" and "impertinent griefs" he alludes to in *Nature*, but does not depict.

In her examination of the psychology of childhood, Psychologist Alice Miller observes that everyone has a "concealed inner chamber" of "childhood drama" that contains "unmastered aspects of childhood suffering" that only one's own children gain access to.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, Miller is not merely stating that one's children are the only people who have *verbal access* to stories of suffering. She also means to imply that children gain access to unmastered aspects of childhood suffering by being made to

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<sup>47</sup> (JMN 7:347)

<sup>48</sup> Miller, Alice *Prisoners of Childhood: The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for the True Self* trans. Ruth Ward. New York: Harper Collins, 1981, 25-26. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Miller, *Child*.

*experience* them, as well, in their own childhoods; her point is that the unresolved suffering is unconsciously passed on to the next generation for one's progeny to master. Miller's insight provides a useful psychological foreground for understanding why Emerson needed his own "last chamber, a last closet, he must feel, was never opened." It also helps us to understand just why Emerson's son Edward once, perhaps enviously, observed how, "a very little child always had the entrance and run of [Emerson's] study," and when the "young guests came he always made them at ease, found out what interested them, and talked of that as if they were his equals, but in a way that set them to thinking." What comes immediately after Edward's initial observation gestures toward the sub-textual story, those unmastered aspects of suffering in Emerson's own identification with the child: "One rule he held to faithfully—never to talk about himself."<sup>49</sup>

Withholding the story of himself, and substituting a more symbolic, representative story in its place was Emerson's strategy for relating to his personal past, and this reticence is linked psychically with his relationship to his mother, Ruth. As Evelyn Barish observes, Ruth "was molded in a different tradition" than "studies of her son" typically convey.<sup>50</sup> Unlike Emerson's father, who had a more liberal ideological upbringing, Ruth had a "deeply Calvinistic mother" in Hannah Upham Haskins and Ruth was raised, and in turn raised her sons, in "the disciplines characteristic of poverty and a

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<sup>49</sup> P. 167, 171

<sup>50</sup> Barish, 19. See also, Cayton, Mary Kupiec, *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England 1800-1845*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989. 6.

‘typical puritan family.’”<sup>51</sup> Her disciplining featured a “repression of direct gestures of love,” as evidenced in what Barish called “the rather tragic correspondence with her oldest son, John Clarke, who was sent away to live in Maine with Ruth’s sister-in-law” when he was five years old.<sup>52</sup> This pattern of emotional withholding, and the sending-the-child-away gesture would become a featured motif in Emerson’s own writing, and it is born out of, at least in part, a decidedly familial milieu.

In 1839, when “Self-Reliance” was being composed, Emerson’s first daughter, Ellen, was born. Three years earlier in 1836, his first son Waldo had been born, and these two new arrivals in the Emerson home helped Emerson to reenact what Miller calls the “childhood drama” that Emerson himself had lived through. Emerson’s mother also lived with his own family in the “Old Manse” (the Emerson ancestral home) during this period. The living condition seems to stand behind sharply dismissive parries in “Self-Reliance” like this one: “I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my Genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation.”<sup>53</sup> Most radically, in “‘Self-Reliance,’ Emerson declares all family members ‘deceived and deceiving people’ whose life of appearance the seeker of truth must abandon.”<sup>54</sup> The pushing away of (and *at*) the family Emerson enacts here, when his Genius calls, had also been performed by his

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<sup>51</sup> Barish, 19. Haskins, David Greene, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Maternal Ancestors With Some Reminiscences of Him*. Boston: Cupples, Upham, & Co., 1887; reprint, New York: Kennikat Press, 1971. 28, 30, 31, 33-34.

<sup>52</sup> Barish, 21.

<sup>53</sup> (CW, 1:30).

<sup>54</sup> Cole, Phyllis, “Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Family” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 30-31. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Cole, “Family.”

mother, who throughout Emerson's childhood "found time no matter how busy to retire to her room every morning after breakfast to read and meditate."<sup>55</sup>

In *Nature*, the distancing strategy became, for Emerson, a problem of language and symbol. He sublimated the personal problem into a literary problem, and this gesture led to complicated ends insofar as Emerson tried to deal with the historical Past in tandem with the personal past. Putting a symbolic childhood in the place of his actual childhood is a typical strategy for dealing with deep, and likely unremembered, beginnings. "[A] symbol always stands at the beginning," observes Erich Neumann in *The Origins and History of Consciousness*. "In the beginning," Neumann continues, is perfection, wholeness. This original perfection can only be "circumscribed," or described symbolically; its nature defies any description other than a mythical one, because that which describes, the ego, and that which is described, the beginning, which is prior to any ego, prove to be incommensurable quantities as soon as the ego tries to grasp its object conceptually, as a content of consciousness.

Here what Neumann tries to accomplish in psychological language is comparable to what Emerson often tries to accomplish in *Nature's* literary language. As a Jungian, Neumann appeals to the word "myth" as a mental condition prior to language, and prior to ego. Emerson, at least in this early phase of his career, works mostly from a mental vocabulary that he cribs from the Swedenborgianism of Sampson Reed. This fact

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<sup>55</sup> Barish, 21.

explains why Emerson's own language at the beginning of *Nature* fuses "what is acted in life" with language:

Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?<sup>56</sup>

Emerson's trope from *Nature* "that a man's life is a solution in hieroglyphic" is one attempt at languaging the problem of origin. That life not only represents, but also actually is, a kind of holy writing is Emerson's meaning here. To employ Neumann's vocabulary, Emerson's own egoic grasping for the original Ur-text of the self lies behind *Nature's* attack on linguistic commemorations of the past (biographies, histories, criticism). The attack is Emerson's own symbolic circumscribing of a problem that he presents as literary and historical, but is, in fact, more personal and individual than the early portion of *Nature* admits.

Emerson's aesthetic position in *Nature* is his fantasy of a "face to face" interaction with Nature that is unmediated by literary commemoration. He explicitly

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<sup>56</sup> (CW 1:24)

expresses this facing as a kind of cure for “The Age.” The position is less an argument than it is an imaging of the problem of origins:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.<sup>57</sup>

Emerson’s aesthetic focus on the new and the current in the opening of the essay is an attempt to clear imaginative space for himself. As an opening, it succeeds in its dismissals of an over-respect for the past. Yet it is not until later in *Nature*, in Chapter V, which Emerson suggestively calls “Discipline,” that we read how it is the present should be imagined:

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<sup>57</sup> (CW 1:18)



The exercise of the Will or the lesson of power is taught in every event. From the child's successive possession of his several senses up to the hour when he saith, "Thy will be done!" he is learning the secret, that he can reduce under his will, not only particular events, but great classes, nay the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character. Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up. He forges the subtle and delicate air into wise and melodious words, and gives them wing as angels of persuasion and command. One after another, his victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will, — the double of the man.<sup>58</sup>

To call a portion of this vision dangerous would not overstate the case. Reading the passage from our moment in history, the characterization of a man as a child reducing events, even facts of nature to the individual character conjures images of arrogant CEOs meeting their own man-made natural disasters with the irresponsibly adolescent "I want my life back."<sup>59</sup> But Emerson's "Discipline" is less a discipline for society, and more a kind of discipline for himself. Harold Bloom touches on this disciplinary fork in the Emersonian road when admits he is "happier" with the "consequence" of Emerson's

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<sup>58</sup> (CW 1:29).

<sup>59</sup> The plea belongs to former CEO of British Petroleum, Tony Hayward, who, on May 31, 2010, during the worst man-made environmental disaster in United States history, said, "We're sorry for the massive disruption it's caused... There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back."

theory of power in “Whitman’s ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ than when the Emersonian product is the first Henry Ford.”<sup>60</sup> Importantly, Emerson’s own tropes in this passage are linguistic: “He forges the subtle and delicate air into wise melodious words.” He speaks to (and of) his own largely literary interests, and not so much to the world or The Age as he claims. What this vision is born out of is a mediated psychological condition that he began recording in his correspondence during his early twenties, a period of psychological moratorium for Emerson that preceded his “crisis of vocation” and might be called instead his crisis of invocation—his problem of dealing with his own *beginnings*.

As a “calling upon for authority and justification,” and a “formula for conjuring,” “invocation” is an apt word for Emerson’s earliest psychological conflicts. Readers of Emerson have long observed the conflicted Emerson—the writer who was engaged in an agonistic battle to privilege personal experience over cultural commemoration. “The conflict in Emerson’s mind,” as Frederic Ives Carpenter noted, “was not so much between the religious and the secular, as between heredity and the living experience.” For Carpenter, Emerson’s mental struggles were attributed to the fact that “the natural dependence of youth on paternal authority was lessened in Emerson’s case by the death of his father in 1811, when he was only eight years old.”<sup>61</sup> Certainly, as Carpenter suggests, Emerson’s problem of invocation is connected to the literal sepulcher of his own father, an image that Emerson dematerializes into a figurative trope in *Nature*. Emerson obfuscates this paternal relationship by writing over it.

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<sup>60</sup> Bloom, Harold. “Emerson: Power at the Crossing” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Lawrence Buell. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993. 149.

<sup>61</sup> Carpenter, Frederick Ives, *An Emerson Handbook*. New York: Hendricks House, 1953. 4.

The first book-length study of Emerson's earliest years, Evelyn Barish's *Emerson: Roots Of Prophecy*, wisely begins as an inquiry into the silence that Emerson demonstrated about his past, specifically with respect to his father. Barish notes that Emerson's "journals, kept from an early age and richly inclusive, referred frequently to his family—his brothers and aunt especially. But there were no comments about his father, William Emerson, no memories, no quotations handed down by mother or aunt—no vision at all." Ordinarily, the omission of a father from a young man's journal would not be necessarily significant. But when we consider that "Emerson had taken the bound manuscripts of his father's sermons, cut out the contents, and used the covers and stubs of pages to encase his own writings," the omission becomes remarkable. As Barish writes, the Emerson's were "a logocentric family where writing the Word was a vocation to which every son at one time aspired."<sup>62</sup> Destroying the bound versions of his father's sermons was thus a highly significant act. Just what the act meant to Emerson, why he defaced and then seemed to disregard his father's writings, is difficult to ascertain.

The problem with such inquiry, is that it questions authorial perceptions, which, like authorial intentions, are crucial to understanding the subject, but hard to determine and assess. "To live over people's lives is nothing," Henry James famously observed, "unless we live over their perceptions, live over their growth, the change, the varying intensity of the same." Of course we should like to know what Emerson was thinking, feeling, and perceiving as he tore away the pages from his father's sermons and began his own writing career at the age of sixteen. Certain readers of Emerson have discounted "the first thirty years of his life" as "respectable mediocrity."<sup>63</sup> Yet the emotional and

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<sup>62</sup> Barish, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Buell, *Emerson* 13.

perceptual origins of Emerson's work, what young Emerson himself lived by, remain hidden and mysterious, not quite on the pages. They live instead in certain inexplicable actions like the defacement, disregard, and destruction of his father's writings.

Fortunately, the concept of Nature as a religious *topos* for the enabling of a solitary, but still spiritualized, individuality can be sourced out in Emerson's early writing. Emerson's aunt Mary Moody, whose poetic stance in relation to Nature can be seen in an early letter Emerson wrote to John Boynton Hill on June 19, 1823, is a clear source for Emerson's own *Nature*:

I am seeking to put myself on a footing of old acquaintance with Nature, as a poet should,—but the fair divinity is somewhat shy of my advances, & I confess I cannot find myself quite as perfectly at home on the rock & in the wood, as my ancient, & I may say, infant aspirations led me to expect. My aunt, (of whom I think you have heard before & who is alone among women) has spent a great part of her life in the country, is an idolator of Nature, & counts but a small number who merit the privilege of dwelling among the mountains. The coarse thrifty cit profanes the grove by his presence—& she was anxious that her nephew might hold high & reverential notions regarding it (as) the temple where God & the Mind are to be studied & adored & where the fiery soul can begin a premature communication with other worlds. When I took my book therefore to the woods—I found Nature not half poetical, not half visionary enough. There

was nothing which the most forward imagination could construe for a moment into Satyr or Dryad.<sup>64</sup>

Composed at age twenty, Emerson's letter to Hill suggests that the stance that Emerson takes in *Nature*, which was composed ten years later, was presented rhetorically through his Aunt before Emerson came to the conclusion, himself, with his own senses and literary sensibilities. In short, Emerson's own version of Nature was a mediated vision, and not the "original relation" to the Universe that he longed for and championed in his own inaugural literary work. Of course, the text of Emerson's *Nature* proves that he did eventually adopt his Aunt's stance toward Nature, even if he did not (or could not) attribute it to her. Perhaps the reason why Emerson did not seem to have it when he wrote to Hill was that something blocked Emerson's communion with Nature in his early life. Some undefined, and seemingly indefinable, pain appears to have kept him from looking back on his own past, and this pain seemed a matter of identity, or sense of self. As Emerson put his disappointment with Nature to Hill in 1823, "I found that I had only transported into the new place my entire personal identity, & was grievously disappointed."<sup>65</sup>

Despite the fact that so little material from Emerson's youth survives, clues about the undefined and indefinable pain involved when Emerson looked back on his youth abound, and these clues help us to see Emerson's ulterior impulse for putting off Howitt's request. They also help us to see the real sorrow Emerson identifies in *Nature*. In his journal, as he approached adulthood in the winter of 1825, he characterized his childhood

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<sup>64</sup> (*L* 1: 133)

<sup>65</sup> (*L* 1: 133).

as “unpleasing.”<sup>66</sup> This is a flat characterization, unforthcoming, until it is set beside the subconscious flinching that occurred for Emerson when he attempted to look back on what he called “any part” of his youth. A journal entry from March 4, 1838, puts this psychic wince most plainly:

Last night a remembering & remembering talk with Lidian. I went back to the first smile of Ellen on the door stone at Concord. I went back to all that delicious relation to feel as ever how many shades, how much reproach. Strange is it that I can go back to no part of youth, no past relation without shrinking and shrinking.<sup>67</sup>

Here the provocative image of shrinking—an image that simultaneously connotes youth, a lack of potency, and fear—gives us a brief glimpse of Emerson’s psychological relation to his childhood. And it also addresses why the Howitt solicitation in 1847 met with such a sterilization on Emerson’s part: Emerson’s own childhood—unlike, for instance, Wordsworth’s—seems to have been psychically disabling rather than creatively enabling. But again, the reader wonders *why*?

When his father, William Emerson Sr., died in 1811, Emerson was thirteen days from his eighth birthday—roughly the age, as theorists of Developmental Psychology suggest, that is crucial to the formation of one’s sense of self.<sup>68</sup> According to Piaget’s Stage Theory, at the time of William Sr.’s death, Emerson would have been straddling

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<sup>66</sup> (JMN 2:309).

<sup>67</sup> (JMN 5:456).

<sup>68</sup> The principal theorist of Developmental Psychology from which this point is made is Piaget, whose theories of cognitive development in children have been summarized in Gross, Richard. *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behavior*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Hodder and Stoughton, 1996. 36-41.

the late phase of Pre-operational Stage (ages two-seven), and the early phase of the Concrete Operational Stage (ages seven-eleven). The Pre-operational Stage is characterized by language acquisition and egocentricity (an egocentricity that leads children in this stage to believe that all events are caused by themselves), while the Concrete Operational Stage is one wherein mental tasks can be performed, but only as long as objects are visible and concrete. The stages, as Piaget conceived them, were phasal, and thus, fluid, meaning transitions from one stage to another overlapped.

As Emerson approached self-realization, his family lost William Emerson Sr.. Young Emerson was likely unable to establish a firm internal identification with his father, his father no longer being visible and concrete. "Childhood experiences," stressed the psychologist John Bowlby, "predispose an individual towards a pathological response to loss."<sup>69</sup> For Emerson, the pathological response to the loss of the missing internal identification with the father seems to have been compensated for linguistically, through writing. The compensation can be seen not only in Emerson's destruction of his father's journals to begin his own, but also in his earliest encounters with Wordsworth's poetry, which shows a strange, often heated, reaction, given Emerson's own eventual literary orientation.

At sixteen, a sophomore at Harvard, Emerson's college themebook of 1819 begins with a brief sketch on orthography, but then launches directly into an interrogation of Wordsworth's verse and character:

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<sup>69</sup> Bowlby, John, *Attachment and Loss*, vol.3 *Loss: Sadness and Depression*. New York: Basic Books, 1980. 217. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Bowlby.

I have thirsted to abuse the poetical character of Mr. Wordsworth whose poems have lately been read to me. I fear I shall hardly be able to clothe in language all the droll fancies that this poetry excites in my mind. At once then his poetry is the poetry of pigmies. It belittles the mind that is accustomed to the manly march of other muses. I am pleased with the prettiness, the exquisite prettiness of his verses and with their novelty as long as their novelty lasts but I am soon conscious of a disagreeable sensation which soon becomes intolerable at the dwarfish dimensions of all my entertainment and am like a man creeping about in the palaces of Lilliput who maugre all the magnificence would fain be on his legs again. He is the poet of pismires. His inspirations are spent light. It is one of the greatest mistakes in the world to suppose that much abused virtue of nature in poetry consists in mere fidelity of representation.<sup>70</sup>

To belittle an older, more established writer as Emerson does here is characteristic of an adolescent who imagines himself as an heir to a poetic throne. “No one knew better than Emerson,” Newton Arvin shrewdly observed, “that every generation goes through a necessary and proper ritual-slaying of its parents.”<sup>71</sup> Here, what strikes the reader are the images of derogation—the literal belittlings: the “pigmies,” “dwarfish dimensions,” and “palaces of Lilliput.” Why does the sixteen-year-old Emerson need Wordsworth to carry his scorn? His animosity against what Wordsworth represents to his young mind is palpable: “I shall hardly be able to clothe in language all the droll fancies that this poetry

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<sup>70</sup> (*JMN*, 1:162).

<sup>71</sup> Arvin, Newton. “The House of Pain” *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 46.



excites in my mind.” Young Emerson’s aesthetic complaint about Wordsworth reveals Emerson’s disowned, unmastered suffering about his youth: “It is one of the greatest mistakes in the world to suppose that much abused virtue of nature in poetry consists in *mere fidelity of representation* [emphasis added].”

That Wordsworth was made to carry Emerson’s disdain is apt, given Wordsworth’s strong capacity for recovering childhood memories in his verse. As is well known of Wordsworth, he had some assistance in the recovery of memories, namely in the person of his sister Dorothy, whose journals Wordsworth would often consult as he composed the poems of the many experiences they shared.<sup>72</sup> Eventually, Emerson himself came to admire and even imitate Wordsworth. His most Wordsworthian poem, “The River,” composed by the twenty-four year old Emerson in July 1827, echoes, consciously or not, Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” “The River” begins,

Awed I behold once more.  
 My old familiar haunts; here the blue river,  
 The same blue wonder that my infant eye  
 Admired, sage doubting whence the traveller came,--  
 Whence brought his sunny bubbles ere he washed  
 The fragrant flag-roots in my father’s fields,  
 And where thereafter in the world he went.  
 Look, here he is, unaltered, save that now  
 He hath broke his banks and flooded all the vales

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<sup>72</sup> Pottle, Frederick A., “The Eye and the Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth” reprinted in *Romanticism and Consciousness* ed. Harold Bloom. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1970. 273-287.

With his redundant waves.<sup>73</sup>

Emerson's "The River" takes a recollective stance. Like "Tintern Abbey," the poem revisits the past as a means of recovering the poet's subjective integration. Both poems differ in chronological depth of the recollection; Wordsworth's poem harkens back five years, Emerson's, perhaps fifteen. But Wordsworth's poem also contains a fellow experiencer, his sister, which creates imaginative room in his poem that is entirely unavailable in Emerson's, as demonstrated in this passage of "Tintern Abbey":

Nor perchance,  
If I were not thus taught, should I the more  
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:  
For thou art with me here upon the banks  
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,  
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once,  
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,  
Knowing that Nature never did betray  
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,  
Through all the years of this our life, to lead

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<sup>73</sup> (CW, 10: 45)

From joy to joy: for she can so inform  
The mind that is within us, so impress  
With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb  
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold  
Is full of blessings.

Having no “wild eyes” in which to see himself reflected, as Wordsworth does in his sister Dorothy, Emerson turns Nature into the observer. But the results are less poetically engaged, and more desperately solitary:

Here is the rock where, yet a simple child,  
I caught with bended pin my earliest fish,  
Much triumphing,— and these the fields  
Over whose flowers I chased the butterfly  
A blooming hunter of a fairy fine.  
And hark! where overhead the ancient crows  
Hold their sour conversation in the sky:—  
These are the same, but I am not the same,

But wiser than I was, and wise enough  
Not to regret the changes, tho' they cost  
Me many a sigh. Oh, call not Nature dumb;  
These trees and stones are audible to me,  
These idle flowers, that tremble in the wind,  
I understand their faery syllables,  
And all their sad significance. The wind,  
That rustles down the well-known forest road--  
It hath a sound more eloquent than speech.  
The stream, the trees, the grass, the sighing wind,  
All of them utter sounds of 'monishment  
And grave parental love.

After seeing Emerson's compulsion to project upon Nature the role of loving parent, it is less surprising that he would despise Wordsworth's fidelity of representation. For Emerson, poetry was meant to supply a compensatory fantasy. Young Emerson's early life matched common experiences Wordsworth celebrated in his early verse. Emerson preferred not to be reminded of his rather squalid condition.

Emerson's youthful poverty is well known, and often noted by his readers. Perry Miller began his still useful, though psychologically disinterested, essay "Emersonian Genius and the American Democracy" with the sentences, "Ralph Waldo Emerson was a poor boy, but in his community poverty mattered little. Few of his Harvard classmates had more money than he did, and they made no such splurge as would cause him to feel

inferior.”<sup>74</sup> Emerson’s own journal tells a different story. He writes, “How imbecile is often a young person of superior intellectual powers for want of acquaintance with his powers.” Emerson makes this observation in his journal of 1834, as he approached thirty years of age. And while the entry seems like an impersonal observation, something akin to the kind of sentence that one frequently reads in an Emerson essay where aphorisms and moral generalizations are elevated to universal proportions, the end of the journal entry Emerson reveals the decidedly more personal register: “My manners & history would have been different, if my parents had been rich, when I was a boy at school.”<sup>75</sup>

Strictly speaking, Emerson did not have parents (in the plural) throughout most of his schooling. So when Emerson writes, “My manners & history would have been different, if my parents had been rich,” he is either misremembering his youth, or choosing to alter the memory. Either way, the fact that Emerson remembers “my parents,” when he observes that he would be “different,” points to the missing parent, the father. The likely reason that Emerson includes his father in this tale is that his father’s death was the clear beginning of Emerson’s own poverty-stricken childhood. Couple this fact with the fact that Emerson Sr.’s death came early, but far from suddenly, and the story of Emerson Sr.’s irresponsibility in providing for his wife and family after his passing becomes relevant. Emerson Sr.’s own explanations for this irresponsibility were likely small comfort to a family that would have to live in the wake of his death:

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<sup>74</sup> Miller, Perry “Emersonian Genius and the American Democracy” *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1962. 31.

<sup>75</sup> (*JMN*, 4:263).

To my wife and children, indeed, my continuation upon earth is a matter of moment; as, in the event of my decease, God only knows how they would subsist. And then the education of the latter! But I am not oppressed with this solicitude. Our family, you know have so long been in the habit of trusting Providence, that none of them ever seriously thought of providing a terrestrial maintenance for themselves and households.<sup>76</sup>

As Providence is often a poor parent, and the death of a real parent can never find substitute in a theological or ideal one, the death of Emerson's father brought an early maturation upon Emerson's oldest brother William. As the older brother, William inherited the role of Emerson patriarch, while Ralph (the next oldest of the five remaining brothers) began to retreat further into the world of imaginative literature—a world, as his childhood friend W.H Furness recalled, that seemed to be there from the beginning for Emerson.<sup>77</sup>

The retreat allowed Emerson to begin fashioning his own, less responsible identity—an aspect of himself that he would come to call “silliness.”<sup>78</sup> Superficially

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<sup>76</sup> William Emerson Sr. to Mary Moody Emerson, quoted in Cabot, Elliot James. *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1887. 26-27. cited hereafter as Cabot.

<sup>77</sup> In 1843, Furness stated, “but I can recall but one image of him as playing, and that was on the floor of my mother's chamber. I don't think he ever engaged in boys' plays; not because of any physical inability, but simply because, from his earliest years, he dwelt in a higher sphere. My one deep impression is that, from his earliest childhood, our friend lived and moved and had his being in an atmosphere of letters, quite apart from himself. I can as little remember when he was not literary in his pursuits as when I first made his acquaintance.” Quoted from Cabot, 6.

<sup>78</sup> On the matter of his “silly” characterization of himself compared to his brothers, Emerson wrote in his journal, “When I consider the constitutional calamity of my family which in its falling upon Edward had buried at once so many towering hopes—with whatever reason I have little apprehension of my own liability to the same evil. I have so much mixture of silliness in my intellectual frame that I think Providence has tempered me against this. My brother lived & acted & spoke with preternatural energy. My own manner is sluggish; my speech sometimes flippant,

formed in part as a defense against his brothers, each of whom seemed better blessed with gifts of intellect and character, “silliness” was the public face of a private anxiety that Emerson owed to two particularly sorrowful aspects of his childhood: the subtle *internalization* of his father’s familiarly irresponsible interest in his own literary future, and the largely unknown and uncommented-upon relationship Emerson had with his mother, Ruth Haskins Emerson.

Psychologically, *internalization* differs from *introjection* in one crucial respect: what is psychically internalized is not a person or a part of a person, but an *image* of the subject’s relationship with the person. The physical image of William Sr. that exists to posterity—to take a literal stance in defining his image—shows him as “much more than ordinarily attractive,” with a “graceful and gentlemanlike” demeanor.<sup>79</sup> Emerson internalized this image of his father, but, because of the fact that Emerson likely blamed his father for his own childhood poverty, the internalization had a decidedly negative symbolic register. Some twenty-three years after his father’s death, Emerson captured the image in his journal: “Rev. Dr. Freeman consoled my father on his deathbed by telling him he had not outlived his teeth, &c. & bid my mother expect now to be neglected by society.”<sup>80</sup> The remembrance characterized both his father’s vanity, which was formidable, as well as his lack of concern for his wife and family in anticipation of his oncoming death.

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sometimes embarrassed & ragged; my actions (if I may say so) are of a passive kind. Edward had always great power of face. I have none. I laugh; I blush. I look ill tempered; against my will & against my interest. But all this imperfection as it appears to me is a caput mortuum, is a ballast—as things go—is a defense.” (*JMN*, 3: 136).

<sup>79</sup> Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Scribners, 1949. 160. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Rusk, 12. See also Lowells’ letter in Sprague, William B. *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 9 vols. New York, 1865. 8:244.

<sup>80</sup> (*JMN* 5:30)

It is not surprising then that among Emerson's very few recollections of his father was that of a "somewhat social gentleman." Emerson's own sense that William Sr. privileged society over his children comes into focus when Emerson added to this recollection, "but severe to us children."<sup>81</sup> When Emerson made this observation to his brother William in 1850, he had been asked for the third time in the same year to provide a biographical sketch of his father. It was characteristic of Emerson to be a scholar regarding the literary remains of his relatives. He carefully studied his Aunt Mary's papers and his brother's Charles' journal, yet begrudged an examination of his father's literary legacy. Emerson flatly observes in a letter to his brother William, "I have not recollections of him that can serve me. I was only eight years old when he died."

Another of Emerson's recollections of his father troubles his initial dismissal of the image that he had internalized. Emerson's daughter Ellen, once asked Emerson what he remembered of his father, she later shared this anecdote:

He said, "No, I don't remember him very well. I know the doctor had advised him to have me go into the salt water every day because I had salt rheum and he used to take me himself to the Bath-house. I did not like it, and when in the afternoon he called me I heard his voice as the voice of the Lord God in the garden, and I hid myself and was afraid..."<sup>82</sup>

While this recollection could not "serve" Emerson in the respect of writing a biographical sketch of his father, it did serve him in other, more psychologically suggestive ways. As

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<sup>81</sup> (*L* 4: 178-79).

<sup>82</sup> "What" *HMS* (quoted in Barish, 27.)



Evelyn Barish has suggested, the experience may be the psychic source for “Emerson’s vision of himself as Adam, a trope often present in his writing.”<sup>83</sup> But also, the experience suggests something like a deep, resenting fear towards his father as Lord, and when this fear is read in relation to Emerson’s observation regarding his father’s severity towards him as a child, Emerson’s reluctance to memorialize his father proves to be more a psychological reluctance than a practical one. That Emerson, a man whose interest in biography was consistent throughout his entire life, refused to give the most minimal kind of attention to storying his father cannot be accidental.

The ambitious will to achieve, especially as a *littérateur*, was a trait that Emerson shared with his father, who also needed a literary career to satisfy his sense of his own identity. The internalized image of his father is fixed within Emerson at the location of literary ambition, and it is in this psychic locale where Emerson’s substitution of the actual childhood for the representative one likely formed. Like his son, William Emerson Sr. was, among other things, desperate to prove his worth as a scholar and a man of culture, but he satisfied this desperation by actively pursuing social opportunities that proved him to be so, whereas Emerson’s sense of scholarship would always remain something of a solitary affair. By fourteen, Emerson had already started fashioning himself as a secluded scholar, and in letters to his brothers, he had begun to think of himself as a poet as well.<sup>84</sup>

But while Emerson may have unconsciously wished to recover his father through writing, he was also sublimating anger and loss over the abandonment. Evidence of a

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<sup>83</sup> Barish, 27.

<sup>84</sup> See especially Emerson’s letters to brothers William and Edward. Of the two siblings, Edward was the more receptive audience, as William referred to Emerson’s early attempts at poetry as bearing the influence of a “Lisping Muse.” (*L*, 1:13-14); (*L*, 1:15); (*L*, 1: 19).

negative introjection of the father is apparent, if we compare Emerson's visionary privileging of the child with a mysterious entry in Emerson's journal, wherein he seems to have recorded an admonishment of his father:

It is a happy talent to know how to play. Some men must always work if they would be respectable; for the moment they trifle, they are silly. Others show most talent when they trifle. Be it said of W that his excess of reverence made it impossible for him to realize ever that he was a man; he never assumed equality with strangers but still esteemed them older than himself though they were of his own age or younger. He went through life postponing his maturity & died in his error. The scratch-cradle. The Smelling-bottle.<sup>85</sup>

The "W" in this entry remains unidentified, even by those scholars who have provided the voluminous notes for Emerson's published journal. Something like a sense of familial propriety seems to have kept Emerson from attacking his father even in the privacy of his journal. Yet what argues the fact that this "W" stands for Emerson's father William Emerson Sr. is that the depiction matches the one that had been established and enforced by Emerson's Aunt Mary.

In the absence of direct experience, Emerson's vision of his father was principally wrought by his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, sister to his father, who observed that William Emerson Sr., "respected society too much & his whole being too little."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> (*JMN* 5: 32).

<sup>86</sup> *Letters of MME*, 526.

Emerson's Aunt Mary's influence cannot be overstated when it comes to Emerson's negative father introject. Remembering his father in 1850, Emerson would write to his brother William, "I have never heard any sentence or sentiment of his repeated by Mother or Aunt."<sup>87</sup> That Emerson's own father had literary aspirations makes Emerson's observation an implicit criticism.

There is a revealing hypocrisy in Emerson's uncharitable description of W as "postponing his maturity," when compared to his glorification of the nonchalant boy in "Self-Reliance." Perhaps the boy that Emerson wants his audience to court is Emerson, himself. It was difficult for this boy to receive "grave parental love" from a man who refused to mature, and Emerson looked elsewhere, in the poetic representation of nature. "The River" shows Emerson claiming that Nature knows him as a son:

I feel as I were welcome to these trees  
After long months of weary wandering,  
Acknowledged by their hospitable boughs;  
They know me as their son, for side by side,  
They were coeval with my ancestors,  
Adorned with them my country's primitive times,  
And soon may give my dust their funeral shade.

Not yet at the point where Emerson wished to dismiss the ancestral wholesale, "The River" shows an Emerson who is parented by Nature—a confession that is likely more honest than any confession he makes in *Nature*, for the poem depicts something

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<sup>87</sup> (*L* 4:179).

close to Emerson's actual youth—a boy without regular parental guidance, retreating into the trees to experience a parental love he did not seem to receive at home.

A well-known story in Emerson studies—one of the few that features Emerson's mother at all—tells of Emerson having wandered away from home with his brothers for an unexpectedly long period. On their return, Ruth greeted the boys by saying, "My sons, I have been in agony for you." Emerson's response to this attention given by the mother is telling: "I went to bed," he said, "in bliss at the interest she showed."<sup>88</sup> It seems his mother did not regularly demonstrate parental love, even if young Emerson clearly craved it, as all children do.

In Chapter VI of *Nature*, the portion of the essay he calls "Idealism," Emerson comes closest to reconciling his representative child with his actual childhood, and in it we read a compensatory Mother Nature to whom he wishes to respect and adore:

I have no hostility to nature, but a child's love to it. I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons. Let us speak her fair. I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother, nor soil my gentle nest. I only wish to indicate the true position of nature in regard to man, wherein to establish man, all right education tends; as the ground which to attain is the object of human life, that is, of man's connection with nature. Culture inverts the vulgar views of nature, and brings the mind to call that apparent, which it uses to call real, and that real, which it uses to call visionary. Children, it is true, believe in the external world. The belief that it appears only, is an

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<sup>88</sup> Cabot, I, 35.

afterthought, but with culture, this faith will as surely arise on the mind as did the first.

Representing a kind of last gasp for the visionary capacity of the child, the passage addresses the agon between childhood and the culture within which he must enter. Emerson blames culture for inverting and making vulgar the “views of nature,” but he cannot seem to maintain the vision of the child as a necessary compensation against culture. In the end, Emerson settles for a vision wherein one must become adult and carry the burden of an adulterating initiation into culture. Emerson confesses, perhaps most honestly in the final chapter of *Nature*, “Prospects”:

Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler’s trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar’s garret. Yet line for line and point for point, your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.

There is optimism in this final passage, but also a deep, perhaps corrosive, command. When read as advice that Emerson gives to himself as a child, or even as advice that he may be giving to some other child self, the words are encouraging, even darling. *The world exists for you*. But the danger begins to creep into the passage when Emerson's idealism meets an adult reality. "Build, therefore, your own world" is a necessary command for the youth, and even for the writer, or scholar, as it invokes and provokes a beginning. Yet it may be precisely the wrong command for any man or woman who has the resources to actualize the fantasy into a reality—a man or woman who is not at the beginning of life, or at the beginning of a writing career. It was not the best course for Emerson's father, nor, arguably, is it the best course for any adult beholden to a capitalist fantasy.

While there can never be any direct evidence for the personal reasons for Emerson's frequent rejections of the cultural past, the fact that he needed to reject his personal past along with the cultural past suggests that it may have been too painful for him to remember. One emphasis of Emerson's journal—maybe the most crucial one—from June 19, 1838 is, "Be not a slave to *your own* past" [emphasis added]. Refusing to tell the story of his childhood, to Howitt, or to any of his readers, was perhaps Emerson's best insurance against enslavement, and maybe his greatest gift to those readers who continue to represent him. But being himself so beholden to his own spiritual, mental, and subjective world, Emerson encouraged everyone—Whitman's and Ford's alike—to build like children, as if there was room enough for all, and as if all minds were as purely ideated as a child's.

## Chapter Two: The Child as Student

Among the several shrewd observations from Virginia Woolf's 1910 review of Emerson's first volume of journals is her characterization of his early life dilemma: "to be a sage in one's study, and a stumbling schoolboy out of it—that was the irony he had to face." With a keen sensitivity for how social pressure effects one's psychic orientation, Woolf was among the first readers of Emerson's early journals to see that he hid more of himself than he seemed to show. Equating his hiding with a kind of imaginative strength, Woolf writes, "A weaker mind, shut up with its finger on its pulse, would have used a diary to revile its own unworthiness. But Emerson's diary merely confirms the impression he made on his friends; he appeared 'kindly, affable, but self-contained...apart, as if in a tower.'"<sup>89</sup>

Woolf reviewed a slightly expurgated version of Emerson's journals. Emerson's son Edward Emerson was an original editor of the text, and the scholarly edition of Emerson's journals has corrected Edward's occasionally censorial hand. But what Woolf first saw as absent from Emerson's journal remains an absence, connoted in a word she uses that he would not have: diary. Emerson did not keep a diary; if by diary we mean a daily log of one's experiences, tinged with emotional responses.<sup>90</sup> Instead, what he kept is better defined by terms Emerson himself used for his journals—a "commonplace

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<sup>89</sup> Woolf, Virginia. A review of *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-32*. *The Times Literary Supplement*, March 3, 1910. Reprinted in *Books and Portraits*. Mary Lyon, ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. 69. Hereafter cited as Woolf, *BP*.

<sup>90</sup> For a study that does not proceed out of the distinction between a diary and a commonplace book, that I am suggesting here, see Lawrence Rosenwald, *Emerson and the Art of the Diary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

book,” from the Latin *locus communis*, “a theme or argument of general application.”

This distinction bears keeping in mind as we read Emerson’s journals for what, by virtue of their compositional intentions, is not supposed to be there.<sup>91</sup>

In 1820, the seventeen-year-old Emerson began keeping his journal at Harvard where common-placing was part of Harvard pedagogy. His writing is therefore born out of this educative tradition, though as an adult, Emerson often seems to be writing against it. “Write always to yourself and you write to an eternal public” he observes in his 1832 journal.<sup>92</sup> Another of Emerson’s writing precepts, this one from 1867: “The good writer seems to be writing about himself, but has his eye always on that thread of this Universe which runs through himself, & all things.”<sup>93</sup> As a writer, Emerson is an emphatic champion of the “I.” Yet it is how Emerson writes about himself as an “I” that makes many readers, including Woolf, take issue with him, as she does here:

But what is true of his style is true of his mind. An austere life, spent in generalizing from one’s own emotions and in keeping their edges sharp, will not yield rich romantic pages, so deep that the more you gaze into them the more you see. Isolated, one loses the power of understanding why men and women do not live by the rule, and the confusion of their feelings merely distresses one. Emerson, born among half-taught people, in a new land, kept always the immature habit of conceiving that a man is

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<sup>91</sup> See (*JMN* 1: 3) where Emerson writes, “These pages are intended at this their commencement to contain a record of new thoughts (when they occur); for a receptacle of all the old ideas that partial but peculiar peepings at antiquity can furnish or furbish; for tablet to save the wear & tear of weak Memory & in short for all the various purposes utility real or imaginary which are usually comprehended under that comprehensive title *Common Place book*.”

<sup>92</sup> (*JMN* 4: 430)

<sup>93</sup> (*JMN* 11: 21)



made up of separate qualities, which can be separately developed and praised. It is a belief necessary to schoolmasters; and to some extent Emerson is always a schoolmaster, making the world very simple for his scholars, a place of discipline and reward. But this simplicity, which is in his diaries as well as in his finished works—for he was not to be “found out”—is the result not only of ignoring so much, but of such concentration upon a few things.<sup>94</sup>

Woolf’s claim that Emerson’s tendency towards generalizing—that his writing style was somehow indicative of his “style of mind”—emphasizes the psychological “I” in a manner characteristic of Woolf, but not of Emerson. In Woolf’s reading, Emerson lacks a complicated, integrative imagining of man because of his “immature” habit of generalizing from his own emotions. The charge is similar to the well-known Jamesian observation that Emerson had “one style” and he used it for everything. But what Woolf wants—and her language bears this out—is an Emerson who is an emotional diary-keeper. Her preference for the confusion of feelings, and not the studious and intentional generalization, demonstrates a modernist shift in what constitutes value in writing, while it also reveals Woolf’s blind spot about the emotional sources of Emerson’s intellectual inquiries.

For better or worse, Emerson began writing out of an instructive impulse. Thinking of writing as a fundamentally instructive act enabled him more than the idea that writing could be expressive of complicated emotions or feelings. Lawrence Buell accurately assessed Emerson’s own “idiosyncratic handling” of the first person when he

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<sup>94</sup> Woolf, *BP*, 71.

observed that transcendental writers “attached great theoretical importance to the self,” though “most of what they themselves wrote seems quite impersonal, including their own private journals.”<sup>95</sup>

For Buell, who “certainly finds differences among the Transcendentalists,” the “basic inhibition about revealing themselves,” was “not so much a Victorian sense of propriety...although that did enter in,” but “it was also a matter of principle.”<sup>96</sup> Buell notes that the “first axiom of Transcendentalist thought was that the individual is potentially divine,” and “the second was that the individual is valuable only sub specie aeternatis, in his universal aspects.”<sup>97</sup> As the principal theoretician of Transcendentalism, Emerson himself rendered Buell’s distinction about the “I” when he wrote, “the soul’s emphasis is always right,”<sup>98</sup> but “the individual is always mistaken.”<sup>99</sup> For Emerson, the idea of the soul helped to serve as a defense against the particulars of his own individuality, and it also allowed him to manage “the transcendentalist paradox of self-preoccupation versus self-transcendence.”<sup>100</sup>

But while Buell is correct in his characterization of the ideological strands of Emerson’s orientation to the biographical “I”, there are also certain matters of Emerson’s biography that played a role in his particular cultivation of the first-person in his writing.

<sup>101</sup> Most importantly, Emerson’s early relationship with his two brothers, William and Edward, helped him to learn that he could first privately compose himself in his journal,

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<sup>95</sup> Buell, 268

<sup>96</sup> Buell, 269

<sup>97</sup> Buell, 260.

<sup>98</sup> (*W*, II, 145).

<sup>99</sup> (*W*, III, 69).

<sup>100</sup> Buell, 260.

<sup>101</sup> Rightly, Buell argued that Emerson’s orientation to the paradox has “its origins in the three traditions...democratic, romantic, and (especially) Protestant thought.” Buell, 269

and then present himself to a social milieu. By examining this relationship, Emerson's strategy of universalizing the "I" can be sourced out within a familial matrix that preceeds the theoretical orientation to the self that Buell has traced and Woolf was disillusioned with. As Woolf first asserted, Emerson clearly spent much of his writing generalizing from his own emotions, but the "edges" of those emotions, are not as "sharp" and unavailable as she believed they were.

As a mature writer, Emerson clearly harbored the idea that achieving a transcendental biographical representativeness was a principal task. The writer's use of the "I," he writes in "Thoughts on Modern Literature," hinges upon whether it "leads us to Nature, or to the person of the writer. The great always introduce us to facts; small men introduce us always to themselves. The great man, even whilst he relates a private fact personal to him, is really leading us away from him to an universal experience."<sup>102</sup> This writerly instruction, as Emerson depicts it, moves away from the biographical truth of emotional source material. It is a claim that makes the merely personal "small," while it conscieintously privileges "facts," and gestures toward the "universal" after these facts. The claim recalls Woolf's "schoolmaster" figure in its didacticism. Yet when we recall that one of Emerson's own "great men" was Montaigne, a more implicitly structural facet of Emerson's approach to writing the "I" becomes apparent.

The form of Montaigne's *Essays*, as Erich Auerbach showed, "stem[med] from the collections of exempla, quotations, and aphorisms which were a very popular genre in late antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages and which in the sixteenth century helped

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<sup>102</sup> (W, XIII, 314-315).

to spread humanistic material.”<sup>103</sup> “Originally,” Auerbach writes, Montaigne’s “book was a collection of the fruit of his reading, with running commentary,” but Montaigne soon “broke from the form,” as his “commentary predominated over the text.” Subject matter became “not only things read but also things lived,” and “his own experiences,” “what he heard from other people,” and “what took place around him” entered into his book.<sup>104</sup> The shift was crucial for the establishment of Montaigne’s writing, for what it did was put himself at the center of his book—Montaigne the man became the willfully impulsive organizing principle. The method rounded out the character of the writer and established a clearly recognizable “I” within the text. Montaigne’s writing allowed for both meaningful digression, and the occasional personal confession, and Emerson’s own 1855 essay on Montaigne from *Representative Men* clearly shows Emerson’s appreciation for Montaigne the man, and Montaigne the method, as he called Montaigne the “frankest and most honest of all writers.”<sup>105</sup>

Yet while Emerson, like Montaigne, would explore a similar orientation to the facts in his writing—books, experiences, and the thoughts of others were all fair game for Emerson—he did not make his biographical self the organizing principle of his writing. Instead, Emerson came to privilege what might be called original images of thought. Taking a poetic orientation to the image of himself in his work, Emerson eventually created a style of writing that largely obscured Montaignean frankness, and honesty. Indeed, Montaigne wrote in a far more personal register than Emerson ever would, or could, and one reason for this involves literary propriety, which meant one thing in

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<sup>103</sup> Auerbach, Erich *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974. 295.

<sup>104</sup> Auerbach, 295.

<sup>105</sup> (CW 11: 69)

sixteenth-century France, and quite another in nineteenth-century New England. (Emerson himself observes these differences, and I shall return to them later in the chapter.)<sup>106</sup> Emerson's emphasis on the image, and the fact that the image is more integral to his art than any romantic feeling or inspiration, helped Emerson to successfully hide within his texts.

The origins of Emerson's journal writing procedure, which he explained to Elizabeth Peabody, the one time business manager of Emerson's literary magazine *The Dial*, provides an illuminating perspective on Emerson's veneration of the image. Peabody writes,

He advised me to keep a manuscript book and write down every train of thought which arose on any interesting subject with the imagery in which it first came to mind. This manuscript was to be perfectly informal and allow of skipping from one subject to another only with a black line in between. After it was written I could run a heading of subjects over the top—and when I want to make up an article—*there* were all my thoughts ready.<sup>107</sup>

The important phrase here, at least for my purposes, is *with the imagery in which it first came to mind*. This strategy of honoring the original images, and not the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, helps to explain what we read in Emerson's

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<sup>106</sup> Emerson's own explanation for these matters of literary propriety appear in his essay on "Montaigne: Or, The Skeptic"

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Richardson, *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009). 21.

journals, as much as it explains the absence of what Woolf calls “rich, romantic pages.” For Emerson’s journals are not the record of feeling self as much as they are a record of thinking, and poeticizing self—an imaging self. This fact of Emerson’s writing explains the long tradition existing in Emerson scholarship regarding the difficulty of knowing the essential Emerson.<sup>108</sup> In part, what this tradition has always falsely assumed is that Emerson wanted to be, in that phrase Virginia Woolf lifts from his journal, “found out.” But much of Emerson’s writing tells the story of how he worked assiduously not to be known.

It is instructive to read Emerson’s earliest and failed attempt at journal keeping, attentive to his image consciousness. As he describes his first attempt at keeping a journal, Emerson reveals why his journals read, as Woolf had it, like a “world very simple for his scholars, a place of discipline and reward:”

When I was quite young I fancied that by keeping a Manuscript Journal by me, over whose pages I wrote a list of the great topics of human study, as, Religion, Poetry, Politics, Love, etc, in the course of a few years I should be able to complete a sort of Encyclopedia containing the net value of all the definitions at which the world had arrived. But at the end of a couple of years my Cabinet Cyclopaedia though much enlarged was no nearer

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<sup>108</sup> See Porte, Joel “The Problem of Emerson” reprinted in *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed*. 36.

completeness than on its first day. Nay, somehow the whole plan of it needed alteration.<sup>109</sup>

Here Emerson's first fantasy for his journal is a totalizing one where an encyclopedia "of great topics of human study" produces its own *net value*. The alteration Emerson arrived at was to make the leap from a reporting orientation, what he calls recording "the great topics of human study," to an image-creating orientation, that which he stressed to Peabody when he encouraged her to keep a journal.<sup>110</sup> The shift, what could be called Emerson's invention of a self, performed through language, accounts for the success of Emerson's journal keeping after his failed first attempt.

A useful distinction to bring to Emerson the early journal keeper can be found in J.S. Mill's 1833 essay, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties." In it, Mill observes how "Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but, if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*." Mill further explains, "Eloquence supposes an audience," and where Emerson's early journal fails is in its imagining of an audience. His earliest journal, as he describes its failure, is a private "cabinet," an encyclopedia he writes for himself and his own education. Yet when we consider the many paeans to Eloquence that pepper Emerson's successful journal, we also notice that Emerson carried a poor imagining of his audience well into his journal keeping.

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<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Richardson, Robert D. *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009. 20.

<sup>110</sup> Poirier, Richard *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 86-111.

There is clear evidence of Emerson's longing for an audience in his early journals, but what the evidence shows is that Emerson had a confused image of the audience for which he wanted to perform. An oft-quoted passage in Emerson studies is one wherein Emerson records his "passionate love for the strains of eloquence," and he writes that he "burn[ed]" after the Ciceronian "*aliquid immensum infinitumque*."<sup>111</sup> The admiration for Cicero is a clear indication of how the youthful Emerson seemed to imagine himself as a speaker, a budding sermonizer who is preparing for his inevitable career as a preacher. But we see slightly more confused ambition for an audience in another entry from Emerson's journal, composed when he was nineteen years old. Here the emphasis is less on any oratorical skill, and more upon a mythical imagining of a self that is clearly destined for greatness:

With a spark of prophetic devotion, I hasten to hail the Genius, who yet counts the tardy years of childhood, but who is increasing unawares in the twilight, and swelling into strength, until the hour, when he shall break the cloud, to shew his colossal youth, and cover the firmament with the shadow of his wings.<sup>112</sup>

As Joel Porte observed, "the reader of Emerson's early journals must be struck by the frequency with which meditations on individual greatness...are linked to the enormous promise of his own young nation."<sup>113</sup> In his early journals, as Porte writes,

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<sup>111</sup> (*JMN*, 2:238).

<sup>112</sup> (*JMN*, 2:4).

<sup>113</sup> Porte, Joel. *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in his Time*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. 286. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Porte.



Emerson is startling for “the inflated and self-conscious manner in which the nineteen-year-old... assumed the prophetic mantle.”<sup>114</sup> But if we account for this inflation by reading young Emerson as practicing a dramatized image of himself, we can begin to see the youthful Emerson had not yet made the distinction between *poetry* and *eloquence*. In his early journals, Emerson, to use Mill’s terminology, is practicing the art of learning to overhear *his own writing*; he is writing prose *as* poetry, imagining eloquence as the overheard art, not the heard one.

“The peculiarity of poetry,” Mill observed, “appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.” With Mill’s distinctions in mind, what might be said of the youthful Emerson is that he conflated the role of the poet and orator, for by thinking of himself as a poet—in effect, regularly overhearing himself in his journal—Emerson actually taxed his ability to be eloquent. The early journals show him dramatizing himself as an eloquent Ciceronian orator, but Emerson’s tendency to embody this drama in symbols—“hailing the Genius,” “breaking the clouds” “showing his colossal youth”—show how Emerson worked more like Mill’s poet, and less like his eloquent orator.

Interestingly, Emerson’s early familial role engendered his conception of himself as a poet, and is best seen in his youthful correspondence. One early example dates from

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<sup>114</sup> Porte, 286.

April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1813, when a nine-year old Emerson writes to his Aunt Mary in Waterford, Maine, reporting on a typical day in his life:

In the morning I rose as I do commonly about 5 minutes before 6 I then help Wm in making the fire after which [I] set the table for Prayers. I then call mamma about quarter after 6. We spell as we did before you went away I confess I often feel an angry passion start in one corner of my heart when one of my Brothers get above me which I think sometimes they do by unfair means after which we eat our breakfast then I have from about qua[r]ter after 7 till 8 to play or read I think I am rather inclined to the former.<sup>115</sup>

Here three elements of Emerson's early psychic life are apparent, and each helps us to understand how Emerson first began to think of himself as a poet. First, there are the beginnings of a sibling rivalry over studies ("I often feel an angry passion start in one corner of my heart when one of my Brothers get above me"). Second, there is the powerful tutorial role that his Aunt played as a correspondent and confessor. And finally, there are the beginnings of a self-recognition that is more inclined towards play than study—a self imagined as a non-studious figure.

The early sibling rivalry over studies is born out of the period when Emerson's older brother, William, and his younger brother, Edward, both went away to school, leaving Emerson behind with the rest of his family in Concord. William believed the least in Emerson's poetic abilities. As the oldest son, living in a household with a deceased

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<sup>115</sup> (L 7:102-03).

father, William was put into the responsible role of man of the house—a role he seems to have accepted with seriousness and an occasionally unforgiving sobriety. In their early correspondence, Emerson consistently writes up to William, appealing to his familial authority by stressing his own studiousness. “Pursuant to your request in Charles’ letter to keep letters ready at all times” young Emerson writes on Jan 12, 1816, “I have begun to write though I do not know any opportunity at present.” The tone here, noticeably deprecatory and respectful, is typical of young Ralph’s letters to William during this period when he seems to be writing out of a sense of obligation more than affection. Emerson attempted to ingratiate himself through humor, exemplified in this letter to William:

I can not help observing to you, Mon cher frere, how much I was offended as a ‘man of honour’ as I profess to be, in your writing to Charles the youngest in the family first and omitting to write to me ‘The Man of the House’ ‘Generalissimo’ &c. &c.<sup>116</sup>

That William chose to write to Charles, who was a toddler at the time, clearly offended Emerson. He defended himself with sarcasm, but the offense to Emerson’s sense of his place within the family hierarchy is clearly seen. He wanted to be given his due as an authority—the man in charge when his older brother was gone from the household. But William (intentionally, or not) denied him this right. The dynamic appears to be part of a pattern between William and Ralph, going back to the sibling rivalry that Emerson made reference to with his Aunt when he was nine.

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<sup>116</sup> (L 1:13).

Yet the fact that William was not convinced of Ralph's poetic ability seems to have bothered Ralph to a degree that forged an early problem with authority. Another admonishment delivered by William to Emerson at thirteen seems to corroborate this speculation. William's response to one of Emerson's early letters in verse, written in what Emerson called the "dialect of Poetice" received the following response from William: "Ralph, don't make poetry till you have gone through Algebra." Feeling himself as a subordinate and in need of his brother's approval, Emerson writes in the same letter from 1816:

On Monday (day after tomorrow) I begin to study Geography at Latin School with Cummings' Geography, 2 beautiful Globes, An Orrery, and a large Atlas. You will say that if I begin with such great advantages I ought certainly to make great improvement; it is true and I hope I shall. I should think it would appear to us almost a vacation week, it certainly will be a relaxation from hard study.<sup>117</sup>

Here Emerson's self-presentation is basically antithetical to how he had earlier portrayed himself toward his aunt—being "inclined toward play" strongly contradicts being "being hard at study." Like most of us, Ralph practiced a strategy of showing one face to the judging world, while being more tentative about his true views and interests. In writing to William, pressure to keep up appearances and play the correct social role left little room for brotherly camaraderie. In its stead, there is animosity and posturing towards responsible appropriateness.

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<sup>117</sup> (L 1:14).

It is typical of a grieving child to rely more upon a sibling relationship in lieu of a parental one.<sup>118</sup> Compensation for the parental loss shifts the sibling hierarchy, and often the oldest is forced to take on the role of parent surrogate—something that is evident in the William and Ralph correspondence. In the absence of their father, William is the father figure, stern and judgmental, and Ralph feels anxious to justify his ways to William.

In his correspondence with his younger brother, Edward, Emerson presents a different identity, the identity his older brother explicitly rejected: that of the Poet.

“Childhood experiences,” stressed the psychologist John Bowlby, “predispose an individual towards a pathological response to loss.”<sup>119</sup> Young Emerson’s pathology, being “middled” between a stern father manqué in his older brother, and a younger, more accepting brother in Edward, is quite evident in his early correspondence. Ralph’s early letters to Edward do not seem to take the superiorly responsible tone that elder William’s letters must have taken towards younger Ralph. Instead, what is seen in the Ralph/Edward correspondence is a more playful acceptance regarding Ralph’s poetry—something that was crucial to Ralph, for it allowed him to present his poetic self to reasonably engaged and receptive audience.

Emerson wrote to Edward just two days after Edward’s departure for study at Andover, and in terms of both tone and presentation, the letter is quite different from the letters written to William. Gone are the anxieties about familial position and authority, and in their place, we have Emerson mocking authority and authorship. The joking even

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<sup>118</sup> See Worden, William. *Children and Grief: When A Parent Dies* New York: The Guilford Press, 1996).

<sup>119</sup> Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss*, vol.3 *Loss: Sadness and Depression*. New York: Basic Books, 1980. 217. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Bowlby.

stretches toward a diminution of the Emerson family itself, or at least a diminution of the ancestral debt to the family—something that was consistently underscored by both Mother and Aunt Mary.<sup>120</sup>

One poem in the letter is a mock-heroic send-up of Edward's arrival at Andover. This poem fulfills two expectations with respect to both Ralph and Edward. In the first sense, it shows Ralph exploring his own sense of himself, with respect to the family. And in the second sense, it shows Ralph dealing with the respect that the family seems to have held for itself.

And now arrives the chariot of state  
That bears the regal pomp Ned, Bliss the great  
See from afar arise a dusty cloud  
And see approaching fast the gathering crowd  
See yonder rank of learned sages come  
Like Reverend fathers of Majestic Rome  
Down from their aged heads their hats they bend  
On either hand the bowing lined extend  
While thro' the midst with elevated mein  
Stalks 'Edward Emerson the great' between  
Hark the loud clangor of the sounding bell  
To Andoveria's college hails the well.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> See *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson*, Ed. Nancy Craig Simmons, 30.

<sup>121</sup> (*L* 1:25).

This playfully pompous elevation of Edward, drawn up in the style of Emerson's earliest commemorative verses, is intended to be humorous—young Emerson, himself, even calls it "nonsense." But there is a serious side to the verse as well, and this, one suspects, is why Emerson's mother suggested that Edward not show the letter to his classmates at Andover. The serious side, latent in the first verse, becomes blatant in the verses that follow—verses, quoted previously, that describe their squalid home in Boston. The Emersons, though regal in Concordian lineage, were far from regal in their present society. During this period, especially, Ruth and Aunt Mary were keeping boarders and living far below their station, so that they might secure an education for each of their sons. Notably, Ralph began to "puzzle his muse" in this broken Emerson environment. In effect, it is his first circle as a poet, a circle he would later identify as "the hoop that holds" and "the iron band of poverty."

The faces Emerson presented to his family, whether as the young scholar eager to please, or the jesting, Puckish poet, each obscured deeper sentiments of loss and confusion, as Emerson attempted to form his sense of self in a home reeling from the losses of father and brother, without directly acknowledging these traumas. The weight of the losses had to find indirect expression. Emerson's youthful retreat from society to the fantastic comforts of literature is the prime example. We see much of Emerson's repressed grief in a poem from the Latin School period, "The History of Fortus" (1813).

A chivalric romance composed in heroic couplets, "Fortus" is one of the first fruits of what Kenneth W. Cameron has identified as Emerson's chivalric period (ages nine through sixteen).<sup>122</sup> The poem reflects young Emerson's earliest psychic fixations.

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<sup>122</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Memorabilia of Emerson at The Boston Latin Public School (1812-1817)* Ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron. Hartford: Transcendentalists Books, 1996). 9.

Replete with battles, rings, and fairies, the plot of the poem involves a queen who enlists Fortus, a brave knight-errant, to recover a “precious ring under guard.” With the aid of supernatural fairies and a phantom that supplies Fortus with a charmed sword, Fortus slays two dragons and twenty thousand men — no small feat, even for a chivalric romance. Throughout the poem, young Emerson does not supply his readers with the background story of the ring, the woodland queen, or even much of the details of the battle. Instead, he decides to linger over the “moans” of the fathers and brothers of the slain. In Emerson’s poem, all the protectors of the ring are familial relations—a detail that suggests that young Emerson was trying to deal with the very real deaths of his brother and his father by fictionalizing and poeticizing.<sup>123</sup>

The values being taught to Emerson by his family seemed to collide with his early interest in literature. It should be noted, and has been, that Emerson’s admiration for novels and novelists was not great. Emerson tended “to disdain the novel, somewhat moralistically, as frivolous and artificial.”<sup>124</sup> Yet there is an interesting remark recorded in Emerson’s journal that helps us to see something else at work in Emerson’s orientation to fiction. Remarking on his fiction-writing contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emerson writes, “Nathaniel Hawthorne’s reputation as a writer is a very pleasing fact, because his writing is not good for anything, and this is a tribute to the man.”<sup>125</sup> That Emerson needed writing to be good for something, and that a reflection of the man was also a desired effect, is explicit in this passage. This attendant literary need helps us to

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<sup>123</sup> For the entirety of the “Fortus” text see, “Emerson’s Boyhood and Collegiate Verse: Unpublished and New Texts Edited from Manuscript” Ed. Albert J. von Frank. *Studies in the American Renaissance* 1983. 3-13.

<sup>124</sup> Buell, 107.

<sup>125</sup> (JMN 8:111).



understand that Emerson's early attempts at fiction were likely thought of as reflections of his own self.

But what the young Emerson, and even the middle-aged Emerson, could not entirely admit to liking, the old Emerson had no trouble championing. He would write in his 1863 essay "Education:"

Do not spare to put novels in the hands of young people. Let them read "Tom Brown at Rugby," read "Tom Brown at Oxford," – better yet, read "Hodson's Life"—Hodson who took prisoner the king of Delhi. They teach the same truth—a trust, against all appearances, against all privations, in your own worth, and not in tricks, plotting, or patronage.<sup>126</sup>

Here, a sixty-year-old Emerson is likely remembering his own boyhood, where he was charmed by reading novels and romances, but shamed for indulging his interests in them. A family friend, Reverend Cooke, recounts a story where young Emerson "once brought home the first volume of a novel from the circulating library, having paid six cents for it." The story begins as a charming tale of Emerson as a young litterateur; but the anecdote quickly shifts to a traumatic tale of shame and youthful irresponsibility, as his Aunt Mary enters the story: "His Aunt Mary reproved him for spending money in that way, when it was so hard for his mother to obtain it. He was so affected by this appeal

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<sup>126</sup> (CW 6: 91).

that he returned the volume and did not take out the other; nor was the end of the romance ever read.”<sup>127</sup>

Defined in experiential terms, “shame is an inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person. It is the self judging the self.” Psychologists who have studied the effects of shame on one’s sense of self note that “a moment of shame may be humiliation so painful or an indignity so profound that one feels one has been robbed...of his dignity or exposed as basically inadequate, bad, or worthy of rejection.”<sup>128</sup> Compensation for the effects of this feeling of exposure have broad-reaching implications in one’s life, as it is not the moment of shame that is important to the ever-developing individual, but rather the memory and reaction to the moment that shapes the life of the person. To have been shamed so early, merely for indulging in adventurous reading, seems to have had a measurable effect upon Emerson’s orientation both to his aunt and to his writing. We begin to understand Emerson’s life-long ambivalence towards novels and novelists, while we read Emerson’s teenage attempts at prose fiction through this lens.

An early prose fantasy he composed when he was approaching eighteen years old, called “The Magician,” features an Aunt-Mary-like female tutelary spirit, a witch named Uilsa, gifted with the power of prophecy. Uilsa stands ready to prophesy the fate of Wilfred, the young narrator—a thinly disguised, adolescent Emerson. The story rambles awkwardly through the gothic architecture of its plot. By the end of the tale, Uilsa meets her end when strangled by a giant snake, whom she refers to, weirdly, as “the minister.”

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<sup>127</sup> Conway, Moncure Daniel. *Emerson At Home And Abroad*. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968). 38.

<sup>128</sup> Fossum, Merle A. and Mason, Marilyn. *Facing Shame: Families In Recovery* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986. 5.

Throughout, Wilfred, the narrator, defends the witch in town and communes with her in the forest. This strategy of fictionalizing psychological difficulties that he could not understand is, as we have seen, also apparent in his earliest poetic efforts. What is of interest in “The Magician” is how Emerson performed Self as something of a heroic bystander.

We have already seen how Emerson’s performed childhood manifested itself in his mature work. In Chapter One, it was shown that Emerson’s Nature-era rejections of the past had inherently biographical registers, rooted in Emerson’s own past, and evidenced by his creation of a representative child that he developed in order to compensate for his actual childhood. But here, I draw on Emerson’s 1850 essay, “Montaigne, Or The Skeptic,” where Emerson tells a brief, but psychologically illustrative, story about his childhood that reveals his literary debt to Montaigne, and his own tendency to “stand beside” his presentation of self.

Emerson’s 1855 essay on Montaigne from *Representative Men* gives the strongest sense of the canonical, and personal debts that Emerson felt he owed Montaigne, whom, as we have seen, Emerson called the “frankest and most honest of all writers.” In the essay, Emerson is confessing, in his own highly obtuse way, that Montaigne is his truest precursor, and here I part with Richard O’Keefe, whose taut reading of “Montaigne” once pointed out the most obvious fact of the essay—“the whole treatment of Montaigne is less than one-fourth” of the work, “a fraction of the middle of the text.” This fact, and several others, leads O’Keefe to the claim that the essay shows Emerson writing as a kind of “anti-Montaigne.” O’Keefe writes, “The rejection of Montaigne in ‘Montaigne’ comes as a surprise, first of all, to Emerson,” who introduces his readers to Montaigne as

writer whom he “loves,” but then treats in an highly ambivalent manner. I admire O’Keefe’s reading of Montaigne, though what it ignores are those highly personal registers that exist beneath Emerson’s performative child-self, to which, by way of ending this chapter, I will now turn.<sup>129</sup>

In paragraph fifteen—the first hint (aside from the title) that the essay has anything whatsoever to do with Montaigne—Emerson introduces the reader to his representative of skepticism:

These qualities meet in the character of Montaigne. And yet, since the personal regard which I entertain for Montaigne may be unduly great, I will, under the shield of this prince of egotists, offer, as an apology for electing him as the representative of skepticism, a word or two to explain how my love began and grew for this admirable gossip.<sup>130</sup>

This introduction to Montaigne draws on some fourteen paragraphs of description and illumination, but Emerson places emphasis here on what he calls a, perhaps, “unduly great” “personal regard.” Emerson is showing conscientiousness toward his readership, specifically with respect to matters of taste and propriety; but he is also trying to teach his reader how to appreciate Montaigne, a fact best illustrated by the original images Emerson conjures with at the opening of the essay:

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<sup>129</sup> O’Keefe, Richard R. “Emerson’s ‘Montaigne; or, the Skeptic:’ Biography as Autobiography.” *Essays In Literature*. 1996. 16.

<sup>130</sup> (CW 8:79).

EVERY FACT is related on one side to sensation, and on the other to morals. The game of thought is, on the appearance of one of these two sides, to find the other: given the upper, to find the under side. Nothing so thin but has these two faces, and when the observer has seen the obverse, he turns it over to see the reverse. Life is a pitching of this penny, heads or tails. We never tire of this game, because there is still a slight shudder of astonishment at the exhibition of the other face, at the contrast of the two faces. A man is flushed with success, and bethinks himself what this good luck signifies. He drives his bargain in the street; but it occurs that he also is bought and sold. He sees the beauty of a human face, and searches the cause of that beauty, which must be more beautiful. He builds his fortunes, maintains the laws, cherishes his children; but he asks himself, Why? and whereto? This head and this tail are called, in the language of philosophy, Infinite and Finite; Relative and Absolute; Apparent and Real; and many fine names beside.<sup>131</sup>

Here, the strongest image is that of the two-sided penny, one side given to morals, the other to sensation. Holding this image in mind as we read “Montaigne,” it is clear that Emerson imagines himself on the moral side of the coin, while he imagines Montaigne on the sensational. As Emerson’s essay imagines it, both writers are not opposed to one another as much as they are two sides of the same coin. This fact becomes more evident as we read the second paragraph that mentions Montaigne (paragraph fifteen), where

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<sup>131</sup> (CW 8:79).

Emerson becomes anecdotal, and attempts to explain his “unduly great” admiration and apologizes for “this prince of egotists”:

A single odd volume of Cotton’s translation of the *Essays* remained to me from my father’s library, when a boy. It lay long neglected, until, after many years, when I was newly escaped from college, I read the book, and procured the remaining volumes. I remember the delight and wonder in which I lived with it. It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience.<sup>132</sup>

The boyhood provenance Emerson presents in this passage may or may not be true. While it is true that Emerson’s father’s library was sold off to cover debt shortly after his father’s death in 1811, it cannot be proved that Cotton’s translation of Montaigne was not also sold off. My interest lies not so much with whether Emerson tells the truth. Rather, my interest is more to the matter of Emerson’s canonical presentation of Montaigne’s readers, particularly as it relates to the legend Emerson is composing of his father, which he provides as the paragraph continues:

It happened, when in Paris, in 1833, that, in the cemetery of Pere Lachaise, I came to a tomb of Auguste Collignon, who died in 1830, aged sixty-eight years, and who, said the monument, "lived to do right, and had formed himself to virtue on the *Essays* of Montaigne." Some years later, I became acquainted with an accomplished English poet, John Sterling; and,

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<sup>132</sup> (CW 8:80).

in prosecuting my correspondence, I found that, from a love of Montaigne, he had made a pilgrimage to his chateau, still standing near Castellan, in Perigord, and, after two hundred and fifty years, had copied from the walls of his library the inscriptions which Montaigne had written there. That Journal of Mr. Sterling's, published in the Westminster Review, Mr. Hazlitt has reprinted in the Prolegomena to his edition of the Essays. I heard with pleasure that one of the newly-discovered autographs of William Shakespeare was in a copy of Florio's translation of Montaigne. It is the only book which we certainly know to have been in the poet's library. And, oddly enough, the duplicate copy of Florio, which the British Museum purchased with a view of protecting the Shakespeare autograph (as I was informed in the Museum), turned out to have the autograph of Ben Jonson in the fly-leaf. Leigh Hunt relates of Lord Byron, that Montaigne was the only great writer of past times whom he read with avowed satisfaction. Other coincidences, not needful to be mentioned here, concurred to make this old Gascon still new and immortal for me.<sup>133</sup>

The happenstance quality here is a clear example of Emerson working in Montaigne's mode, and the movement through Montaigne's readers, which begins at the cemetery with the epitaph of Auguste Collignon and ends in his father's library, is made highly relevant due to its topical irrelevance. Collignon is a figure that is memorialized in two places: Père Lachaise and Emerson's essay. Unlike every other figure in the passage, Collignon is not a writer. He is entombed as a cipher, introducing the reader to Sterling,

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<sup>133</sup>(CW 8:80).

Hazlitt, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Byron, Leigh Hunt and “other coincidences” that Emerson deems “not needful” to be mentioned in the essay. Particularly striking is the detail Emerson provides about Shakespeare:

I heard with pleasure that one of the newly-discovered autographs of William Shakespeare was in a copy of Florio's translation of Montaigne. It is the only book which we certainly know to have been in the poet's library.

The detail becomes salient, but only to that reader who remembers that Emerson has just told us that his own library, inherited from his father, effectively begins with Montaigne. The alignment between Emerson and all of these writers figuratively teaches his readers to read Emerson's own writing within a tradition of writers, perhaps *the* tradition of writers. Though in reality, Emerson's father bequeathed Emerson next to nothing, and only in his constructed representation of self did his father confer upon him anything like an exalted literary heritage.

In his earliest years, Emerson was a writer in search of a poetic persona in which to present himself, and as we have seen, thinking of himself as a poet became young Emerson's most primary act of self-definition. With poetry, and the image of himself as poet, Emerson felt he could first privately compose himself and then present himself to a social milieu, specifically, his two brothers, William and Edward. Yet, because he grew up alongside three enormously ambitious brothers (his youngest brother, Charles, would be as academically competitive as both William and Edward), Emerson saw that he



lacked what he would come to call “the power of face”—the ability to have a personal influence on a public.<sup>134</sup> Compensating for this lack, Emerson crafted a private poetic self that he could perform—first for his family, and much later for society, at large. We see this writerly face, and Emerson plays with the image of it in “Montaigne.” Yet, by drawing the connections between Emerson’s own youthful orientation to writing and the mature manifestation in “Montaigne,” we begin to further understand how Emerson developed his personal poetic *mythos* into social *ethos*—or how he developed a personal, shadowy defect of character into a public virtue. The paradox inherent in Emerson’s two faces—one schoolboy, the other sage—is that the very source of Emerson’s cultural authority is his lack of personal authority, experienced often when he was a child, and lingering beneath the surface of his work all the way into adulthood.

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<sup>134</sup> (JMN 3:136).

### Chapter Three: The Child as Teacher

“I think I could have taught an orator, though I am none.”<sup>135</sup>

*Emerson's Journal, 1862*

Merton M. Sealts, Jr. points to one of the most interesting aspects of Emerson's vision of the child when he asks readers to consider “Emerson as Teacher.”<sup>136</sup> Emerson was a graduate of Harvard College in 1821, but as Sealts notes, “there was not a single Harvard professor on the private list of personal benefactors he drew up in 1836, when he was thirty-three.”<sup>137</sup> Edward Everett, one Harvard instructor that may have made the list, had it been drawn up earlier, became, after the mid 1830's, a mere purveyor of a “popular profoundness”<sup>138</sup> and Emerson learned to take the measure of Everett's oratory as derivative and unoriginal.<sup>139</sup> And yet, throughout his life, Emerson often spoke of how he “wished for a professorship.”<sup>140</sup> Why did he continue to admire the role of professor, even if he did not continue to admire, and in some cases even loathed, many of his own?

Emerson's long-held wish to become a professor was something he spoke of often in the final years of his life. He told Moncure Conway “that when he graduated, his

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<sup>135</sup> (JMN 15:246).

<sup>136</sup> Sealts, Merton M. Jr. “Emerson as Teacher”, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Lawrence Buell. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.

<sup>137</sup> (JMN 5:160).

<sup>138</sup> Rusk, 77.

<sup>139</sup> (JMN 5:32). April 22, 1835. "I have made no record of Everett's fine Eulogy at Lexington on the 20th. But he is all art & I find in him nowadays maugre all his gifts & great merits more to blame than praise. His is not content to be Edward Everett, but would be Daniel Webster. This is his mortal distemper. Why should such a genius waste itself? Have we any to spare? Why should Everett make grimaces? He will not deliver himself up to dear Nature, but insists on making postures & sounds after his own taste, & like those he has heard of, & now he does not know there is any Nature for him. Neither has he any faith."

<sup>140</sup> (JMN 10:20)

ambition was to be a professor of rhetoric and elocution.”<sup>141</sup> He also asked himself in his journal “Why has never the poorest country college offered me a professorship of rhetoric?”<sup>142</sup> The context of Emerson’s conversation with Conway suggests that, by graduation, Emerson meant graduation from college, not Divinity School. Therefore, considering the period from Emerson’s 1821 Harvard graduation to his being admitted to the Divinity School in 1825, means imagining a young man who wants, at the very least, to be a professor of rhetoric, but was instead forced to accept what he called the “miserable employment” of a “hopeless Schoolmaster.”<sup>143</sup>

Eighteen twenty-one proved to be a difficult year for Emerson, psychologically. The then eighteen-year old was teaching young women at a finishing school, kept in Boston by his brother William, and his journals during this time appear more confessional than they would during any other time of his life. Ralph Rusk, Stephen Whicher, and Henry Nash Smith have each helped to characterize what we now know as Emerson’s “problem of vocation,” a period named by Smith that had “two principle phases”: before he entered Harvard Divinity school in 1825 and after he resigned from the ministry in 1832.<sup>144</sup> But Smith’s essay focuses on the second phase, not the first. Similarly, Glen Johnson has proposed Emerson’s “problem of professionalism,” which discusses Emerson’s paper-shuffling years, specifically 1836-1841, when the ex-minister

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<sup>141</sup> Conway, Moncure Daniel. *Emerson At Home And Abroad* New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968). 43

<sup>142</sup> (*JMN* 10:28)

<sup>143</sup> (*JMN* 1:130).

<sup>144</sup> Life; Whicher, Stephen. *Freedom and Fate: And Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1953. esp. chaps. 2-4; Smith, Henry Nash “Emerson’s Problem of Vocation,” *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Milton Konvitz and Stephen Whicher, Prentice-Hall: New Jersey, 1962.) pp.60-71.

was getting his act together as a Lyceum lecturer.<sup>145</sup> I wish to look more closely at Nash's first phase, that earlier period of Emerson's development, beginning around the year 1821, when he initiates an interrogation of his own, primarily recent, personal past. Not yet precisely a problem of vocation, but more like the psychic orientation that would eventually cause it, the years 1821-23 show an Emerson who was beginning to recognize the psychic disappointment caused by reckoning with personal history.

The conflation of personal history with History is a well-known feature of Emerson's thought. As Robert D. Richardson and others have shown, Emerson's conception of history, "as it evolved from the 1836-37 Philosophy of History lecture series, through the 1841 essay 'History', to the lectures and eventual book on *Representative Men* (1850), to the Hegelian phase beginning the late 1860s, was a complex, wide-ranging, and above all, constantly developing set of ideas."<sup>146</sup> What is called Emerson's first phase, ranging from the mid-1830's, to the appearance of the essay "History," is where "Emerson most actively sought to break with tradition, to rethink the problem [of history] afresh." As history is an inherently retrospective affair, requiring one to look back at the past, Emerson on History ought to inspire what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance."<sup>147</sup> But Emerson finds an imaginative way to avoid engaging

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<sup>145</sup> Johnson, Glen. "Emerson on 'Making' in Literature: His Problem of Professionalism, 1836-1841." *Emerson Centenary Essays*. Ed. Joel Myerson. Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, 1982. pp.65-73.

<sup>146</sup> Richardson, Robert D. Jr. "Emerson on History," *Emerson: Prospect and Retrospect*, Ed. Joel Porte, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982. 50. See also, Caponigri, A.R. "Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History." *New England Quarterly*, vol. 17. 1945. 368-390; Nicoloff, P.L. *Emerson on Race and History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961; Van Cromphout, G. "Emerson and the Dialectics of History." *PMLA*, 91. 1976. 54-65.

<sup>147</sup> One of the most influential and extensively studied theories in social psychology, the theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or by justifying or rationalizing them. See Festinger, Leon 1957. *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957.

History in anything like an historical way, and he does this by appealing to one of his own core philosophical beliefs. He posits a “universal mind,” one “common to all men” that allows “all to be explained from individual experience.”<sup>148</sup>

Ortega y Gasset once observed that a crucial difference between the “truly philosophical temperament” and a mind prone toward theorizing is that the philosopher has only one idea, which he develops, while the theorizer has many, which he does not.<sup>149</sup> The observation holds true for Emerson, whose own awareness of his “one idea,” he describes in a journal entry in April of 1840:

In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man. This the people accept readily enough, & even with loud commendation, as long as I call the lecture, Art; or Politics; or Literature; or the Household; but the moment I call it Religion,—they are shocked, though it be only the application of the same truth which they receive everywhere else, to a new class of facts.<sup>150</sup>

Emerson’s confession shows his awareness of his own historical moment, but it is the private part of this observation that gives the clue of what would become Emerson’s teaching on “History.” Celebrating an “infinite privacy” means maintaining a discretionary policy with respect to personal disclosure, which Emerson does in “History,” as he does in all of his published work. Yet what makes “History” the standout

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<sup>148</sup> (CW 2:10)

<sup>149</sup> Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme* trans. Toby Talbot New York: Meridian Books, 1964. 19.

<sup>150</sup> (JMN 7:342)

essay in this context (Emerson places it first in *Essays, First Series*) is that this inaugural essay of the collection shows how Emerson preserves his own privacy by taking on a teacherly role in his prose.

Emerson's admiration of the role of teacher is born largely from three principle influences in his youth: First, the difficulty with which Emerson recollected his own personal past; second, the compensatory mythology Emerson developed in order to compensate for this difficulty; and finally, and perhaps most crucially, the role played by one of Emerson's own childhood teachers, Sarah Alden Bradford. Each of these influences will help to provide an answer to the question why Emerson continued to admire the role of teacher, and even learned to think of himself as such.

In his essay "History," Emerson instructs his readers "to read History actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary."<sup>151</sup> Emerson performs this feat at the bottom of the third paragraph of the "History," where the rhetorical move from the private mind to the reflection of that mind in the historical record teaches the reader how to read History:

Every revolution was first a thought in one man's mind, and when the same thought occurs to another man, it is the key to that era. Every reform was once a private opinion, and when it shall be a private opinion again, it will solve the problem of the age. The fact narrated must correspond to something in me to be credible or intelligible. We as we read must become Greeks, Romans, Turks, priest and king, martyr and executioner, must fasten these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall

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<sup>151</sup> (CW 2:5)

learn nothing rightly. What befell Asdrubal or Caesar Borgia is as much an illustration of the mind's powers and depravations as what has befallen us. Each new law and political movement has meaning for you. Stand before each of its tablets and say, "Under this mask did my Proteus nature hide itself." This remedies the defect of our too great nearness to ourselves. This throws our actions into perspective: and as crabs, goats, scorpions, the balance, and the waterpot lose their meanness when hung as signs in the zodiac, so I can see my own vices without heat in the distant persons of Solomon, Alcibiades, and Catiline.<sup>152</sup>

Considered rhetorically, the passage performs the type of reading of history that Emerson's essay endorses, but the perspective that is generated by making historical figures effectively own one's worst attributes de-individualizes both the self and History. The ostensible lesson here is how to read History the way Emerson does, but as he makes Solomon, Alcibiades, and Catiline incarnate vices that are not even explicitly named, the reader, in this instance, knows neither History nor Emerson.

While it may exceed the scope of an essay like "History" to expect Emerson to treat his own life as the text, an essay like Emerson's "Compensation," (the third in his 1841 collection), better meets the expectation that Emerson places on his readers. Unlike "History," which begins by making universal claims regarding the self, "Compensation" begins with what seems like an overtly personal confession, where Emerson's own life generates the text:

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<sup>152</sup> (CW 2:11)

Ever since I was a boy I have wished to write a discourse on Compensation; for it seemed to me when very young that on this subject life was ahead of theology and the people knew more than the preachers taught.<sup>153</sup>

The boyhood provenance of this recollection belongs not to his “boyhood,” but to the year 1821, when Emerson, at eighteen, was teaching at his brother’s finishing school. When Emerson writes “life was ahead of theology” in his 1841 essay, the observation speaks to the compensatory lessons Emerson learned as a “hopeless Schoolmaster,” when his practical life began outpacing his education, and looking back upon his own past became painful and discouraging.

A study of Emerson’s 1821 journal reveals the deep personal regrets that seized his imagination when he looked back upon his past. “Then again look at this,” he begins a particularly candid entry,

there was pride in being a collegian, & a poet, & somewhat romantic in my queer acquaintance with (Gay;) and poverty presented nothing mortifying in the meeting of two young men whom their common relation & character as scholars equalized. But when one becomes a droning schoolmaster, and the other is advancing his footing in good company & fashionable friends, the cast of countenance on meeting is somewhat altered. Hope, it is true, still hands out, though at further distance, her gay banners; but I have found her a cheat once, twice, many times, and shall I

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<sup>153</sup> (CW 9:43).



trust the deceiver again? And what am I the better for the two, four, six years delay? Nine months are gone, and except some rags of Wideworlds, half a dozen general notions &c I am precisely the same World's humble servant that left the University in August. Good people will tell me that it is a Judgment & lesson for my character, to make me fitter for the office whereto I aspire; but if I come out a dispirited, mature, broken hearted miscreant,—how will Man or myself be bettered? Now I have not thought all this time that I was complaining at Fate although I suppose it amounts to the same; these are the suggestions only of a disappointed spirit brooding over the fall of castles in the air. My fate is enviable contrasted with that of others; I have only to blame myself who had no right to build them. Waldo E.<sup>154</sup>

In this passage where an eighteen-year old Emerson is comparing himself to former fellow student Martin Gay, he measures himself a failure. Referring to himself as “Waldo” during this period, a practice he began in his journal during his student years at Harvard, Emerson seems self-consciously aware of the need to recast himself. The act of taking his middle name as his poetic name during his college years appears to have been a gesture at re-fashioning his identity. This gesture also has familial resonance. As Mary Kupiec Cayton showed, Emerson grew up in his father's world, and his father, William Emerson Sr., quite deliberately named his sons with hereditary honorifics in mind.<sup>155</sup> He

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<sup>154</sup> (JMN 1: 130)

<sup>155</sup> Cayton, Mary Kupiec. *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England 1800-1845*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989. See pp. 3-33

named his first son John Clarke after his predecessor at the First Church, and his second son after himself. Each name speaks to Emerson Sr.'s pedigree-conscious, quasi-shamanic belief that a son with the appropriate name might carry on the family's ministerial legacy. Portraits of William's First Church predecessors, "Charles Chauncy and John Clarke overlooked all company from the wall of the Emerson family dining room,"<sup>156</sup> and two of William Emerson Sr.'s sons were named after these men. Yet with Ralph's arrival into the Emerson family, William Sr.'s honorific naming was temporarily discontinued. Emerson Sr. seems to have been "somewhat less interested in Ralph, his third son, and the result of Ruth's fifth pregnancy, than in previous children."<sup>157</sup> Likely, this was why Emerson was named after one of Ruth's siblings, Ralph Haskins, Ruth's prosperous younger brother, "who at the time was somewhere on the Pacific Ocean in charge of a cargo of merchandise from China."<sup>158</sup>

Emerson seems to have harbored an attendant sense of paternal rejection regarding his name—one reason why the adult Emerson would insist, in his essay "The Poet" that "the Poet is the *namer* and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the center...He is the true and only doctor."<sup>159</sup> That Emerson was named after a man that he could not have met during his childhood, while his brothers (including the two who were born after him) were named for family heroes, seems to have created a psychic wound that Emerson was *of* the family, but not precisely *in* the family. His early adolescent act of claiming his middle name, Waldo, for his poetic personality was one of

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wherein Cayton discusses what she calls "Emerson's education in Federalism." Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Cayton.

<sup>156</sup> Cole, 121.

<sup>157</sup> Barish, 24.

<sup>158</sup> Allen, *Waldo*. 37. Allen also maintains that the "Waldo" part of the name likely came from a family into which an Emerson had married in the seventeenth century.

<sup>159</sup> (*CW* 3:6,7).

his first attempts at doctoring this wound, which *middled* him between his father's assignation, and his mother's nomothetic affiliation. "Waldo" was an odd combination of adolescent, poetic posturing and familial diplomacy, something Emerson often displayed in his youthful correspondence. Jockeying for his place in a family with no father, three intelligent, achievement-oriented brothers, and a pushy, charismatic aunt helped to instill in Emerson a sensitivity to position, image, and secrecy.<sup>160</sup>

"The advantage in Educations," he would privately admit in his journal "is always with those children who slip up into life without being objects of notice. Happy those then who are members of large families."<sup>161</sup> The private admission, which never found a public venue in any of Emerson's lectures or essays, is pregnant with disguised pain. Emerson makes it an advantage to be ignored, but this is in retrospect. No child takes comfort in being overlooked, which means that the claim Emerson makes in his journal is a compensatory mythology.

Tellingly, Emerson performs a similar gesture when, a mere nine months after he has graduated from Harvard College, he writes in his journal that he has become a "droning schoolmaster," while Martin Gay "is advancing his footing in good company & fashionable friends." As his journal entry continues, Emerson insists that during his college years "poverty presented nothing mortifying in the meeting of two young men whom their common relation & character as scholars equalized." But as he makes this confession, Emerson is unhappy with his own material reality in the present. He is nostalgic for his student life—his "Waldo" years—a period when was still hopeful of a

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<sup>160</sup> In one of his early letters, Emerson gives us an indication about the ambitious quality of Edward, the Emerson brother that would eventually have what we would today call a nervous breakdown. "Edward smitten to the bowels with ambition....he is too good to be a Lawyer, and too bad to be a Divine." (*L* 1:149)

<sup>161</sup> (*JMN*, 5: 50).

future that he had not clearly imagined. Emerson goes on to denigrate his own fantasy for success, (“castles in the air”), only to comfort himself, in his compensatory way, with the thought that his “fate is enviable contrasted to that of others.”<sup>162</sup>

Emerson’s success fantasy of 1821 was vague in terms of how the fantasy would be achieved, and the journal shows him reflecting on the ineffectiveness of fantasizing:

My infant imagination was idolatrous of glory, & thought itself no mean pretender to the honours of those who stood highest in the community, and dared even to contend for fame with those who are hallowed by time & the approbation of ages. –It was a little merit to conceive such animating hopes, and afforded some poor prospect of the possibility of their fulfillment.<sup>163</sup>

Meeting the disinterest of the real world, especially as he played the role of schoolmaster, gave Emerson perspective on the vagueness of his “animating hopes.” His hopes were hitched to becoming a poet, touched by contact with the supernatural:

This hope was fed and fanned by the occasional lofty communications which were vouchsafed to me with the Muses’ Heaven and which have at intervals made me the organ of remarkable sentiments & feelings which were far above my ordinary train. And with this lingering earnest of better hope (I refer to this fine exhilaration which now & then quickens my clay)

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<sup>162</sup> (*JMN* 1, 130)

<sup>163</sup> (*JMN* 1:133)

shall I resign every aspiration to belong to that family of giant minds  
which live on earth many ages & rule the world when their bodies are  
slumbering, no matter, whether under a pyramid or a primrose? No I will  
yet a little while entertain the Angel.<sup>164</sup>

A compensatory “family of giant minds,” which Emerson aspires “to belong to,” is explicitly constructed in this passage. Apparent too is Emerson’s unwillingness to let go of the fantasy, (“I will yet a little while entertain the angel”). Yet it is most instructive to see how the accomplished, elderly Emerson remembers this period of his youth, as it stands in sharp contrast to how it appears in his 1821 journal. In a lecture Emerson gave in 1865, speaking to “the ladies who, as girls, had attended his school,” we see the source of the claim Emerson makes at the beginning of “Compensation.” Explaining to his former students “that he had certain regrets with regard to his teaching,” the regrets themselves sound little like the regrets he had recorded in his journal as an eighteen-year old:

I was at that very time already writing every night in my chamber my first thoughts on morals and the beautiful laws of Compensation and the individual genius, which to observe and illustrate have given sweetness to my life. I am afraid no hint of this ever came into the school, where we clung to the safe and cold details of languages, geography, arithmetic and chemistry. Now I believe that each should serve the other by his or her strength, not by their weakness, and that if I could have had one hour of

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<sup>164</sup> (*JMN* 1:133)

deep thought at that time, I could have engaged you in thoughts that would have given reality, depth and joy to the school, and raised all these details to the highest pleasure and nobleness.<sup>165</sup>

Here Emerson tells his audience of former pupils that, as a young man, he wrote in private what he could not practice in public. Confessing to have lived a double life—a schoolteacher by day, and a romantic poet-moralist, a “Waldo,” by night—the elderly Emerson dramatizes his school-teaching period as a time when he made his most crucial discoveries. “I could have engaged you,” he muses before his crowd of former pupils. The remark portrays a failure, but its source is ambiguous. Did the young schoolmaster, every night in his chamber, have no time for his pupils? Or is it that Emerson, more than the school, was the one to cling to “safe and cold details”? The elderly Emerson expresses regret to his audience that, as a youth, he worked the depths as a writer and thinker in his chamber at night, not in the classroom.

Emerson’s objective with his former students is to be remembered not for how he may have appeared to them in the past, but rather as he represents himself in the present (for posterity). As a teenage teacher, Emerson was “terrified at entering a girls’ school and was troubled by what he later called the ‘infirmities of my cheek,’” “occasional admirations of some of my pupils,” and “vexation of spirit when the will of the pupils was a little too strong for the will of the teacher.”<sup>166</sup> None of these memories make it into his speech. Nor do memories taken from Emerson’s teenage journal of the period, which

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<sup>165</sup> Current Opinion Edition, notes 395. “Compensation.”

<sup>166</sup> Rusk, 90.

show Emerson looking back upon his personal past, feeling at once nostalgic and disappointed with himself.

Between the “hopeless Schoolmaster” entry of May 7<sup>th</sup>, and a May 13<sup>th</sup> entry where Emerson describes “a goading sense of emptiness & wasted capacity,”<sup>167</sup> he writes a passage that shows him trying on yet another identity:

Trust not the Passions; they are blind guides. They act, by the confessed experience of all the world, by the observation within reach of a child’s attention, contrary to Reason. It were madness & manifest perdition for a man who beheld from the shore a stormy & ranging ocean, darkened by clouds & broken by rocks—to cast himself into a boat, upon it without oar or helm, to be tossed to savage shores perhaps, perhaps to famine, perhaps to the wild wilderness of waves, inevitably to death for no other purpose by to gratify a moment’s caprice. But this is the strict history of one who trusts himself to the government of passion. He voluntarily puts away from him that godlike prerogative which distinguishes him from the beasts, and which determines & fortifies his actions, and throws himself into the wild tempest of temptations & vice, into the direct commission of those crimes which human & divine laws have fenced round & forbidden. He has become another being, and under this strange metamorphosis he dares & delights in enormities at which his calm mind but now shuddered. He has made himself accountable & perchance execrable for high handed wickedness from which a moment’s firmness would have extricated him

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<sup>167</sup> (*JMN* 1: 133)

entirely; he had made himself liable to new temptation, and fatally easy to the triumphs of Sin.<sup>168</sup>

This reads like a practicing sermonizer, with its puritanical preoccupation with Passions run wild, and it's sure-footed peddling in Sin business. Yet more than being a simple, though repressive, religious impulse in himself, the passage indicates what Evelyn Barish had once made evident as she compared Emerson's late teenage years with a comparable English upbringing:

Waldo had evidently not been exposed to anyone he could admire. Unlike an English youth just graduated from Oxford, he had taken no tour, been instructed by no cultivated tutor, and attended no court of salon. He had heard little, even at second hand, of how the great and influential minds of the day arrived at or disseminated their ideas; all he had for such instruction were months-old copies of the *Edinburgh Review* and its ilk. In short, he was part of the still very thin New England culture of its day that had permitted his father, having left the village of Harvard and his farm three years earlier, to become editor of America's first literary journal and his aunt—when not herself farming or keeping house—to write occasional anonymous pieces for the same publication.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> (*JMN* 1: 131).

<sup>169</sup> Barish, 152-53.



Barish's insight, especially with respect to Emerson's early literary education, is corroborated by Emerson's sermonic journal entry, for in the next paragraph, Emerson's writing seems to be aiming at something beyond the ministerial. Instead of writing a sermon, he seems to be attempting to write literary criticism that serves as something like life criticism. "We take our impressions from the average results," Emerson continues,

of our own limited experiments. These form our general notions from which we reason in cold moments. But we always derive a transient & partial prejudice from the last contact which we had with it. We feel a low & miserable humiliation when we have been in company with beings of that worst sort—like John of Cappadocia in "Decline & Fall," or Glossin in *Guy Mannering* or Clodius at Rome. This is by far the most tremendous character (in species), which can be found. Another portrait of it is Richardson's Lovelace. It is a worse being than Byron's personifications; the pirate Cleaveland is of Byron's kind, with the laughing devil in his sneer, but is hardly so dreadful in many respects as these; because the character of which I speak exactly comes up to the best limit of human nature at the same time that it appertains more to the fiend: Byron's have redeeming gently affections;—these exhibit the gently affections only to laugh at them, and shock you by butchering ham beings & divine things in a genteel way,—in becoming popular in proportion as they become outrageous.

Here a nineteenth-century adolescent cocktail of Scott, Byron, and Guy Mannering are made to carry the freight of what young Emerson then knew about philosophy. The thought, as the boy himself could realize, goes nowhere. Emerson ends the entry with “(All this might be as well continued as not).”<sup>170</sup> But the stance, which is pedantically literary when it wishes to be pedagogically literary, is clear enough in this entry. Emerson is trying to teach something that he does not yet know himself.

It is not entirely surprising that Emerson dramatizes himself to his former pupils as “already writing every night in my chamber...the beautiful laws of Compensation.” But as what Emerson wrote in his 1821 journals were largely complaints about his “ambitious prospects” and his “careless because ignorant of the future” teenage self, the dramatization re-imagines his past to serve the compensatory function of correcting his lived life. Speaking before his former pupils, Emerson imagined his own past for what it needed to be, rather than what it was, and this alteration of the facts reveals the vice of Alcibiades that Emerson references in “History.” For while the historians of antiquity lionized Alcibiades for his oratorical skill, his skill was attributed to a gift for speaking to the occasion. Alcibiades’ art was in the telling of what his crowd wanted, or needed, to hear.

Precisely why Emerson compensated for the meagerness and the discontent of his schoolmaster years by making them (wrongly) the source of his idea of compensation is not entirely clear, but there are three possible reasons for the act. The first is that Emerson merely *forgot* the details of his schoolteacher past, though the reference to the “sin of Alcibiades” in his essay “History” seems to suggest some amount of

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<sup>170</sup> (JMN 1: 131-32).

conscientiousness of the fact that Emerson was being an intentional alterer of the speech for the crowd. This conscientiousness leads to the second, and more likely, reason why Emerson makes his schoolmaster years wrongly the source of his idea of compensation: Emerson is taking an Alcibiadean rhetorical liberty with his former students, and he is preaching encouragement to his audience. But the third, and still compelling, reason for why Emerson wrongly makes his schoolmaster years the source for his ideas of compensation is that Emerson himself has come to believe in his own myth, and truly wished to let it displace fact.

In his journal, Emerson could not entirely ignore his own lived life, but by engaging History publicly in his essays, he began the practice of disappearing, or at the very least mythologizing, his personal past. What he calls for in “History,” “to read History actively and not passively; to esteem [one’s] own life the text, and books the commentary” became a strategy of disregard where his own life was concerned.<sup>171</sup> In “History,” we read how Emerson writes about himself by marshaling historical personages, evoking his “self” through historical associationalism. Substituting History for personal history is the essay’s primary gesture. But in “Compensation,” Emerson gives us an “I,” an “Ever since I was a boy” story that seems to be personally biographical, rather than, as Emerson re-imagines it, disassociatingly historical. And yet, even in this ostensibly personal context, Emerson shifts quickly away from his personal past. After educating the reader on the “ancient doctrine of Nemesis, who keeps watch in the universe, and lets no offense go unchastised,” Emerson writes:

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<sup>171</sup> (CW 2:5)

This voice of fable has in it somewhat divine. It came from thought above the will of the writer. That is the best part of each writer, which has nothing private in it; that which he does not know; that which flowed out of his constitution, and not from his too active invention; that which in the study of a single artist you might not easily find, but in the study of many, you would abstract as the spirit of them all.<sup>172</sup>

After this rhetorical encounter with the technology of fable, the reader becomes newly aware of Emerson's seemingly personal beginning of the essay. With Emerson's introduction of the idea that "that is the best part of each writer, which has nothing private in it," "Compensation's" story about his fabled boyhood becomes a performed compensation.

The reality of Emerson's boyhood, evident in at least one early writing encounter with Sarah Alden Bradford as Emerson approached his eleventh birthday, shows if not where, then at least why he learned to compensate for his experienced history. Bradford served young Emerson as both a teacher-model and as an emotional surrogate for the more challenging, and occasionally strained relationships he had in his youth with both his mother and his aunt. Emerson wrote to Bradford, in 1814, a letter written almost entirely in rhymed couplets, and the letter reads like a clear result of her encouraging influence:

Your favor I received of late

But know that I cannot like you translate

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<sup>172</sup> (CW 3:169)

But yet my humble efforts I will make  
Not in Greek 'tis verse I undertake  
You ask in Rollin what I like best  
Under whose banners I myself enlist?  
Tis Athens bravery which does me delight  
I follow her in peace and in the fight.  
I wish that Rollin in his history brought  
The wars of Troy to every readers thought,  
The burning city, and Aeneas' flight  
With great Anchises on that fatal night.  
You mention Nisus and Euryalus too  
Those youthful heroes and those friends so true,  
With you I like that charming history so well  
Both in act and friendship noble fell  
But to your fifth Bucolic I proceed  
And here young Mopsus tunes his slender reed<sup>173</sup>

In the letter that elicited Emerson's verse response, Bradford had urged him to "continue this versification" of Virgil's eclogue. Playing the role of a teaching correspondent for the ten-year old boy, Bradford, a twenty-year old herself, was guiding young Emerson toward awareness of his own need for companionship. Her reference to Nisus and Euryalus, two characters from Virgil's *Aeneid* known for their close bond, seems to show her awareness of Emerson's familial situation at the time. His brother William was then

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<sup>173</sup> (*L* 1:5).

at Harvard, and Emerson's only sister, three-year-old Mary Caroline, died weeks earlier on April 14, 1814. Seeming to sense young Emerson's emotional neediness during this time, Bradford asked him to work an appropriate literary theme that stresses a strong social connection.

During this time, Emerson's own social bonds were not only weakened by the departure of his siblings, but they were also strained by the economic conditions of the Emerson household, which became volatile after Emerson's father's death in 1811. This condition, which forced Emerson's mother, Ruth, into running several boarding houses, taxed the boy to a degree that he could almost confess to Bradford. The need for Bradford, as surrogate, seems to be born out of this economic strain on the Emerson household. Young Emerson hints at this matter, somewhat shamefully, when he writes Bradford two months later:

I hope you will forgive my long delay  
In writing you but I no longer stay  
The cause of my not writing I'll not tell  
You know the reason and you know too well.<sup>174</sup>

It is difficult to fully measure Bradford's influence on Emerson in his early years, but the influence seems to have been tied to her gracious encouragement and attention, something that Emerson did not seem to receive frequently during his youth. Emerson's early letters to both his mother and his Aunt are limited to practical and philosophical concerns. Letters to and from his mother cover daily wants and needs, while the

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<sup>174</sup> (L 1:6)

correspondence between him and Aunt Mary was idea based, referencing books and beliefs.<sup>175</sup> What Bradford was giving Emerson reveals a lack in what was given by Ruth and Mary. Some years later, on January 25<sup>th</sup> 1819, Emerson wrote to William with news that Bradford would be marrying Samuel Ripley, head of the Waltham school, in which both brothers had been tutoring from time to time. In this letter to William, Emerson's more maturely made associations with Bradford are apparent.

I suppose you feel anxious to know something of your old tabernacles in an official capacity in its regenerated state. The captain-general is unaltered. The new inhabitant by far the finest woman I ever saw; (our *own* friends alone excepted). She has lost all that reserve to strangers that she used to have; knows just as much & more in Literature; still cleans lamps & makes puddings; never hurts any one's feelings, & yet appears to feel a superiority for all out of her own immediate circle. When no one is reading to her, at leisure moments you will find her reading a German critic or something of the kind, sometimes Reid on Light or Optics. As to her knowledge, talk on what you will she can always give you a new idea—ask her any philosophical question, she will always enlighten you by her answer. She is never cross or any thing like coldness; is very fond of *him* as *he* of *her*. In short I must end where I begun, that she is the finest woman I ever saw.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> See *Letters of MME*, 526, where Emerson's aunt responds to his inquiry, "You will recur to the past w'h I always bury."

<sup>176</sup> (*L* 1:75).

Pressed between two declarations of Bradford being “the finest woman” he had ever seen, Emerson makes some suggestive observations about her character. That sixteen-year-old Emerson marvels at Bradford’s anti-provincial sensibility, as well as her inability to be “cross and cold” suggests what he had been accustomed to growing up with Ruth and Mary. “Crossness” was something that Emerson often noted of his Aunt’s temperament, even into his manhood, while “coldness,” though never explicitly stated by Emerson, was a part of how he remembered his mother’s style of mothering.<sup>177</sup> Perhaps his teachers compared poorly to Bradford, as well.

Ultimately, the reason Emerson continued to admire the role of the teacher, even if he did not continue to admire any of his own, is that his *idealism* of the teacher, born out of his youth, preexisted and survived Emerson’s problem of vocation. For instance, Emerson wrote his letter of resignation from the church on September 11, 1832, officially ending his relationship with the First Church, though not with preaching or teaching.<sup>178</sup> Six days after his formal resignation, in a journal entry that combines his clear willingness to continue to preach and an imaginary audience that includes his former teacher Edward Everett and the orator and statesman George Canning, he wrote,

I would gladly preach to the demigods of this age (& why not to the simple people?) concerning the reality of truth & the greatness of (trusting it) believing in it & seeking after it. It does not shock us when ordinary persons discover no craving for truth & are content to exist for years

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<sup>177</sup> Emerson’s late essay “Amita,” which he wrote for his aunt upon her death records the “crossness” with which Mary often engaged others. For Emerson’s mother’s style of mothering, see Barish, pp. 19-22.

<sup>178</sup> (*L* 1:355-57).



exclusively occupied with the secondary objects of house & lands & food & company & never cast up their eyes to inquire whence it comes & what it is for, wholly occupied with the play & never ask after the design. But we cannot forgive it in the Everetts & Cannings that they who have souls to comprehend the magnificent secret should utterly neglect it & seek only huzzas & champagne. My quarrel with the vulgar great men is that they do not generously give themselves to the measures which they meddle with; they do not espouse the things they would do; live in the life of the cause they would forward & faint in its failure, but they are casting sheep's eyes ever upon their own by [-] ends [;] their pert individuality is ever & anon peeping out to see what way the wind blows & where this boat will land them[,] whether it is likely they will dine nicely and sleep warm. That for the *first* thing, that choosing action rather than contemplation, they only half act, they only give their hands or tongues & not themselves to their works.<sup>179</sup>

There is no lack for teacherly hubris in this journal entry, any more than there is a lack of interest in continuing to preach. Emerson attacks Canning and Everett explicitly for how “they do not espouse the things they would do,” when they “seek only huzzas & champagne.” But the more critical attack on both men involves how they *don't think*: “choosing action rather than contemplation, they only half act, they only give their hands or tongues & not themselves to their works.” And what would be thinking for Emerson? What would giving themselves to their work entail?

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<sup>179</sup> (JMN 4: 42-43)

My *second* against them is, that they lack faith in man's moral nature.

They can have no enthusiasm, for the deep & infinite part of man out of which only sublime thought & emotions can proceed, is hid from them.<sup>180</sup>

This "deep & infinite part of man"—the source of Emerson's own felt authority as a teacher—provides the answer to the question of why Emerson continued to admire the role of the instructor. For Emerson, the sublimity of thought and emotion, lay dormant in each youth until unearthed and cultivated by the wise and faithful instructor. As an enabling myth for the teacher, the claim is an admirable one. It recalls the presence of Sarah Alden Bradford from Emerson's youth: "As to her knowledge, talk on what you will she can always give you a new idea—ask her any philosophical question, she will always enlighten you by her answer."<sup>181</sup> But to blame men like Canning and Everett for not living up to the sublimity of "man's moral nature," while he, himself, made effort to hide his own less than sublime thoughts and emotions, diminishes Emerson the teacher, if not entirely his lesson.

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<sup>180</sup> (*JMN* 4: 43)

<sup>181</sup> (*L* 1:75).

## Chapter Four: The Child as Preacher

“It is the best part of man, I sometimes think, that revolts against his being the minister. His good revolts from official goodness.”<sup>182</sup>

*Emerson’s Journal, January 10, 1832*

On May 14, 1835, in the middle of a three-week period that had him serving as a supply preacher in East Lexington, Chelmsford, and Groton, Emerson asked in his journal “Where are your Essays?” The question was preceded by two other questions: “When will you mend Montaigne?” and “When will you take the hint of nature?”<sup>183</sup> He was thirty-one years old. The publication of his *Essays, First Series* would take another five years, while *Nature* would be published only a year later, in 1836. What Emerson writes to himself in his journal on this day in 1835 provides insight into his strategy for initiating his writing career: “When I write a book on spiritual things, I think I will advertise to the reader that I am a very wicked man, & that consistency is nowise expected of me.”<sup>184</sup> Emerson never entirely explored this conscientiously Montaignean path of literary presentation. Perhaps the closest he ever came was the rebelliously “sublime discontent” of his “Address...Before The Senior Calls in Divinity College, Cambridge” on July 15, 1838.<sup>185</sup> Yet the fact that Emerson entertained the fantasy of the

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<sup>182</sup> (*JMN* 3:318).

<sup>183</sup> (*JMN* 5:40).

<sup>184</sup> (*JMN* 5:40).

<sup>185</sup> Porte, 105.

wicked writing man as early as 1835 shows how important wickedness was as a self identity, even if it proved to be incompatible with his life as a minister.

It is sometimes forgotten that Emerson carried on as a preacher long after his resignation from the First Church in 1832, and even after his Divinity School Address of 1838. Emerson's 1838 Divinity School Address showed how "Emerson achieved his self-definition through defiance and dissent."<sup>186</sup> But Emerson did not preach his last sermon until January 20, 1839, almost seven years after he resigned from the First Church. Thus, he spent more years preaching before and after his residence at the First Church than he ever would as its official minister. It is not Emerson's slow breaking away from the church, but rather, his equally slow early acceptance of it that is of interest. By examining Emerson's ambivalent acceptance of the ministerial role, which Emerson declared in his journal on Sunday, April 18, 1824, Emerson's *secret self* emerges more clearly into view.

In his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, Carl Jung observed that

"in many cases in psychiatry, the patient who comes to us has a story that is not told, and which as a rule no one knows of." To Jung's "mind,

therapy only really begins after the investigation of that wholly personal story.

It is the patient's secret, the rock against which he is shattered. If I know his secret story, I have a key to the treatment.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Porte, 105.

<sup>187</sup> Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* New York: Random House, 1965. 117

Jung's observation can also be applied to a famous, oft-quoted passage from Emerson's journal, when he vowed to dedicate "my time, my talents, & my hopes to the Church." In Emerson's entry, he speaks freely of what he called his "defect of character," "which neutralize[d] in great part the just influence my talents ought to have." The Church, as Emerson saw it in 1824, was a way to change his bearing in the world. He entered it with the hope that it would give him "good humored independence & self esteem," while he also thought it might remedy his secret fear that he was "ill at ease...among men."<sup>188</sup> As Emerson seemed to imagine it, beginning his professional studies to become a minister represented an opportunity to correct his private anxiety about his *defect of character*, by stepping into the social role that had been so much a part of the Emerson lineage:<sup>189</sup>

But in Divinity I hope to thrive. I inherit from my sire a formality of manner & speech, but I derive from him or his patriotic parent a passionate love for the strains of eloquence. I burn after the 'aliquid immensum infinitumque' which Cicero desired. What we ardently love we learn to imitate...The office of clergyman is twofold; public preaching & private influence. Entire success in the first is the lot of the few, but this I am encouraged to expect.<sup>190</sup>

In the twofold office of clergyman that Emerson describes here, public preaching is, in fact, what he would eventually succeed with; but the role of clergyman would prove inadequate to put him at ease among men. The private aspect of the his ministerial duty,

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<sup>188</sup> (JMN 2:237-42).

<sup>189</sup> Whicher, 72-78.

<sup>190</sup> (JMN 2:239-40).

which involved giving counsel to his flock, did little to help him overcome his natural diffidence in the company of strangers.<sup>191</sup> Emerson's successor at the First Church, Dr. Chandler Robbins, told an illustrative story. Explaining to Emerson's first biographer, James Eliot Cabot, Robbins spoke of a revolutionary war veteran who once chided Emerson, regarding his lackluster performance of "domiciliaries." Upon summoning young Emerson to his deathbed for "the appropriate consolations," and noticing Emerson's "hesitation...at handling his spiritual weapons," the veteran barked: "Young man, if you don't know your business, you had better go home."<sup>192</sup>

It is suggestive that Emerson's own honest accounting of his temperamental inabilities in the social arena are a strong feature of his April 18, 1824 declaration. He did not fool himself about his interpersonal faults, and while he may have kept them private, he seems to have been trying to work on himself therapeutically by writing in his journal. The 1824 journal entry shows Emerson conscientiously entering into the ministerial career of his ancestors, but it also measures two other professions, which Emerson weighs against his temperament:

Now the profession of Law demands a good deal of personal address, and impregnable confidence in one's own powers, upon all occasions expected & unexpected, & a logical mode of thinking & speaking—which I do not possess, & may not reasonably hope to obtain. Medicine also makes larges

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<sup>191</sup> Allen, Gay Wilson. *Waldo Emerson*. New York: Viking, 1982. 131.

<sup>192</sup> Cabot, 169.

demands on the practitioner for a seducing Mannerism. And I have no taste for the pestle & mortar, for Bell on bones or Hunter or Celsius.<sup>193</sup>

Here, each profession is measured in terms of the social demands that the occupation may eventually put forth. The source of Emerson's social inability, his secret story, can be partially attributed to his familial role, which is complicated in this context. Three of Emerson's brothers, the eldest, William, and the two younger brothers, Edward and Charles, each entered the legal profession; and in his journals, Emerson noted that his brothers (specifically Edward) had "power of face," the ability to have a personal influence on a public.<sup>194</sup> Against this estimation of his siblings, Emerson noted of his own face, in a declaration that shows a decidedly low and embarrassed estimation of self, "My own picture is ugly to me."<sup>195</sup>

In his study of Emerson's oratorical role as both preacher and lecturer, David Robinson has shown how Emerson's personal insecurities were also exacerbated by the fact the "he was in a difficult position of trying to replace a very much beloved pastor," Henry Ware Jr., Emerson's conservative senior colleague at the Second Church.<sup>196</sup> Robinson describes Ware as having "a gift for pastoral care" that "placed a burden on Emerson which is readily discernible in his introductory sermon, the customary occasion on which a new minister made his own hopes and goals for his pastorate known to his congregation."<sup>197</sup> In that sermon, Emerson again presents his recognition of the two

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<sup>193</sup> (*JMN* 2: 239).

<sup>194</sup> (*JMN* 3: 136).

<sup>195</sup> (*JMN* 4: 349).

<sup>196</sup> Robinson, David. *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 41.

<sup>197</sup> Robinson, 41.

branches of ministerial service, “public ministrations and...pastoral visits,” but as Robinson rightly points out, it is what Emerson calls the “high and difficult office” of preaching that “receives most of the attention in his first sermon.” Most significantly, Emerson preaches a kind of passivity to God in the sermon, which he claims as the source of eloquence: “every man who gives himself wholly up to a just sentiment which he lives to inculcate, will be eloquent.”<sup>198</sup> Having described himself to his brother William just before his ordination on March 11, 1829, as “very well but casting many a lingering look at my chamber as the execution day approaches,” Emerson’s first sermon seems preached to himself as much as to his congregation. He hopes God will correct *his* faults. Emerson has what Robinson calls “an attitude of trepidation” about becoming a clergyman, and finds himself wanting in that just sentiment in which *he* lives to inculcate. Thus, Emerson’s phrase *the execution day*, reads rather like a rueful confession that Emerson may have expected to lose some crucial part of himself as he gained his profession.

The ministry was an appropriate career path for a nineteenth-century boy with Emerson’s aspirations, though just why Emerson chose the ministry while all of his brothers refused it is a minor mystery. Only his elder brother, William, came close to becoming a preacher, though each of his brothers endured the same shabby genteel upbringing, each went to Harvard, and each experienced the influence of their Aunt Mary Moody Emerson. From “his early youth,” as Robert Milder has characterized it, “his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson had imparted to him, as well as his brothers, an ideal of ministerial leadership that ‘helped to bring a strain upon these delicate organizations

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<sup>198</sup> YES, 26.



which they could ill endure.”<sup>199</sup> For Emerson, if not for his brothers, the strain also had a temperamental wrinkle. His “sore uneasiness in the company of most men & women,”<sup>200</sup> which, by his own measure, his brothers seemed inoculated against, troubled his childhood fantasy about becoming an eloquent orator. Yet it this trouble that may have been part of what led him to become a preacher, while his brothers refused.

One of the Emerson family rules, inspired by (and likely enforced by) Aunt Mary, was “to do what you are afraid to do.” Emerson recounts this educative principle in his commemorative essay “Amita,” and it is as good as any explanation as to why Emerson entered the ministry when his brothers did not. His aunt, an autodidact, differed dramatically in her orientation to education when compared to her brother, Emerson’s father, William Sr., whose pedagogical orientation was less creatively oriented and more traditional. Like nearly every other pedagogue of his day, William Sr. favored memorization and recitation over more progressive forms of pedagogy, a fact that is illustrated in the correspondence between William Sr. and Emerson’s, mother Ruth.

For his son John Clarke, who was seven at the time, Emerson Sr. expected that he “repeat [from memory] passages from Addison, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, etc.”<sup>201</sup> And of William, who was five, and Ralph, who was three, he wrote his wife that. in his own absence, “William will recite to you as he does to me, if you have leisure to hear him, a sentence of English grammar before breakfast,—though I think, if only one can be attended to, Ralph should be that one.”<sup>202</sup> It seems plausible, given the occasional, if

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<sup>199</sup> Milder, Robert. “Emerson’s Two Conversions.” *ESQ*, Vol. 33, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 1987, 20. The quotation that ends Milder’s point here can be found in James Eliot Cabot’s *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887. I, 3.

<sup>200</sup> (*JMN* 2: 238).

<sup>201</sup> Allen, 10.

<sup>202</sup> Allen, originally from Cabot, Vol. 1, 29.

problematic, matter of being called a “dull scholar”<sup>203</sup> by his father, that Emerson may have had some difficulties with memorization in his youth. If Emerson did have such a difficulty, it may have been what led him to compose hymns when the rest of his family memorized them for the Sabbath.

The recitation of hymns was a family ritual in the Emerson household, both before and after William Sr.’s death. And while it is not clear whether Emerson Sr. gave Ralph the opportunity to write his own hymns instead of memorizing them, his Aunt Mary, “who is known to have written prayers that were ‘read aloud morning and evening’ by the older boys” certainly encouraged Emerson to write when he did not (or perhaps could not) memorize. One story, imparted some one hundred years after the fact by Emerson’s daughter, Ellen Tucker Emerson, is a testament to the psychological importance his early hymn writing must have held for him:

In the afternoon [the boys] each had to learn a hymn. Sometimes instead of learning one Father wrote one, and Uncle Edward had great delight in laying it in the hymn-book, running to his Mother and asking “Wouldn’t you like to have me read you a hymn Mamma?” O course she said yes; he would read it and say “Isn’t that a good hymn?” And poor Mama would say “Yes, my son, excellent.” Then Edward triumphant would cry “Ralph wrote it!”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Cole, Phyllis. *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Cole.

<sup>204</sup> “What I can Remember About Father...7 April 1907.” 11. MH. (quoted in von Frank 2-3).

That this story could have mattered enough to Emerson for him to tell it to his daughter, and that his daughter could still tell it herself, suggests two things. The first is that the story was likely told more than once, which allowed it to become family lore. But the second, and in this context, more important aspect that the story shows is that young Emerson was rewarded early for his *religious* writing. As rewards in the Emerson family were few, the importance of this particular one cannot be overstated, especially when we consider the several myths of the family that Emerson conjured with in his journals and essays.

It is likely that during his early youth, Emerson recognized that he was not the boy that his parents had hopes for. Several biographical facts support this likelihood, not the least of which was the early academic successes of his brothers. But as we saw in the previous chapter, Emerson learned to mythologize his own lack of recognition as an advantage. “The advantage in Educations,” he admitted in his journal, “is always with those children who slip up into life without being objects of notice. Happy those then who are members of large families.”<sup>205</sup> There is a disguised pain in this entry. Emerson makes not being noticed an advantage, but this is in retrospect. Of course, no child takes comfort in being overlooked, but Emerson’s revisionary myth, which never found a public venue in any of his sermons or lectures, hints at the fact that, in childhood, Emerson felt he was not really seen among his young contemporaries, his brothers, and the Emerson family, more generally. Being seen—in a grand and overtly public way—thus became a fantasy that he would try to live out as a preacher.

“Accommodation to parental needs,” observes the psychologist Alice Miller, “often (but not always) leads to the ‘as-if personality’ (Winnicott has described it as the

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<sup>205</sup> (*JMN*, 5: 50).

‘false self’).”<sup>206</sup> In Emerson’s case, his childhood was one wherein parental needs were particularly strong in the feminine because of a notable weakness in the masculine. The major figure of female strength was Emerson’s Aunt Mary who, unlike the other principal female figures in his youth (Sarah Alden Bradford and his mother, Ruth) had literary and intellectual aspirations that were similar to Emerson’s own. Phyllis Cole shows that with the death of Emerson’s father in 1811, when Mary “was thirty-six, a phase of her life closed.” “Never again,” Cole continues, “would Mary admit aspiring to either intellectual mastery or spiritual perfection on earth, and defeated hope became a steady tone in her writing.”<sup>207</sup> After 1811, Aunt Mary became a part of a “genuine parental partnership” with Emerson’s mother, even if she “felt far from resigned to spending her future only in Boston with Ruth” and the children.<sup>208</sup> The key to understanding Emerson’s imagined persona of wickedness and how it was associated with his writerly secret self resides with this psychic relationship Emerson shared with his Aunt Mary. Her frequent departures from the Emerson domestic sphere made her something of an outsider figure in Emerson’s unconscious. Not surprisingly, throughout Emerson’s early journals we see young Emerson writing so as to recover his missing aunt. He also begins to take on her fantasies of intellectual mastery and spiritual perfection on earth.

As we saw in Chapter Two, an early prose fantasy Emerson composed when he was approaching eighteen years old, “The Magician,”<sup>209</sup> features an Aunt-Mary-like

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<sup>206</sup> Miller, *Child* 12.

<sup>207</sup> Cole, 136.

<sup>208</sup> Cole, 137.

<sup>209</sup> (*JMN* 1:266-68; 273-74; 284-86; 302-303)

female tutelary spirit,<sup>210</sup> a witch named Uilsa who is gifted with the power of prophecy. Being an early product of Emerson's imagination (Emerson never mastered, or even had much respect for, the art of prose fiction), the story rambles awkwardly through the gothic architecture of its plot. But by the end of the tale, Uilsa meets her own end by being strangled by a giant snake, whom she refers to as "the minister." The eighteen year old Emerson spent approximately nine months attempting to complete the "The Magician," and its status as a "far from finished work" indicates how troubled the young man was by the notion of completing a version of his aunt. That Mary was not yet pushing him towards the ministerial profession during this period of his life is an important biographical detail that suggests how Emerson's early imagination was both emboldened, and later threatened, by Aunt Mary's encouragements. During the nine-month span that Emerson composed "The Magician," he lived the last months as a Harvard undergraduate, and approached the "Gehenna," as he called it, of school teaching.<sup>211</sup> His brother William was preparing to study theology, insuring that at least one of the Emerson boys would be carrying on the family legacy, which, as several scholars have shown, was hugely important to Aunt Mary.<sup>212</sup> During this period, Emerson sports with his aunt in a letter regarding his Harvard commencement, where he was to read the class poem:

Mother directed me to write a note to you signifying the utter discrepancy of opinion which exists between you & herself with regard to Waldo's

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<sup>210</sup> The relation between "The Magician" and Emerson's Aunt Moody is owed to Evelyn Barish's, "Emerson And "The Magician': An Early Prose Fantasy." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 31, supp. I Summer 1976. 13-18.

<sup>211</sup> (*L* 1: 103).

<sup>212</sup> Cole, 136-62

exhibition, & my object is to convert you to our views. Now you must be aware that if all reasoned like you the luckless performers would speak their well-conned exercises to bare walls. And if I may be allowed to be impudent I shall suggest the fact that not twenty present will know that your proud ladyship is related to the despised & ragged poet. You are wont to say that the spectacle of this worlds' splendour amuses you and if it will gratify you I am very confident the company of the day will be the leaders of the fashion as the sons of senators &c have parts on that day. Furthermore if you would wish your bashful nephew to do well & claim the ground his own vanity aims to reach, you must encourage him with your presence on Tuesday, 24<sup>th</sup> April—My room is No 9 Hollis. Should you come from Hamilton you must not ask for Waldo the poet—he is better known by the name of Emerson the Senior.<sup>213</sup>

Clearly attempting to enact his writerly self (“Waldo the poet”) Emerson’s tone here is comedic, but challenging. He is working hard to have his aunt see him read and, thereby, validate his fantasy identity. He wants his aunt to honor his accomplishments as a poet, while his letter simultaneously attempts to tease her reclusive tendency to hover slightly outside of both the familial and the social spheres. Emerson points to his aunt’s preoccupation with the family lineage (i.e. no one need know that “your proud ladyship is related to the despised & ragged poet”), while he also acknowledges his own ambitions,

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<sup>213</sup> *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson* ed. Nancy Craig Simmons, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993) 99-100. I have preserved the letter’s original misspellings. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as *MME Letters*.

as well as his social inabilities (i.e. “wish your bashful nephew to do well & claim the ground his own vanity aims to reach”).

A letter from Mary, herself, written later that year, helps us to see the degree to which she helped Emerson to develop his early poetic dialect. Even the very language that Emerson would begin his journals with owes a significant debt to her peculiarly spiritual patois:

What dull Prosaic Muse would venture from the humble dell of an unlettered district, to address a son of Harvard? Son of—of —poetry—of genius—ah were it so—and I destined to stand in near consanguinity to this magical possession! Age itself wd throw off its’ gravity for a moment—and dream that there was a vestige of fame to attach it to earth—that a name so dear was one day to leave some memorial. Vain wish. Where are the names which blazoned an admiring world! Where the Heroes so powerfull—the loftier Statesmen—the fascinating talents; the wonder working powers of attracting and guiding the human mind! “We are such stuff as dreams are made of and our whole life is rounded with a sleep.” A name on this flying planet, at which even the powers of higher orders are subject, is no matter of joy, when viewed by the celestial light of faith which shows us the destiny of man thro the long vista of future ages. In that great Assembly, where human nature is purified from its native dross & ignorance, may the name of my dear Waldo be inrolled.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> *MME Letters*, 98

Not only the language, but also the poetic stance of Emerson's youth can be traced back to this particularly encouraging letter. Aunt Mary thinks of Waldo in terms of the pantheon of great men of history, just as young Emerson wishes privately to himself. Her encouragement is also replete with muses, heroes, fascinating talents, and wonder-working powers, all of which, she hopes, young Waldo will be able to access.

Just six months later (May 26, 1818), Aunt Mary's poeticized encouragement becomes even vaster in scope, depth, and power. In this letter, Mary gives Ralph a characterization of his own verse, and a sketch towards defining the function of poetry according to her own high piety, vis-à-vis the now largely forgotten poet Mark Akenside:

On all sides surrounded with the beauty of Vertumnus, what shall I say to my dear Waldo, whose taste I have known in his early days, somewhat morbid to his decorations. And yet a pact—surely in compliment to your profession I must talk of the pow'rs of nature. If you were plumigerous as Muses generally are, that you might visit the Vale; and hear the songs of the grove echoed by the little tritons of Neptune, who is suspected of holding a smale court in the neighboring Lake—if indeed his sedge crowned Majesty ever inhabits less than the “vasty deep”. If not, you could people a sylvan scene with Nymphs or Faries; and queen Mab might send her followers after moon beams. Hithertoo you have had no association with retirement—for you,<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *MME Letters*, 112-13. The Mark Akenside poem “Pleasures of the Imagination” is here inserted into Mary's letter to Emerson.



It is suggestive here that Mary refers to Emerson's poeticizing as his *profession*. She is jesting with Emerson, but also encouraging him in a way that he likely was not encouraged about any other aspect of his life. The rest of this letter blends Mary's poetic encouragement with a kind of moral advice that helps to reveal the source of Emerson's "somewhat moralistic disdain" for fiction that did not morally educate. "I began in jesting with poetry," Mary continues,

end with respecting it. Could not resist pleasure of writing the above. Those who paint the primitive state of man's creation are sweet poets—those who represent human nature as sublimed by religion are better adapted to our feelings and situation; but those who point the path to the attainment of moral perfection are the guardian Angels. But this is no easy poetic task. The lowly vale of penitence and humility must be passed before the mount of vision—the heights of virtue are gained. Therefore we so often hear the warning voice of high-toned Moralists against the seductions of the vagrant flower clad Muse. May yours if she should continue and preene her wings, be sanctified by piety and I shall not blush to decorate my age with a sprig from your garland. But let pass the flowrets of nature and art—or deck them with sepulchral dews when we think of M'kean and Thatcher. Alas, for us who knew their worth, for you whom they would have cherished, and for Society—their light is departed. Would you know the worth of earthly blessings, visit the tomb of genius learning & influence. What avails these highest sublunary gifts! Where

now those strong prejudices—those ardent sensibilities which so fully attracted our attention in the celestial spirit of the Professor? All gone & useless, but his piety—his faith in the Son of God—his penitence and humility These only pass the Ordeal of holiness in the world, where the naked character appears! Peace and honor to his memory! His Family—how deprived! Yet sweet are there tears, and hallowed their sorrows for they mourn no common loss.”<sup>216</sup>

Aunt Mary’s warning to young Waldo, that he should “hope to point the path to the attainment of moral perfection” and that he be “aware of the seductions of the flower clad muse,” do much to describe some of the trajectory of Emerson’s literary career. But what is most suggestive about the letter is how Waldo takes Aunt Mary’s jest—here, a reference to Queen Mab—and turns it into an invocation for his own journal. Emerson literally begins his life-long practice of journal keeping with words that he first heard from his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson.<sup>217</sup>

It is highly significant that, as an adult, Emerson wrote of his aunt that hers was a “representative life,” because for Emerson, “a ‘representative life’ was not average but exemplary, a ‘type’ of its age.”<sup>218</sup> But Aunt Mary’s wicked affiliations and psychological associations, which Emerson had spent his literary life acting upon and improving,<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> *MME Letters*, 112-13.

<sup>217</sup> See (*JMN* 1:3); Emerson’s first Journal entry begins, “Mixing with the thousand pursuits...” and includes, “O ye witches assist me! Enliven or horrify some midnight lucubration or dream (whichever may be most convenient) to supply this reservoir when other resources fail. Pardon me Fairy Land! Riche region of fancy & gnomery, elvery, sylphery, & Queen Mab!”

<sup>218</sup> Cole, 3.

<sup>219</sup> This point is corroborated by Elizabeth Peabody’s observation that “Emerson derived much of his character from his aunt—he has improved the talent, hers was buried.” (Peabody quoted in

were also preserved in the final paragraph of the commemorative speech he performed on the anniversary of her death:

She gave high counsels. It was a privilege of certain boys to have this immeasurably high standard indicated to their childhood; a blessing which nothing else in education could supply. It is frivolous to ask,—“And was she ever a Christian in practice?” Cassandra uttered, to a frivolous, skeptical time, the arcana of the Gods: but it is easy to believe that Cassandra domesticated in a lady’s house would have proved a troublesome boarder.

From the prophetic Uilsa, composed when Emerson was in his teens, to the prophesying Cassandra, cited in his fifties, Aunt Mary’s grasp on Emerson’s unconscious bears some of the marks of a psychic phenomenon that the analytical psychologist Carl Jung once called the shadow.

Jung maintained that when the shadow is activated, usually through projection, it is charged with affect, and takes on a life of its own. He also noted that the shadow from the personal unconscious tends to be projected onto a person of the same sex, whereas projections onto persons of the opposite sex are thought to emanate from the anima/animus phenomenon and lead to a confrontation with the collective unconscious.<sup>220</sup> In other words, when aspects within a person’s own psyche are rejected,

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Robinson, diary, March 9, 1869—I’ve pulled the quote from Phyllis Cole’s *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism*, 5.)

<sup>220</sup> Casement, Ann. “The Shadow.” *The Handbook of Jungian Psychology: Theory, Practice and Applications*. Ed. Renos K. Papadopoulos. New York: Routledge, 2006. 96-98.

those parts of the person are hidden, kept in the shadows, until a suitable outside person is found to stand in for the shadowed side of the psyche. Often, unwanted or unaccepted so-called feminine tendencies within a man will be disowned and assigned to a woman, for example, but the conflicts that arise from the projection will dramatize unexplored ideas that are still being resolved in the human race as a whole. Emerson's early literary projection of the Aunt Mary-inflected Uilsa, corroborated in his adult characterization of Mary as Cassandra, indicates a life-long psychic orientation to his aunt. His aunt seems to have carried some projected aspect of Emerson's psyche, an aspect that neither his mother nor his father could carry for him, as his parents played the roles of the rulers that reject Cassandra.

Additionally, if we approach what Jung called "personal unconscious projection"—the projection onto a person of the same sex—we have the well-known presence of Martin Gay in Emerson's early journals. Emerson's entirely imaginary teenage dalliance with his Harvard classmate—the "appropriately named Martin Gay"<sup>221</sup>—demonstrates one of the earliest tendencies of Emerson's mind: his propensity for projecting a marvelous morality and estimable character upon anyone who showed even the remotest amount of interest in him. It is a common misreading of Jung's shadow concept to assume that projections are exclusively negative. Positive projections, Jung noted, do occur, especially in cases wherein the "more positive side of the individual is repressed and consequently lives in the shadow."<sup>222</sup> This clearly seems to be the case regarding Emerson's orientation toward Gay.

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<sup>221</sup> Milder, 76.

<sup>222</sup> Casement, 94.

“The cold blue eye of [Gay],” Emerson wrote on October 24, 1820, “has so intimately connected him with my thoughts & visions that a dozen times a day & as often in the night I find myself wholly wrapped up in conjectures of his character & inclinations.”<sup>223</sup> Emerson’s journals tell us that his fantasy friendship with Gay was set off not by any direct association, but rather by “two or three long profound stares” that they “aimed at each other”—hardly what might be characterized as an actual intimate connection. The crippling shy teenage Emerson promises himself, “be it wise or superstitious I must know him,” but never makes good on the promise, and instead relies upon a conversation that he overhears, presumably because he had neither the individual courage nor the social grace to ask around about Gay:<sup>224</sup> “Well, I am sorry to have learned that my friend is dissolute; or rather an anecdote which I accidentally heard of him shews him more like his neighbours than I should wish him to be. I shall have to throw him up, after all, as a cheat of fancy.”<sup>225</sup> Dissolution and a commonness “more like his neighbours than I should wish him to be” ruined the potential friendship, though it does suggest that Gay caught a positive shadow projection, which quickly shifted into a negative one. The volatility of Emerson’s own sense of self is behind his sudden and highly changeable regard for others. A person lacking an individuated Self is unable to see the Other, but projects his own fragmented image wherever it will take. Once that fabrication is refuted by undeniable fact, the person will either adapt a new projection or altogether discard the object of the projections. The journals suggest that Gay was soon discarded.

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<sup>223</sup> (*JMN* 1:29).

<sup>224</sup> The *JMN* notes that “Emerson omitted Martin Gay’s name but later filled the blank space with meaningless letters and pseudo-letters intended to mislead prying eyes” (*JMN* 1:53 note 31).

<sup>225</sup> (*JMN* 1:52)

If we follow Jung, who tells us that the shift of the shadow projection from the positive to the negative is characteristic of a psyche moving towards integration, we have to wonder why the more positive side of Emerson's psyche was "at all repressed and consequently liv[ing] in the shadow."<sup>226</sup> We know that the youthful Emerson frequently saw in himself a propensity for idleness, and felt no communion with his peers.<sup>227</sup> We know, too, that the young Emerson (as we saw in his letter to his aunt above) could admire his Aunt Mary for her tendency to depart from the social scene, though Emerson also felt that he could not command that scene as he believed she could. Throughout his life, the social confrontation was something Emerson made many efforts to avoid, and his aunt seems to have been well aware of this temperamental trait, and likely imposed (consciously or unconsciously) this quality upon Emerson. After making his crucial decision to leave his ministerial post at Boston's Second Church in 1832, a departure Emerson bolstered himself with by psychically identifying with Martin Luther, Emerson's youngest brother, Charles, thought that his actions bore the stamp of the true reformer, and predicted that Waldo would establish a new society conforming to his own ideals.<sup>228</sup> But their Aunt Mary scorned any such expectation:

You talk of as being a 'reformer and needing good health.' A reformer!

And begin at the wrong end? Annulling a simple rite w'h has bound the

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<sup>226</sup> Casement, 94.

<sup>227</sup> As Robert Milder has observed, as a youth "Emerson found himself paralyzed by what he variously called his 'ungrateful & unaccountable Indolence,' his 'abominable listlessness,' and his 'lassitude.' (*JMN* 2: 160, 154-155; 1:41), symptoms of a chronic self-distrust that arose less from any doctrinal aversion to the ministry than from the hesitations of a shy and awkward youth before a public role that required almost charismatic performance." See Robert Milder, "Emerson's Two Conversions," *ESQ*, vol 33, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter, 1987, 21.

<sup>228</sup> For the discussion of Emerson's identification with Luther, See Porte, pp. 285-299.

followers of Jesus together for ages & announced his resurrection! A reformer—who on earth with his genius is less able to cope with opposition? Who with his good sense less force of mind—and while it invents new universes is lost in the surrounding halo...No, he never loved his holy offices—and it is well that he has left them.<sup>229</sup>

While we have begun to see Emerson take on Mary's need to become a writer, he could not bear the cross that she put upon him about his pedigree. Her psychic "legacy persisted as an internalized pressure" for Emerson, as Milder has observed, even as it "assumed a Ciceronian cast under the influence of his college 'idol' Edward Everett."<sup>230</sup> But Aunt Mary diagnosed her nephew's temperament accurately, and Emerson seems to have intentionally needed to displease her in order to free himself from the youthful sway she held over his imagination. His intentional separation from his aunt is the likely reason why he chose the odd matter of the Lord's Supper to begin his break from the Second Church.<sup>231</sup> The "doctrinal issue concerning the Lord's Supper was not fundamental" to Emerson, "as he later declined a call from New Bedford which, influenced by the Hicksite Quakers, had accepted a view of the rite similar to his."<sup>232</sup> But Emerson's father

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<sup>229</sup> See Emerson, *Letters*, 1, 355; Rusk, *Life*, pp. 165-67; Hutchison, William R. *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969. 36

<sup>230</sup> Milder, 20; (*L* 1:128).

<sup>231</sup> In her study of Emerson's sermons Susan L. Roberson notes that when "Emerson delivered CLXIV (The Lord's Supper Sermon), Emerson insisted that each person be free to form his own beliefs. 'Freedom,' he told his congregation in the famous 'Lord's Supper' Sermon, 'is the essence of Christianity.'" Roberson, Susan L. *Emerson in His Sermons: A Man-Made Self*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995. 2 For the sermon itself, see *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Albert J. von Frank et al. 4 vols. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989-1992. Vol. 4, p 186, 193. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as *CS* followed by volume number, and page number.

<sup>232</sup> Smith, 63; McGiffert, 255.

“had worried over it in his day and had once had some indefinite plan to liberalize its observance.”<sup>233</sup> Both his father and aunt wanted to pursue a literary career, though they disagreed profoundly (and often) on religious matters.

The ideological battle between Emerson’s aunt and father, a crucial dichotomy in Emerson’s psyche that Phyllis Cole characterizes as “Mary Versus William,”<sup>234</sup> is evidenced in their correspondence, in which they regularly sparred over the issue of worldly ambition and the demands that the Emersons “have a name in the world.” For a time, Emerson Sr. took a stand in this argument that would sound much like Emerson himself some years later: the elder Emerson began to prize “the life of the honest, quiet man.”<sup>235</sup> Yet, Emerson Sr. could not maintain this solitary stance for very long, as he consistently looked outward towards society for acceptance and acclaim.

Here, a letter of November 27, 1850 from Mary to Emerson is relevant. In response to a letter from Emerson that seems to have been an inquiry about his ancestry, Mary writes, “You will recur to the past w’h I always bury,” only to continue her thought with, “As to resemblance between parents & offspring there is none naturally between souls. My Father left no trace of his ardent unselfism on one of us.”<sup>236</sup> It is not clear as to whether Emerson inquired about his grandfather or his own father (Emerson’s side of the correspondence has been lost), and as Mary’s response wavers back and forth between both men, one cannot be sure without the originating letter. What is certain here is that Mary very clearly criticizes Emerson’s father, whom she claims “respected society too

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<sup>233</sup> Rusk, 160.

<sup>234</sup> Cole, pp.120-29.

<sup>235</sup> Rusk, 21.

<sup>236</sup> *Letters of MME*, 526.



much & his whole being too little.” Mary’s reasons for detecting this respect in Emerson Sr. have some notable corollaries to her sense of the younger Emerson:

Had he one friend, superior, to whom he could closely communicate himself what a continuance of his youthful fame. One remembrance I cherish (more than limited views gave me then) in his last days he said to me of that “robe so needed”—not anything like the fanatics or antinomians corruption. And where is the mystery—whence came the beauty & worth of the excited mind? And in higher wants why not richer gifts? Yes I love to think of his future. And of yours—of the vast variety of spirits past.<sup>237</sup>

Not until 1850, well after Emerson had left the ministry, did Mary Moody so explicitly associate Emerson with his father. She did so in the context of a future in the ministry that was an impossibility for both men. In other words, Mary associated them through her disappointment.

Throughout Mary’s correspondence, she repeatedly demonstrated a tendency toward offering counsels that involve a savaging of materialism and worldly ambition, for which (as we have seen) she consistently chided William Sr. On June 24, 1810, she reminded Emerson’s older brother, William Jr., that “being spoken well of by gentlemen, is of no consequence compared to being pious and benevolent,” and she ended this letter with a dart likely intended to burst William Jr.’s burgeoning cocksureness: “a man possessed of amiable dispositions is always sure of happiness, and without those, tho’ he

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<sup>237</sup> *Letters of MME*, 526.

were a president or Governor would be despicable.”<sup>238</sup> Suggestively, this was the kind of advice that Mary Moody saw fit to give a boy of nine years of age. Mary seems to have seen in her nephews that dangerous quality of seeking acclaim from ones peers—a quality that today is widely understood to be developmentally appropriate, even necessary, for children of that age—that she always saw in her brother, William Sr., whom one might speculate was developmentally arrested at that stage after having it thwarted by his own father.<sup>239</sup>

What survives of Mary Moody’s early correspondence with young Ralph Emerson was of a decidedly different timbre than most of her letters to young William. When Ralph was nine, she wrote,

I rejoice you have received any ( ) not because of the honor, but because it denotes worth in yourself. Go on, my dear Waldo, and exert every nerve to gain the favor of God and the good will of the worthy part of society will follow. I Sometimes anticipate the time when you shall be at man’s estate, the Protector of your beloved Mother and Sister, with emotions of hope and pleasure. How delightful the thought that your virtues shall honor the memory of your Father!<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> *Letters of MME*, 57.

<sup>239</sup> The principal theorist of Developmental Psychology from which this point is made is Piaget, whose theories of cognitive development in children have been summarized in Gross, Richard. *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behavior*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Hodder and Stoughton, 1996. 36-41.

<sup>240</sup> *Letters of MME*, 65

When Mary wrote to young William Jr., her brother was alive. When she wrote to young Ralph, her brother was dead. This must have influenced her view of the two boys, as much as William Jr.'s name affected Mary's judgment of him.

What makes Mary's advice to young Ralph so startling is how much of Mary Moody's projected wish for Emerson actually came to be a reality, for it was Ralph's estate that helped to protect his mother until her death. The crucial distinction between honor and worth is also notable, especially when one considers how much of a hinge this distinction became in Emerson's own sense of himself. His mature vision of himself was marked by a courage that came from privileging his own sense of worth over any form of social honor—a vision that hardened into crystalline aphorisms like “to be great, is to be misunderstood.” This largely introjected form of courage is a testament to the fact that perhaps more than any of his brothers, Emerson took to heart Mary Moody's “high counsels,” and he undoubtedly formed much of his own personality out of the visible (and invisible) shadow materials that he witnessed in his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson.

Yet Emerson's youthful allegiance would not keep him from making his break from his aunt, which he did in a letter of 1829 wherein Emerson gave her “pages of his new philosophy.” Mary “tore up the letter in a rage,” and wrote to Emerson, “This is the bitterest moment of my life. You I cannot think of—you are above human sympathies.”<sup>241</sup> Mary's denunciation, Phyllis Cole wrote, “fell not on specific ideas but on [Emerson's] ability to philosophize without considering Mary herself.”<sup>242</sup> Continuing to write what his Aunt Mary did not like (his *new philosophy*) was the beginning of Emerson's public career as a writer.

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<sup>241</sup> *Letters of MME*, 310.

<sup>242</sup> Cole, 214.

As 1829 was the year Emerson was ordained the junior pastor at the Second Church, the notion, long believed in Emerson criticism, that Emerson “began to consider leaving the ministry” after the death of his first wife Ellen in 1832, is not entirely accurate.<sup>243</sup> More to the matter, psychologically, is that Emerson was encouraged to write himself away from the church because of Ellen’s influence, not because of her death. With Ellen, Emerson had his first young audience (Ellen was eighteen when they married) upon whom he could project his own youthful fantasy of the poet-orator, first encouraged by his aunt.

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<sup>243</sup> A recent articulation of this belief can be found in Len Gougeon, *Emerson and Eros: The Making of a Cultural Hero*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007. 79.

## Chapter Five: The Child as Lover

By the time his essay “Love” from *Essays, First Series* was published in 1841, Emerson was several years into his second marriage and some ten years past his first. One of the earliest sources of “Love” appears in Emerson’s journal in January, 1835, fresh from the announced engagement to his second wife, Lidia Jackson:

Truth is beautiful. Without doubt; and so are lies. I have no fairer page in my life’s album than the delicious memory of some passages at Concord on the Merrimack when affection contrived to give a witchcraft surpassing even the deep attraction of its own truth to a parcel of accidental & insignificant circumstances. Those coach wheels that rolled into the mist & darkness of the July morning. The little piazza, a piece of silk, the almshouse, the Davison girl & other such things, which were not the charm, have more reality to this groping memory than the charm itself which illuminated them.<sup>244</sup>

Here, Emerson is recalling a visit to Concord, New Hampshire, in the summer of 1829, during his engagement to his first wife, Ellen Tucker.<sup>245</sup> It is his memory’s peculiar seizing upon the material detail that he speaks to in this journal passage. As Emerson explains it, memory has a way of evading what one actually wishes to remember, and

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<sup>244</sup> (JMN 5: 8).

<sup>245</sup> (JMN 5: 9)

placing the import not upon what one is truly longing for in the past, but upon the material surroundings—“coach wheels,” “a piece of silk,” “the little piazza.” What is curious, however, is the context of his musing, associating his first marriage with his second. Emerson appears blind to the manner in which his second engagement labors under the memory of his first. And what is he suggesting when he writes of the beauty of both truth and lies?

When compared to the journal entry that inspired it, the published version of this portion of “Love” contains some suggestive omissions and additions:

But here is a strange fact; it may seem to many men, in revising their experience, that they have no fairer page in their life's book than the delicious memory of some passages wherein affection contrived to give a witchcraft surpassing the deep attraction of its own truth to a parcel of accidental and trivial circumstances. In looking backward, they may find that several things which were not the charm have more reality to this groping memory than the charm itself which embalmed them.<sup>246</sup>

What is gone from this passage is “Truth is beautiful. Without a doubt; so are lies.” The published essay, unlike the journal entry, also speaks of “revising experience” as if it were a conscientious and intentional act. Revising is not precisely reviewing. Coming from the Latin *revisere*, revise does mean “look at again”; but as a writer, Emerson is well aware of the procedure of revision, and likely, quite clear about its difference from review. In writing, revising suggests intentional alteration, while

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<sup>246</sup> (CW 2: 169)

reviewing connotes the spectator's glance, occurring after the text is already written. We witness Emerson *revising*, as he alters his journal entry into a publishable passage above. What we do not witness—at least, in the published passage—is Emerson *reviewing* the past.

As a practice of remembering the past, revision is akin to the beautiful lie Emerson excised from his essay “Love.” Revision lies by creating the illusion of a composed present, a believable now articulating itself upon the page. When Emerson reviews his past in his journal entry, what he marvels at are the ephemerals—how they “have more reality” to his “groping memory.” When he revises his past for publication, what he marvels at is the “strange fact” “wherein affection contrived to give a witchcraft surpassing the deep attraction of its own truth to a parcel of accidental and trivial circumstances.” This is a knotty construction, present also in his journal entry, but the gist of it is that affection was somehow tricked into an attraction to “accidental and trivial circumstances,” and not the “deep attraction of its own truth.” In other words, affection dupes the self into material attractions, not spiritual or metaphysical ones.

The stance that privileges the metaphysical truth over the physical fact is typical of Emerson's mature idealism, where Intellect trumps affections as a reliable measurer of Truth. In his essay “Intellect,” also from *Essays, First Series*, Emerson claims “Intellect separates the fact considered, from you, from all local and personal reference, and discerns it as if it existed for its own sake...Intellect is void of affection and sees an object as it stands in the light of science, cool and disengaged. The Intellect goes out of the individual, floats over the personality, and regards it as a fact, and not as I and Mine.”<sup>247</sup> What this line of thinking forgets is that memory associates the *I* with thought through

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<sup>247</sup> (CW 2:335)

experience. The reliable (and necessary) faculty of intellect devises what Emerson would call “universal laws” from personal experience. But Intellect is also a convenient way to separate “the fact considered...from all local and personal reference.” To be a champion of Intellect over affections is to be a reviser of memories who refuses to review what is most personal about them.<sup>248</sup> Emerson, who ignores how his first engagement is remembered within his second, seems to be engaged in such a revision.

Rivaled only by having children, marriage often triggers deep, sometimes surprising reckonings with one’s own childhood. The likely reason for this involves the new responsibility of emotional care taking, as the role of emotional caretaker shifts from the family, prior to marriage, to the partner, after the marriage. The difference between Emerson’s two marriages, noticeable in terms of the quality and type of love Emerson was willing to express with each wife, can be explained in part by the kind of man Emerson was as he approached each engagement. He was twenty-four when he married his first wife, Ellen Tucker, and thirty-two when he married his second wife, Lidia Jackson. Emerson’s first marriage to Ellen Tucker would always remain a site of deeper psychological commitment, in part because he was younger and more impressionable when he married Ellen. But the primary reason for the depth of Emerson’s relationship to Ellen was that it taught the adult Emerson to embrace Intellect, “dismiss affection,” and go “out of” himself as an “individual” and “float over” his “own personality.”

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<sup>248</sup> It is at the nexus between the affections and intellect that we see Emerson siding more with the Unitarian position than with the Puritan position regarding the reliability of the affections. Perry Miller’s classic claim of a continuity of a visionary and ecstatic mode in New England religious thought is troubled by this stance Emerson takes toward affections. Edwards, and his evangelical followers defended affections or emotions as the center of religious experience. Here, Emerson takes the Massachusetts Bay liberal position characteristic of Boston and Harvard College, arguing for a religion of reason and virtue. See Miller, Perry. “From Edwards to Emerson,” in *Errand into the Wilderness* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956. 184; see also, Cole, 33-34.



His first marriage, to a woman who died early in their relationship, became Emerson's *locus* for personal and interpersonal revision. The death of Ellen Emerson cauterized Emerson's passionate side, which, because of his childhood, had been difficult for him to access in the first place.

A relationship with Caroline Sturgis in the early 1840s offered Emerson an opportunity to relive his romantic past, and not merely revise or review it. However, the precursorial relationship with Ellen would never entirely be oversight—not by Sturgis, or his second wife Lidian—for both the social and psychological conditions out of which Emerson's relations with Ellen bloomed would always hold too strong a sway over Emerson's imagination, limiting both his evolving orientation to love, and the opportunity to adequately re-imagine his own childhood.

Several months prior to his engagement to his first wife, Ellen, Emerson complained to his brother Charles, "my quarrel is with my race which will not give me what I want, either in the shape of man or woman."<sup>249</sup> The date was New Year's Day, 1828, and Emerson added, "I look out impatient for the next stage of my existence..."<sup>250</sup> Twenty-four and not yet established in his ministerial career, Emerson was understandably restless as he cast about in search of his adult identity. The next stage of life likely seemed daunting to him, with all of the fantasies of great men that had populated his youth to compare himself against. Psychologically, he was in a position needful of encouragement. "I would give more than I now own," he continued in his letter to Charles, "to find a convenient acquaintance such as I have read of & heard of & thought of times without number that would answer anyhow to the fabulous descriptions

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<sup>249</sup> (*L* 1: 225).

<sup>250</sup> (*L* 1: 225).

of a friend.”<sup>251</sup> Lonely and vocal in his desire for someone who would give him what he wanted, Ellen Tucker emerged at the perfect moment, enthusiastic and aggressive in her affection, and completely unintimidated by Emerson’s “sore uneasiness in the company of most men & women...[and] jealousy of disrespect.”<sup>252</sup>

By the end of 1828, after a courtship that lasted forty-three days, Emerson was engaged to Ellen, and well on his way to being ordained as a minister. Shortly after his engagement, he prayed in his journal:

Will my father in Heaven regard us with kindness, and as he hath, as we trust, made us for each other, will he be pleased to strengthen & purify & prosper & eternize our affection.<sup>253</sup>

This was a far cry from the Emerson who admitted to his 1827 journal, only days before meeting Ellen on Christmas of that year, “I ought to apprise the reader that I am a bachelor & to the best of my belief have never been in love.”<sup>254</sup> Emerson’s glad and wholly committed acceptance of love for Ellen suggests that he was on the verge of what contemporary psychologists call individuation.

According to Jungian Psychology, individuation is a process of psychological integration, having for its goal the development of the individual personality. “In general,” Jung wrote, “it is the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated [from other human beings]; in particular, it is the development of the

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<sup>251</sup> (*L* 1:224).

<sup>252</sup> (*JMN* 2:239)

<sup>253</sup> (*JMN* 3:149)

<sup>254</sup> (*JMN* 3:99)

psychological individual as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology.”<sup>255</sup>

That Emerson’s individuation was spurred by his romantic attachment to Ellen Tucker seems, on the surface, inherently un-individuated. In our own times, due in part to our “Religion of Self-Reliance”—as Harold Bloom calls it—the career is the typical locus for many modern conversations regarding individuated persons.<sup>256</sup> The person who can support himself socially and financially, the thought runs, is considered to be the mature person, the adult. But it is the peculiarity of love, and what it does to the psychology of the lover, that allows for a form of individuation that is impossible to achieve merely within the locus of one’s employment.

When Ferdinand La Salle, an early figure of Spain’s labor movement was going to marry, he gave the news to a friend, parodying Hegelian terminology by writing, “I am going to individualize myself in a woman.”<sup>257</sup> La Salle’s joke speaks to a psychological truth about love: the lover becomes more of himself by effectively surrendering the practical aspects of his selfhood—his solitude, his self-sufficiency, or to use the Emersonian word, his self-reliance.

That Emerson gladly surrendered all these attributes with Ellen, though not with his second wife, Lidian, sheds light upon how much of himself Emerson probably felt he lost when Ellen died. He wrote in “Love” that “a beauty overpowering all analysis or

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<sup>255</sup> C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types*. Collected Works Vol.6., par. 757

<sup>256</sup> Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. Bloom notes that, “Unlike most countries, we have no overt national religion, but a partly concealed one has been developing among us for some centuries now. It is almost purely experiential, and despite its insinuations, it is scarcely Christian in any traditional way.” The private, and by Bloom’s reckoning, Emersonian aspect of this “Post-Christian” American faith is suggested by Bloom through Gallup poll numbers (i.e. “in 1989, 88 percent of Americans believed that God loved them personally, while 9 percent were uncertain, and 3 percent say that the Lord’s affection for them is nonexistent.”), 37. See also, Bloom, Harold “The Sage Of Concord.” *The Guardian*. Saturday, 24 May, 2003.

<sup>257</sup> Ortega y Gasset, 130.

comparison and putting us quite beside ourselves we can seldom see after thirty years.” Given the context of these lines—the paragraph mentions those familiar material details, “a glove, a veil, a ribbon, the wheels of a carriage”—Emerson was undoubtedly thinking of Ellen, not Lidian. “Lidian could have quickly counted,” as Henry Pommer observed, “that her husband was twenty-seven when he lost Ellen, thirty-two when he married” her.<sup>258</sup> There was a certain amount of himself that Emerson was less willing, or perhaps unwilling, to give to his wife in his second marriage. As Emerson himself suggests, age and maturity have something to do with his unwillingness: we are not often “beside ourselves” in love after thirty years. A clear and interpersonally damaging emotional shift occurred in Emerson when Ellen died on February 8, 1831, and it limited what he could give to any future romantic relationship.<sup>259</sup>

What occurred after Ellen’s death can be described as a reversion to his previous defenses of emotional withdrawal and psychic self-preservation. Most radically in “Self-Reliance,” “Emerson declared all family members ‘deceived and deceiving people’ whose life of appearance the seeker of truth must abandon.”<sup>260</sup> This is not a vision Emerson had, or could have had, during his first marriage with Ellen, which was childless, and unlike his second marriage, romantic. Yet the resentment caused by Ellen’s death, coupled with the domestic situation in which Emerson lived during his second marriage, combined to make Emerson’s melancholy feelings of aloneness into a philosophy of self-reliant solitude. “Every man beholds his human condition with a

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<sup>258</sup> Pommer, Henry F. *Emerson’s First Marriage*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967. 92.

<sup>259</sup> In Emerson’s own estimation of his second marriage he observed that he was “sorely troubled by imperfections in the tie” between himself and his Lidian, though he confided to Margaret Fuller that he did not “believe in anything better.” See Myerson, “Margaret Fuller’s 1842 Journal,” 332.

<sup>260</sup> Cole, “Family,” 30-31

degree of melancholy,” he admits in “Intellect.” In the same essay, he convinces himself (indeed, comforts himself) that “a truth separated by intellect, is no longer a subject of destiny...It is the past restored, but embalmed.”

The psychic orientation of Emerson’s youth—his embalmed past—begins to reappear in his journal entries immediately following Ellen’s death. Stricken with grief, Emerson’s first post-Allen entry grants her spirit an extraordinary palpability. Appealing to her spirit for guidance, the journal entry shows Emerson not reviewing his romantic past with Ellen, but instead, already revising it:

Five days are wasted since Ellen went to heaven to see, to know, to worship, to love, to intercede. God be merciful to me a sinner & repair this miserable debility in which her death has left my soul. Two nights since, I have again heard her breathing, seen her dying. O willingly, my wife, I would lie down in your tomb. But I have no deserts like yours, no such purity, or singleness of heart. Pray for me Ellen & raise the friend you so truly loved, to be what you thought him. When your friends or mine cross me, I comfort myself by saying, you would not have done so. Dear Ellen (for that is what your name is in heaven) shall we not be united even now more & more, as I more steadfastly persist in the love of truth & virtue which you loved?<sup>261</sup>

Like so many grieving spouses, Emerson cannot yet let go of the physical reality of his wife. He reminds himself that Ellen is both with him and away from him; she is

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<sup>261</sup> (JMN, 3:226).

his Ellen, but she is also Ellen in heaven. Obviously dealing with the psychological reframing of the death of a spouse that the Puritans and their descendants understood as a message from God, Emerson asks for God's mercy for his sins.<sup>262</sup> But as his journal entry continues, traces of a line of thought akin to a child's guilty conscience appear. Recording the fear that Ellen will now observe the difference between the image he presented to her and what he more truly thought himself to be, he continues:

Spirits are not deceived & now you know the sins & selfishness which the husband would fain have concealed from the confiding wife—help me be rid of them; suggest good thoughts as you promised me, & show me truth. Not for the world, would I have left you here alone; stay by me & lead me upward. Reunite us, oh thou Father of Spirits.<sup>263</sup>

As Freud once suggested, the Christian plea toward the Father bears an undeniable relation to the idiom of childish cares and childcare.<sup>264</sup> Emerson's childish feelings of abandonment are clear in his reproach, "Not for the world, would I have left you alone." He wants Ellen to continue to help him see truth, to be rid of the "sins & selfishness" he hid from her. He asks the "Father of the spirits" to reunite him with his wife, but in Emerson's moment of grief, Ellen's spirit comes before God's; Ellen, not God, becomes the watcher and benefactor of better behaviors. In less spiritual, more

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<sup>262</sup> Emerson's sermon "Consolation for the Mourner," which he preached at Second Church only twelve days after Ellen's death, operates solidly within the puritan grief paradigm. See McGiffert, Arthur Cushman. *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston, 1938. 139-44.

<sup>263</sup> (JMN 3:226-27).

<sup>264</sup> I refer here to the well-known ideas on religion Freud explored in the *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

psychological terms, he is asking for Ellen's help in continuing the process of individuation that his love for her inspired in him.

In his journal, Emerson's defensive attachment to this abstracted and idealized Ellen helps him to form a vision of an imagined future, a prospective vision that would bear much literary fruit:

There is that which passes away & never returns. This miserable apathy, I know, may wear off. I almost fear when it will. Old duties will present themselves with no more repulsive face. I shall go again among my friends with a tranquil countenance. Again I shall be amused, I shall stoop again to little hopes & little fears & forget the graveyard. But will the dead be restored to me? Will the eye that was closed on Tuesday ever beam again in the fullness of love on me? Shall I ever again be able to connect the face of outward nature, the mists of the moor, the star of eve, the flowers, & all poetry, with the heart & life of an enchanting friend? No. There is one birth & one baptism & one first love and the affections cannot keep their youth any more than men.<sup>265</sup>

When the deceased Ellen takes up residence in Emerson's psyche, her memory begins to have permanent sway as the idea that Love is an abstraction, rather than a physical experience. The idea that there will never be another Ellen—"There is one birth & one baptism & one first love"—makes a mythology in Emerson's mind that looks like Platonic love, but is a grief-born myth. In deciding that he "shall never again be able to

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<sup>265</sup> (JMN 3: 227)

connect the face of outward nature...with the heart and life of an enchanting friend,” Emerson effectively abandoned any future attempts at intimacy and romantic human relatedness. Instead of conjuring a future love fantasy to console himself in grief, his mind moved in retrograde, to the people and personal mythologies that he had used to survive the loneliness of his youth.

Attempting to persuade his Aunt Mary to move in with him and his mother only a month after Ellen died is the second indication that Emerson’s psyche moved in retrograde.<sup>266</sup> Chronologically, the first indication is his letter to her, composed the morning of Ellen’s death:

Tuesday 11 o’clock Feb. 8th

Dear Aunt

My angel is gone to heaven this morning & I am alone in the world & strangely happy. Her lungs shall no more be torn nor her head scalded by her blood nor her whole life suffer from the warfare between the force & delicacy of her soul & the weakness of her frame. I said this morn & I do not know but it is true that I have never known a person in the world in whose separate existence as a soul I could so readily and fully believe & she is present with me now beaming joyfully upon me, in her deliverance & the entireness of her love for your poor nephew.

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<sup>266</sup> See (*L* 1:319)



Composed a mere two hours after his wife's death,<sup>267</sup> the letter to Aunt Mary is Emerson's clear call for guidance in his moment of grief. A complicated figure from which to seek guidance, especially on matters of love and death, Aunt Mary is Emerson's natural sounding board. Knowing his Aunt Mary and her propensity for not indulging grief or suffering, Emerson continued in a bolstering tone, likely aimed at pleasing her:

I see it plainly that things & duties will look coarse & vulgar enough to me when I find the romance of her presence (& romance is a beggarly word) withdrawn from them all. But now the fulness of joy occasioned by things said by her in the last week & by this eternal deliverance is in my heart. She has a great deal to say Always about Aunt Mary & would gladly have seen you when Grandfather came, & said then she would like now a letter from you.

But the past days the most eventful of my life are all a dim confusion & now the pall is drawn over them, yet do they shine brightly in my spiritual world. Say, dear Aunt, if I am not rich in her memory?

Respectful love to Grandfather & tell him Ellen blessed him for his prayer—of which her lips repeated every word.

Your nephew,

Waldo E<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> (*JMN* 3:226) Emerson made one entry in his journal: "Ellen Tucker Emerson died 8th February. Tuesday Morning 9 o'clock."

<sup>268</sup> (*L* 1:318)

The tragedy is that Emerson did not even allow himself to acknowledge the romance he had with his wife. He parenthetically scolded himself for the word's *beggarly* connotations, after which the letter turned outward, towards the great deal of respect Ellen had for Mary and his grandfather.

Emerson responded to the death of his wife by committing all the more to the self-image of the poet-orator. His journals became filled with elegiac verses for Ellen,<sup>269</sup> and his poetic attempts to memorialize her eventually become the principal way in which his feelings of grief revised, instead of reviewed, his past. "Why should I live," he begins one stanza of an Ellen-related verse,

The future will repeat the past  
 Yet cannot give  
 Again the Vision beautiful too beautiful to last  
 And o perhaps the welcome stroke  
 That severs forever this fleshly yoke  
 Shall restore the vision to the soul  
 In the great Vision of the Whole<sup>270</sup>

Presented as a stanza to remember Ellen's death, the writing reveals Emerson's rationale for poeticizing the past, for revising it and not reviewing it. "The future will repeat the past," but the *Vision* of his wife, which Emerson prized perhaps above all else, became the fantasy to "restore *vision* to the soul," a repetition of the past in his present.

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<sup>269</sup> (JMN 3:228-35)

<sup>270</sup> (JMN 3:231-31)

While Emerson did not want to answer most requests for accounts of his past (perhaps because, as his verse suggests, he did not want to repeat it), the one part of his past he was willing to discuss was his marriage to Ellen. Puzzlingly, the person with whom he indulged this nostalgia the most was his second wife. Emerson recorded a conversation in his journal as “a remembering & remembering talk with Lidian... back to the first smile of Ellen on the door stone at Concord.” He recounted a feeling of revulsion when examining the past that he described as shrinking. Ellen was not omitted from this experience, and in that sense, conjured the same feelings of loss and regret that Emerson associates with his brothers Edward and Charles. “Infinite compunctions embitter each of those dear names & all who surrounded them.”<sup>271</sup> When one speculates who were the figures surrounding those dear names, those that were subject to Emerson’s bitter guilt and regret, the speculation leads to Emerson’s father, his mother, his aunt, and to himself. Emerson blamed the shrinking feeling on his “superficial coldness & prudence,” noting that the “beatified mates” that populated his past were “superficially generous & noble as well as internally so... They never needed to shrink at any remembrance.” So why, he implicitly wonders, does he?

The psychological blind spot that this journal entry reveals involves Emerson’s emotional reality in the present. That he can talk of his coldness compared to the beatified mates of the past and show little to no warmth toward his current wife in this entry gives evidence of the fact that he hardly cured himself of the “cold.” In his shrinking—a cogent word to describe his regression into a child-self—he is overcome by the ego-inflated

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<sup>271</sup> (*JMN* 5: 456).

child's belief that he is the source and cause of all phenomena,<sup>272</sup> spiraling into a painful self-blame that an unindividuated psyche is not equipped to manage. The best a child can do in that ego state is to escape into fantasy. Emerson ended this entry with a personal promise to grow up, "Well O God I will try & learn, from this sad memory to be brave & circumspect & true henceforth & weave now a web that will not shrink."<sup>273</sup> But the promise is literary, a fantasy; and the confession of coldness, which would be used in his essay on "Love," is a product of that early cultivated tendency in Emerson: the writer's mediation of emotional reality through fabrication of a the secret self.<sup>274</sup>

Emerson's emotion in his "remembering" talk with Lidian is constellated around the figures of his youth, Ellen and his younger brothers Edward and Charles, particularly because they are dead and have become imaginative tropes that help Emerson to re-experience the control that he learned to enact by writing. His reaction to his own father's death by not writing about it or about his father was another exercise of this control.<sup>275</sup> What Emerson also habitually ignores is the present, particularly Lidian, with whom he shares this startlingly insensitive nighttime remembering talk that fixated on his first wife.

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<sup>272</sup> On the previous page, we had discussed the child's belief that the parent is the source of external events, and here, we see the other side of the coin, where the child also imagines himself as the source. These two beliefs can occur simultaneously in the unindividuated psyche because, when the infant is born, the psyche knows no difference between Self and Other.

<sup>273</sup> (*JMN* 5: 456).

<sup>274</sup> (*W* 2: 171).

<sup>275</sup> When asked, for the third time to write a brief biographical sketch of his father, Emerson complained to his brother William, but did not write the sketch. To William, he wrote, "his printed or written papers, as far as I know, only show candour & taste, or I should almost say docility, the principle merit possible to that early ignorant & transitional *Month-of-March*, in our New England culture. His literary merits really are that he fostered the *Anthology* & the *Atheneum*. These things ripened into Buckminster Channing & Everett." (*L* 4:179)

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to characterize Lidian as a victim of Emerson's coldness. More to the matter is that Lidian collaborated with Emerson in his indulgence of remembering, and remembering again, the first smile of Ellen. It was at Lydian's insistence, not Emerson's, that they named their first daughter Ellen. And in their correspondence, Lydian appears to resort to conjuring her predecessor's image as a way of jostling some form of passionate feeling out of her husband. Emerson's side of this jostle is revealed in "a pair of letters he sent her from England in 1848." Regrettably, Lidian's side of the correspondence is lost, but "the reproaches in one are outlined by Emerson's reply."<sup>276</sup>

Ah you still ask me for that unwritten letter always due, it seems, always unwritten, from year to year, by me to you, dear Lidian...always due & unwritten by me to every sister & brother of the human race...It must content you for the time, that I truly acknowledge a poverty of nature, & have really no proud defence at all to set up, but ill-health, puniness, and Stygian limitations....Besides am I not, O best Lidian, a most foolish affectionate goodman & papa, with a weak side toward apples & sugar and all domesticities, when I am once in Concord...Well I will come again shortly and behave the best I can. Only I foresee plainly that the trick of solitariness never ever can leave me.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Pommer, 95.

<sup>277</sup> (L 4: 33)

What Lidian appears to be asking for in this letter is something that Margaret Fuller would also ask of Emerson: namely, some outward sign (here in letter form) of his affection and love toward her.<sup>278</sup> A well-known passage from Emerson's journal in which he recounts how Fuller "taxed me, as often before, so now more explicitly with inhospitality of soul," also mentions Caroline Sturgis and shows Emerson admitting, "I number count & weigh but do not love... Yet would nothing be so grateful to me as to melt once for all these icy barriers..."<sup>279</sup> Emerson's response to his wife Lidian shows the counting and weighing, and Emerson's awareness of the icy barrier. In his letter to Lidian, he generalized his emotional attachment to her, suggesting that such a letter is "due & unwritten by me to every sister & brother of the human race." Further avoiding committing himself to his wife, he finally pleads, "am I not, O best Lidian, a most foolish affectionate goodman & papa... weak... toward apples & sugar..."

Six weeks later, Lidian tried a different tack at unleashing her husband's emotional reserve, referring specifically to Ellen's letters, which Emerson kept, and Lidian had recently read. In Emerson's response, he told Lidian that Ellen's letters deserved all you have said. For they came out of a heart which nature & destiny conspired to keep as inviolate, as are still those three children of whom you send me such happy accounts. But I am deeply gratified by your pleasure and sympathy in them. Ah how we wander from goal to goal of our life, and often it seems as if one thread of consciousness did not tie

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<sup>278</sup> For a discussion of the Emerson/Fuller relationship, which measure the difference in their often competing temperaments see, Steele, Jeffrey. "Transcendental Friendship: Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau." *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 121-37.

<sup>279</sup> (JMN 7:509)

the far parts together. What am I that roam these deserts, & knew this & that in old years? But you should have seen Ellen. When she left this world, I valued every body who had seen her, and disliked to meet those who had not.<sup>280</sup>

In a scenario where Emerson disliked those who had not met his first wife, it would be crucial for Lidian to convince her husband that she knew the woman as intimately as he knew her. It was small comfort to be valued just as he valued every body who had seen Ellen, but Lidian had hardly succeeded in eliciting anything more from Emerson. As the second wife, Lidian Emerson encouraged her husband to keep some feeling for Ellen alive, perhaps in an attempt to have even second-hand access to her husband's love.

What artifacts of Emerson's love were available to Lidian? Only Ellen's letters. "Tantalizing[ly]," observed Edith Gregg, editor of Ellen Emerson's letters to her husband, "no letters written by Emerson to Ellen have survived."<sup>281</sup> It is presumed that Emerson burned his side of the correspondence. What remains of Ellen's correspondence begins with one letter written in 1828, and the bulk written in 1829, the year of their wedding. From Worcester, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, 1829, Ellen gives us a peek into Emerson's side of the correspondence:

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<sup>280</sup> (L 4: 54)

<sup>281</sup> Emerson, Ellen Tucker. *One First Love: The letters of Ellen Louisa Tucker to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Edith W. Gregg. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962. 4. Hereafter cited as *OFL*.

My heart will plague me till I speak about the part of your letter which I still read over and over—and have vainly endeavored to recall any part of mine that could have been thus misconstrued—and I sigh sometimes for the glass window with which to let you see for yourself what passes in the inner man—No! in the 1<sup>st</sup> place I’ve more independence than to be governed by the measure my friend deals to me—if he merits love I’m sure I care not if he give me but a pint I shall give him an ocean and have confidence that as far as I merit I also shall receive—and although you may say—if you wish to be loved love—I say—you may not always be loved in proportion as you love—what will you think of this dear Waldo—Will you say that I insinuate one naughty thing—no! it all came into my head because I do so love you and if ever I feel like a queen it is when I am expressing that feeling—I’m proud I can boast of it as an inmate in my breast I am proud that it was inspired by such an one—don’t lift up your eyes and hands in amazement dire and say “Ellinelli has become distracted and spatters ink about”—but laugh heartily and rejoice with me that we meet again if God pleases next Friday.<sup>282</sup>

Clearly more effusive (and perhaps more honest) about her growing emotional attachment to the twenty-four year old preacher, seventeen-year-old Ellen Tucker could thaw out the coldness of Emerson’s persona. Tucker challenged Emerson with emotional honesty. Calling his mistrust of her affections a lack of *independence*, Ellen counters with

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<sup>282</sup> (OFL, 30).



her confession of love. In the letter that follows this one, we get Ellen quoting Emerson, then countering again:

Dear R. Waldo,

“I have great regard for you”

I love you dearly—

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Emerson’s experience with Ellen taught him how to love. He had complained in his journal, only two years before, that he had “never been in love.” Yet here was a woman who could tell him, in writing,

Waldo says “Are not the affections in our own power?” I say No!—Every day I say –No—I wrote so to somebody once who was vexed that I could not try & love him—And what an Idea! to try and pick out all the little points that offered resistance that I might be such as he—the tall creepers of affection chose still to waver in the breeze and bear their own weight than cling to such support—and wave they did—till they rested on what was designed for them and where they never will die—never will wither one atom—<sup>283</sup>

In the same letter, Ellen wrote, “I like not to believe what you say about the mind,” but also,

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<sup>283</sup> (*OFL*, 32-33).

You can hardly believe it or love to believe your friend has so little power to sketch—I'll try not to believe it as many do truths that closely fit and fret them—though if the concern were wholly mine how frightful would the painted be—Only think that ever I should have anything beautiful in my inner man—and so utterly hidden—Alas! Teach me to draw it forth if it be so—teach me to paint in strong colours.<sup>284</sup>

The combination of emotional challenge with intellectual encouragement helped to attach Emerson to Ellen. As her letters seem to indicate, Ellen was likely the first female ear to hear Emerson's thoughts on crucial concepts like the "inner man." That she seemed to believe in his views, while telling him that she did not wish to believe him, helped to bolster his vision of himself. The inner aspect of Emerson's self, which he had begun to chart and track in his journals, was beginning to be outed by his developing relationship with Ellen.

No correspondence between Emerson and Ellen survives from the twelve months following their first meeting in New Concord during Christmas of 1827. In that year, after meeting Ellen in New Concord while supply preaching at her church, Emerson observed in his journal:

It is hard to yoke love & wisdom. It is hard to criticize the behavior of Beauty. In her magic presence, reason becomes ashamed of himself & wears the aspect of Pedantry or Calculation. Sentiment triumphs, . . . quotes triumphantly the ancient theory (as sweet falsehood) that Beauty is the

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<sup>284</sup> (*OFL*, 33).

flower of Virtue. Experience looks grave & ...musters his saws,...&, what he chiefly relies on, the impressions formerly made on the same heart by other & loftier qualities which reason and stoicism justified. A pretty plea, no doubt, but if the Daemon of the man should throw him into circumstances favorable to the sentiment, reason would stand on a perilous ...footing. The terms of intercourse in society are singularly unpropitious to the virtuous curiosity of young men with regard to the inner qualities of a beautiful woman. They may only see the outside of the house they want to buy. The chance is very greatly against her possessing those virtues & general principles which they most value.<sup>285</sup>

Ellen had her work cut out for her in attempting to draw affection out of one so skeptical, one who admitted to be able only to see the outside of people, one who likened a woman to a house for sale. We can speculate that had Ellen lived longer, Emerson may have learned to feel more comfortable in intimate relationships, but given that his admissions of deeply felt love did not come until after her death, we cannot be confident that his evolution would have occurred with any speed.

In light of Emerson's defensive reluctance to share his affections with Ellen, it is understandable that after his loss, Emerson would have been more reassured by a woman who did not demand his passion. Lidian allowed Emerson to come and go without argument, and by not exciting his feelings to the point that he felt threatened, she was able to hold his regard, if not his love.

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<sup>285</sup> (JMN 3:146-47).

“Temperance” is what Emerson accorded Lydia Jackson on February 1, 1835, and he wooed her by celebrating this admirable (if not adorable) trait in her personality: “In this new sentiment that you awaken in me, my Lydian Queen, what might scare others pleases me, its quietness, which I accept as a pledge of permanence.”<sup>286</sup> “Lydian,” as opposed to “Lydia” came from Emerson’s need to rename his future wife, for he wished to save her name’s pronunciation from an indecorous tick in the New England accent: the growling “r” that attached itself to names ending in “a.”<sup>287</sup> This linguistic adjustment of Lydia’s name was an aesthetic correction—a revision that is representative of the footing on which the relationship began. Writing to Lidian in the earliest months of their engagement, Emerson addressed Lidian in terms that are already ideal, if not entirely romantic:

I delighted myself on Friday with my quite domesticated position & the good understanding that grew all the time, yet I went & came without one vehement word—or one passionate sign. In this was nothing of design, I merely surrendered myself to the hour & to the facts. I find a sort of grandeur in the modulated expressions of a love in which the individuals, & what might seem ever reasonable personal expectations, are steadily postponed to a regard for truth & the universal love.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> (L 1:434).

<sup>287</sup> Dykema Karl. W. “Why did Lydia Jackson Become Lydian Emerson?” *American Speech*. Vol. 17, No. 4, Dec., 1942. 285-286.

<sup>288</sup> (L 1:434).

A far cry from anything that could be constituted a love letter, near the beginning of his relationship, Emerson was already at the position that he would take in his essay "Love." "Every thing is beautiful seen from the point of the intellect, or as truth," he wrote. But in his conscientiously unromantic attachment to Lidian, Emerson was entering into a relationship that was fundamentally different from the brief one he had had with Ellen seven years earlier. That Emerson took the quietness of his feelings as "a pledge of permanence" reveals how deeply afraid he was to be abandoned again.

Perhaps he unconsciously feared his own passions and neediness would bring about Lidian's death, as he sometimes feared with Ellen. Writing to his brother William immediately after his engagement to Ellen, Emerson wrote of how he was "now as happy as it is safe in life to be." Two weeks later, surveying his life to his Aunt Mary, Emerson touched the fear of happy fulfillment again:

You know—none can know better—on what straitened lines we have all walked up to manhood. In poverty and many troubles the seeds of our prosperity were sown...Now look at the altered aspect. William has begun to live by the law. Edward has recovered his reason and his health. Bulkeley was never more comfortable with his life. Charles is prospering in all ways. Waldo is comparatively well and comparatively successful—far more so than his friends, out of his family, anticipated. Now I add to all this felicity a particular felicity which makes my own glass very much larger and fuller. And I straightway say, Can this hold?...There's an apprehension of reverse always arising from success...the way to be safe it

to be thankful. I cannot find in the world without, or within, any antidote, any bulwark, against this fear like this,—the frank acknowledgement of unbound dependence.<sup>289</sup>

For Emerson, the need to externalize himself in his writing was a compensatory act against such feelings of dependence. He describes the truth behind the impulse with startling accuracy in his journal:

We love to paint those qualities which we do not possess...where a man is not vain & egotistic you shall find what he has not, by his praise. I who suffer from excess sympathy, proclaim always the merits of selfreliance.<sup>290</sup>

Of course, the confession here is that Emerson utterly lacks self-reliance. He may have even recognized the implication of his confession, for he left this journal passage out of his essay “Self-Reliance” and used much of the material surrounding it in an essay called “Prudence.”<sup>291</sup> The arena where Emerson’s competing impulses of self-abnegation and self-aggrandizement face off is in Emerson’s vision of the child, which would be ignited again in 1837, when Emerson, thirty-four years old, started to admire the eighteen-year-old Caroline Sturgis.

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<sup>289</sup> (*J*, 2, 259-60)

<sup>290</sup> (*JMN*, 7: 371-372).

<sup>291</sup> (*JMN*, 7: 372 note).

As Kathleen Lawrence shows, the canonical view of the Emerson-Sturgis relationship is that Emerson met Sturgis in 1835, “but only came to notice her when she visited and was introduced to Emerson through Margaret Fuller on June 2, 1838.” As Lawrence also makes clear, this version of the beginning of the relationship is not entirely accurate.<sup>292</sup> It was Sturgis’s strong individualism that seemed to first claim Emerson’s attention, a fact he observed in his journal on March 19, 1837, over a year before the Fuller introduction: “Caroline Sturgis can sketch with invention; others can draw as well, but cannot design. I call it self-distrust,—a fear to launch away into the deep which they might freely and safely do.”<sup>293</sup> The characterizing of Sturgis as one who does not self-distrust shows clearly Emerson’s admiration not only for her ability as an artist, but also for her confidence as an individual.

Born into wealth, Sturgis’ father was “one of America’s first great merchant millionaires,” making “his fortune on dangerous sailing exhibitions to trade furs with Indians of the Northwest territories.”<sup>294</sup> The upbringing recalls Ellen’s familial matrix, as she too was a daughter of man who made his fortune as a merchant. Keen to observe how wealth led to a certain confidence of character that he often admired but did not himself seem have, Emerson, as you may recall, observed in his journal, “My manners & history would have been different, if my parents had been rich, when I was a boy at school.”<sup>295</sup>

Both Ellen and Sturgis had such upbringings, and despite the fact that they were women, who in turn would experience their own social limitations in America’s

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<sup>292</sup> Lawrence, Kathleen. “The ‘Dry-Lighted Soul’ Ignites: Emerson and His Soul-Mate Caroline Sturgis As Seen in Her Houghton Manuscripts.” *The Harvard Literary Bulletin*. Fall 2005, Volume 16, Number 3. 44.

<sup>293</sup> (*JMN* 5: 288)

<sup>294</sup> Lawrence, 45.

<sup>295</sup> (*JMN* 4:263).

nineteenth century, both Ellen and Sturgis had the ease of comportment that often comes from the security of wealth. Each could plainly make their feelings known. Noticing Sturgis, again prior to being introduced to her by Margaret Fuller, Emerson observed in his journal on December 8, 1837, that “The fair girl whom I saw in town expressing so decided & proud choice of influences, so careless of pleasing, so willful & so lofty a will, inspires the wish to come nearer & speak to this nobleness.”<sup>296</sup> Here Emerson’s admiration for Sturgis not only recalls feelings he once held toward his first wife, but also recalls Emerson’s teenage admiration from afar of Martin Gay. With Sturgis, the more mature Emerson of 1837 found a more adequate screen upon which to project his fantasy of the romantic, easily expressive individualist. Sturgis presented an opportunity for Emerson to revise the relationship he once had with Gay, and to a far greater degree, he could again have access to the relationship he had had with his first wife. Ellen, to whom Emerson had once proposed when she was seventeen, seemed once again available in the “fair girl” that was the eighteen-year-old Caroline Sturgis.

Quite tellingly, Emerson transmuted his December 8 journal entry on Sturgis into a significant passage in his essay “Heroism”:

The fair girl, who repels interference by a decided and proud choice of influences, so careless of pleasing, so willful and lofty, inspires every beholder with somewhat of her own nobleness. The silent heart encourages her; O friend, never strike sail to a fear. Come into port

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<sup>296</sup> (JMN 5: 248)



greatly, or sail with God the seas. Not in vain you live, for every passing eye is cheered and refined by the vision.<sup>297</sup>

“The interplay of journal passage to lecture and essay,” observed Kathleen Lawrence, “is important in identifying Emerson as the ‘silent heart’ who speaks to Sturgis obliquely but intimately in a way that he could not yet attempt face to face.”<sup>298</sup> The silence Emerson had kept with Gay, as well as less effusive aspects of his side of the correspondence with Ellen, seem commemorated in the “silent heart” Emerson memorialized in this passage. But after the face-to-face encounters did begin to occur between Sturgis and Emerson, willingness on both sides of the relationship allowed it to blossom. A braver and older Emerson appeared to be no longer willing to keep silent regarding his own passionate feelings toward another human being.

Through passages like the “fair girl” excerpt in “Heroism,” Emerson seemed to be approaching Sturgis through a paternalistic avenue, and the sailing imagery in “Heroism,” as Lawrence notes, was “possibly intended as a confidential embedded message to Sturgis in light of her difficult family history.” “Well-known among the Boston elite, and undoubtedly known to Emerson given earlier references in his journals to Caroline’s father as the quintessential sea-captain,” Sturgis’s “older brother, father’s namesake, and prized Harvard student had tragically drowned after being hit by the sail’s boom in 1834 at the age of sixteen, while learning navigation on one of his father’s ships.”<sup>299</sup> The tragedy “deeply affected Sturgis’ parents, sending her mother into seclusion and severe depression, leaving Caroline as a virtual orphan, and so affecting her

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<sup>297</sup> (CW 11: 21).

<sup>298</sup> Lawrence, 44.

<sup>299</sup> Lawrence, 45.

father that he never again allowed the boy's name to be spoke in his presence."<sup>300</sup> The orphaned, young artist would have been a strong draw for Emerson, given his own myths about himself, which he had been harboring since his lonely youth.

Yet while coming to the aid of Sturgis as a secondary supporting father figure was the likely initial impetus for Emerson's interest in Sturgis, because of some of her similarities to Ellen, the relationship soon shifted toward a decidedly romantic correspondence. Writing to Sturgis on Aug 28, 1840, shortly after a visit from Sturgis, Fuller, and Anna Barker, Emerson wrote,

I must not let the fresh memory of my three golden days fade without telling you how gladly I incur the debt of so much love to you all & severally, & how sensible I am of direct benefit to me...from those few hours.<sup>301</sup>

The letter, which begins in a glad and friendly register, explicitly groups Sturgis with both Fuller and Barker. But what Emerson wrote to Sturgis, in specific, shows that he began to single her out as a confidante with whom he could share an intimate register that he could not share with either Fuller or Barker:

...you have another claim on me which I hasten to own, for are you not my dear Sister and am I not your brother? I cannot write to you with

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<sup>300</sup> Lawrence, 46; see also Sturgis, R.F. *Edward Sturgis of Yarmouth Mass., 1613-1695 and His Descendants* (privately printed, 1914); Loring, C.G. in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1 ser., vol VIII 1864. pp.420-73.

<sup>301</sup> (L 7: 406)

others any more than I can talk with you at a round table. From you I hear my own mother tongue, & not a patois of that, or a foreign language and to you I speak coldly and austere as well as gently & poetically—and always truly. Will you not hear me; will you not reply? Truly, my dear Caroline, it gives me great joy to claim this relation to you, and to insist on being that to you which it suggests.<sup>302</sup>

As Ralph Richardson explains, “even though this, like all his new friendships, was conducted with the language and under the flag of honorary sibling relations and Platonic soul-mating, the charade was not empty.” Unquestionably, Richardson continues, “Emerson was attracted to Sturgis,” and “Emerson was living emotionally, though not physically, in what would now be called an open marriage.” From Richardson we also know that Emerson’s wife Lidian “knew all about” correspondences like the ones he carried on with Sturgis, and was “often herself present” during these encounters; she “frequently copied Emerson’s letters, and counted both Fuller and Sturgis among her own friends.”<sup>303</sup> Lidian’s reliable complicity, which was also a feature of how she managed Emerson’s own undying love for Ellen, likely gave Emerson the emotional confidence he needed to go out on the emotional limb with Sturgis. Lidian’s *caritas*, or caring, allowed Emerson to interrogate *eros*, or being in love, not only with Sturgis, but with the idea. His essay “Love,” began, as Richardson noted, with a “strong straightforward celebration of Eros.”

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<sup>302</sup> (L 7: 406)

<sup>303</sup> Richardson, 329.

Finally, comparing the letters between Emerson and Sturgis with those of Emerson and Lidian reveals “Lidian was often apologetic and self-deprecating, Sturgis playful, ironic, passionate.”<sup>304</sup> Perhaps most importantly of all, at least for Emerson, Sturgis was an artist who could give him something that perhaps no other woman could give him in those grief-stricken months that followed the death of his son Waldo in 1842. Writing immediately after the boy’s death, Emerson confided to Sturgis, “My little boy died last night, my little wonderful boy. You too have seen him & loved him...you will also grieve for him.”<sup>305</sup> Writing a little later in 1842, and after he had received a response from Sturgis, Emerson called upon her to commemorate his son Waldo, “Oh yes, if you have pictures of this child also in your memory, in your head, do not fail, I entreat you to draw them all for me on paper.”<sup>306</sup> Whether Sturgis ever drew these images is not known. But in making the request, Emerson may have been recalling one of his own observations made about Sturgis’s artistry, some three years before Waldo died: “Caroline Sturgis rightly says she cannot draw a child by studying the outlines but by watching for a time his motions & plays she enters into his nature & then can draw him in every attitude.”<sup>307</sup> Wishing to enter his son’s nature by the proxy of a Sturgis drawing would have been a great comfort to Emerson, drawing, as it did, not only on the memory of his son, but also the memories of his own boyish self, which Sturgis seemed to access in Emerson.

The matter of Sturgis’ access to Emerson’s boyish self, while not confessed to outright by Emerson, is available circumstantially. After recording in his journal in 1840 his wish to “soon tell C.” about recent “delights in the beauty of the clouds,” and other

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<sup>304</sup> Lawrence, 54.

<sup>305</sup> (*L* 7: 484).

<sup>306</sup> (*L* 7: 491)

<sup>307</sup> (*JMN* 7: 214).

visuals he had recently witnessed, he copied the poem “Childhood” by Anna Maria Wells into his journal. Wells’ poem speaks of a “delighted laughing boy,” and while it is unclear as to whether Emerson thought of his own son (Waldo was then still living), or a more generalized childhood, the confession Emerson made after mentioning Sturgis, then copying the poem, makes a clear reference to the effect Sturgis had upon him:

Love makes us little children. We never attain a perfect sincerity in our speech except we feel a degree of tenderness. And lovers use the monosyllables and the short & pretty speech of children. Love takes off the edges & the ceremonies of speech & says Thee to one & you to many.<sup>308</sup>

The theory Emerson presents in this journal entry, that “love makes us all children” was never used in any of his published essays or lectures. What it shows readers of Emerson is that the impassioned side of Emerson’s work had an undeniable tether, tied to his childhood. Discovering this child in his first marriage to Ellen Tucker Emerson and having it outed by relationships like the one he had with Sturgis eventually led Emerson to depict his most personal relationships as a procedure of personal and interpersonal revision. Just as Ellen, in her youthful death, became Emerson’s representative lover, causing all of his future romantic relationships with women to be revisions, Emerson’s son Waldo, in his youthful death, would become Emerson’s representative son.

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<sup>308</sup> (JMN 7:391).

## Chapter Six: The Child as Father

“It is true that the boy is gone,” Emerson wrote from Providence on February 15th, 1842, where he was scheduled to lecture a scant two weeks after his son Waldo’s death. In the letter to his wife Lidian, Emerson complains how “for a whole week you have written me no syllable of the poor children, for whom I suppose you think I do not care, nor of yourself nor of Mother.” Understandably, Emerson’s letter is filled with unmastered grief. “Well is this to punish my philosophy?” he asks Lidian, wondering why she has not written him. Yet while Emerson tenderly inquires about his two other children, daughter Ellen, and the still unnamed Edith, he also admits that the recent death of his son has changed the very nature of how he thinks of his home: “the far shining stone that made home glitter to me when I was farthest absent—for you & I are passing, and he was to remain; and with him I feel that my house has lost how much magnetism!”<sup>309</sup>

It has become a commonplace of Emerson criticism to use Waldo’s death as a measure of some kind of psychic turning point for Emerson<sup>310</sup>—in part because of the “willfully perverse third paragraph”<sup>311</sup> of his essay “Experience”:

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<sup>309</sup> (L 3:12).

<sup>310</sup> Stephen Whicher’s study of Emerson, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) was one of the first studies to posit Waldo’s death as the pivot that turned Emerson from optimism to skepticism—a basic structure that still organizes much critical work on Emerson.

<sup>311</sup> Ellison, Julie “Tears for Emerson: Essays, Second Series,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 140. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Ellison, “Tears.”

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. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principle debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me,—neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous.<sup>312</sup>

Emerson's linking of his son Waldo's death with estate imagery is hardly sentimental. Neither is the final image of this passage, portrayed by the botanical word caducous, a term that turns his son into a leaf that merely falls away. But a "sentimental reaction to Emerson's essay today tells us something about the demographics of the professoriate," even if it does not tell us much about Emerson's own psyche.<sup>313</sup> Prone toward obviating personal grief with what he calls in his letter to Lidian "my philosophy," Emerson had the interpersonal (and literary) ability to shunt his personal reactions to pain and loss into seemingly less personal discourses. "He has seen but half the Universe who never has been shown the house of Pain," Emerson observed in his 1844 lecture "The Tragic." No stranger to pain, Emerson's history of alienation from his peers, the loss of his first wife, and then the untimely death of his young son culminate in

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<sup>312</sup> (CW 3:28-29).

<sup>313</sup> Ellison, "Tears," 141.

Emerson's assertion, "Pleasure and Peace are but indifferent teachers of what it is life to know."

As Joel Porte has put it, "the fiercely somber mood" of Emerson's essay "Experience" is "normally attributed to Emerson's despair over the death of his young son," but "the truth is that the tragic event only exacerbated a tendency discernible in Emerson's writing from the start."<sup>314</sup> Even as early as *Nature*, published shortly after the death of Emerson's closest brother, Charles, Emerson's writing bore the marks of a compensatory myth. Neutralizing the actual grief caused by personal losses with the philosophically idealistic notion of "compensation" was Emerson's nascent theoretical *modus operandi*, prior to his son's death. Waldo's death temporarily upset the integrity of Emerson's philosophy to such a degree that it threatened, at least for a moment, Emerson's ability to impersonalize grief.

Part of why this occurred is that Emerson shared the grief of Waldo's death with his wife Lidian, who tended to punish him for his detachment by withdrawing, herself. Sharing the grief with Lidian meant that Emerson needed to address it locally and daily, as he does in the 1842 letter quoted above. When his first wife Ellen died in 1832, Emerson grieved alone. Though he wrote of it often, to his brothers and in his journal, he eventually overcame it by holding fast to his earliest enabling myth—his belief in the heroic figure who conquers sorrow with an intellect that universalizes personal pain and suffering. But Waldo's death tried this myth and, to some degree, destroyed it. "Sorrow

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<sup>314</sup> Porte, *Rep Men*. 154



makes us all children again,” he observed at the end of his first lengthy journal entry after losing Waldo, it “destroys all differences of intellect. The wisest knows nothing.”<sup>315</sup>

It is important that Emerson names the force that destroys the intellect as sorrow. As sorrow defeats wisdom, and makes “all [read, *himself*] children,” in effect what Emerson is saying is that sorrow destroys what he understands as manhood. In “Intellect,” an essay that predated Waldo’s death, Emerson had argued that pain is overwhelming until we are delivered from it by stepping outside our private, egocentric perspective, to regard life objectively, dispassionately, as a phenomenon, a manifestation of ultimately beneficent law. A state of grace, delivered from emotional pain by the intellect, is Emerson’s version of manhood. Stephen Whicher called this “Emerson’s tragic sense,” a refusal “to conceive life as a tragedy,” because only then “could he find the courage to live.”<sup>316</sup>

The refusal was hard won for Emerson, and likely why he conjured an idea of a visionary child, while he simultaneously complained that he was reduced to a childlike status through sorrow. From the nature-boy figure of *Nature* to the nonchalant boy sure of supper in “Self Reliance,” Emerson’s visionary child is denied typically child-like emotions—temper, tears, dependence, shame—because Emerson denied the memory of his actual childhood. Emotionally, Emerson is aware of how sorrow “makes us all children again,” but intellectually, he dismisses the awareness, favoring his representative child over his actual one.

Yet like the death of his first wife, and to a lesser degree the death of his brother Charles, the death of his son returned Emerson to a version of his actual childhood,

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<sup>315</sup> *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology*, Ed. Stephen Whicher Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960. 209. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Whicher, *Anthology*

<sup>316</sup> Whicher, Stephen. “Emerson’s Tragic Sense,” reprinted in *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. Milton Konvitz and Stephen Whicher. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 40.

making him face certain forces of grief and pain that he had not allowed himself to face, or did not yet know how to face. Three months after Waldo's death, Emerson recorded in his journal the emotional beginnings that would eventually become the position on grief expressed in his essay "Experience," the only essay in which Emerson explicitly mentions Waldo's death. The entry is noteworthy insofar as he casts doubt over the entirety of his writing and his life:

If I should write an honest diary, what should I say? Alas, that life has halfness, shallowness. I have almost completed thirty-nine years, and I have not yet adjusted my relation to my fellows on the planet, or to my own work. Always too young or too old, I do not satisfy myself; how can I satisfy others?<sup>317</sup>

To witness Emerson verging here at the precipice of emotional honesty rightly makes us wonder what it was Emerson thought he was writing all along. The crisis seems clear in this journal entry; there is some suspicion on Emerson's part that he has not been forthright; he has not kept an "honest diary." As his journals and essays are never quite diaristic, Emerson's journal entry shows an aspect of himself and his writing that he seems, for the moment, to want to adjust. The entry touches upon themes of mid-life, and the adjustments one makes when it is reached. At the beginning of "Experience," the conundrum of teetering between "too young or too old" finally finds its image in a staircase:

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<sup>317</sup> *Op. Cit.*, 209.

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday. Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. Did our birth fall in some fit of indigence and frugality in nature, that she was so sparing of her fire and so liberal of her earth, that it appears to us that we lack the affirmative principle, and though we have health and reason, yet we have no superfluity of spirit for new creation? We have enough to live and bring the year about, but not an ounce to impart or to invest. Ah that our Genius were a little more of a genius! We are like millers on the lower levels of a stream, when the factories above them have exhausted the water. We too fancy that the upper people must have raised their dams.<sup>318</sup>

The feeling of lostness in the middle of life—"Where do we find ourselves?"—characterizes the mood of this passage. It is the realization of one's limited genius that Emerson tries to honestly imagine here, and he seems finally willing (or able) to abandon

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<sup>318</sup> (W 3:45-46)

the idea, prevalent in his youth, of an individual Genius that was itself part and parcel to God. Joel Porte has called this moment of “Experience” the “keynote of the essay” where a “mood of loss combined with numbness—the sense of being *out of touch*” predominates.<sup>319</sup> As the essay continues, we read Emerson abandoning the heroic individual of the earlier incarnations of his philosophy for what he tellingly calls a more honest position:

The ardors of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism, —that nothing is of us or our works, —that all is of God. Nature will not spare us the smallest leaf of laurel. All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having. I would gladly be moral, and keep due metes and bounds, which I dearly love, and allow the most to the will of man, but I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last, in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal. The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable. The years teach much which the days never know. The persons who compose our company, converse, and come and go, and design and execute many things, and somewhat comes of it all, but an unlooked for result. The individual is always mistaken. He designed many things, and drew in other persons as coadjutors, quarreled with some or all, blundered much, and something is done; all are a little advanced, but the individual is always mistaken. It turns out somewhat new, and very unlike what he promised himself.

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<sup>319</sup> Porte, *Representative Man*, 192.

Precisely why the death of his son wrought such a dramatic change in his philosophy—moving it from Self-Reliance’s “trust thyself,” to “Experience’s” “the individual is always mistaken”—has to do with the particular kind of hope Waldo seemed to represent to Emerson. We read of this hope in the letter Emerson wrote to his wife in 1842 where he writes, “for you & I are passing, and he was to remain.” It is apparent too in the fact that Emerson named his son after his own poetic personality—his *nom de plume* in his adolescence. Waldo’s life seemed to be imagined by Emerson as a potential for correction, on both the personal and social planes. He implicitly addresses this hope in his journal, on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1842, two days after Waldo’s death:

The boy had his full swing in this world; never, I think, did a child enjoy more; he had been thoroughly respected by his parents and those around him, and not interfered with; and he had been the most fortunate in respect to his influences near him, for his Aunt Elizabeth had adopted him from his infancy and treated him ever with that plain and wise love which belongs to her and, as she boasted, never had given him sugarplums. So he was won to her, and always signalized her arrival as a visit to him and left playmates, playthings, and all to go to her.<sup>320</sup>

Part of what appears here is Emerson trying to persuade himself that though Waldo died young, he had a full and happy life—a notion that strips his death of some of its pain. Implicitly however, Emerson experienced his son’s happy childhood by proxy. From

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<sup>320</sup> Whicher, *Anthology* 207.

young Waldo's great opportunities, the fact that he had parental respect and a guiding aunt figure that celebrated (and was celebrated) at arrivals, Emerson hoped to correct his own childhood, which included parental absence, a subsequent dearth of opportunity, and an unreliable and strident aunt.<sup>321</sup>

The idea that the child *corrects* the parent is not new, nor is it specific to Emerson. While the Puritan parenting ideal was one in which discipline was meant to correct the effects caused by "Adam's sin," Emerson's version of correction is much closer to our own, where the parent does not wish to have the child suffer or be denied the way the parent may have suffered or been denied in his youth.<sup>322</sup> Creating a stimulating environment for his son, an improved version of the environment Emerson had had before his father died, Waldo enjoyed the love and admiration of his father and the community that surrounded Emerson and his family.

The day Ellen died, Emerson wrote to one person, his aunt, on the day of his grief. On the day that his son died, Emerson wrote "four short letters to friends and family" and "he wrote six or seven more the next day."<sup>323</sup> The difference points to Emerson's increased sense of community over the span of those ten years, and stands as a testament to the magnitude of need Emerson felt when he lost his son. To his friend Margaret Fuller, Emerson asked, "Shall I ever dare to love anything again?"<sup>324</sup> To Thomas Carlyle, who had first befriended Emerson on his trip to Europe shortly after his wife had

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<sup>321</sup> The "sugarplum" detail also as an antecedent in Emerson's life, as Emerson's father had "attempted to mold [his sons] by offering rewards and conditions": the elder Emerson induced a young Ralph with "Papa will bring home cake for little boys who behave well at the dinner table." Cole, 122.

<sup>322</sup> Greven, Philip *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* New York: New American Library, 1979. 35-36.

<sup>323</sup> Richardson, *Mind On Fire* 359

<sup>324</sup> (*L*, 3:8).

died, he confided, “You can never know how much of me such a young child can take away.”<sup>325</sup>

Given the fact that so little personal disclosure occurs throughout Emerson’s published work, it is an extraordinary feature of “Experience” that Emerson writes about the death of his son at all. Just what he meant by the gesture has inspired its own rich tradition of scholarship that has worked over the problem of Emerson’s reactions, gauging them for their emotional and cultural resonances.<sup>326</sup> “Willfully perverse,” is one such reaction, but Emerson’s wife Lidian seems to have been far less credulous regarding Emerson’s easy public dismissals of grief. Her qualified closeness to Emerson, as well as her participation in the grief over the loss of their son comes across in her correspondence in a way that it does not in “Experience.” “How intensely his heart yearns,” she wrote, “over every memento of his boy I cannot express to you. Never was a greater hope disappointed—a more devoted love bereaved.”<sup>327</sup>

An examination of the constellation of images that expressed Emerson’s grief in “Threnody” shows that Waldo’s life took on what Emerson would have called representative quality. The poem became the memento that would help him put the memory of his actual son to rest. Peter Balaam has recorded how “Emerson wrote the first seven stanzas” of the poem “Threnody” soon after his son’s death, only to “then put the uncompleted poem away for over a year.”<sup>328</sup> The gestation is an important fact.

Emerson’s “progress in composition ran aground on the question of how to manage the

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<sup>325</sup> *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, ed. Joseph Slater New York: Columbia University Press, 1963. 377. Hereafter cited as *E-C Corr*,

<sup>326</sup> Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005. pp. 127-28.

<sup>327</sup> (*Letters of LE*, 82,100.)

<sup>328</sup> Balaam, Peter. *Misery’s Mathematics: Mourning, Compensation, and Reality in Antebellum American Literature*. New York: Routledge., 2009 47

shift from the dirge to the particular version of consolation he had in mind.”<sup>329</sup> In the poem’s two-part structure, the father’s dirge for the lost child is interrupted by the abrupt address of the “deep Heart,” which begins Stanza seven:

The deep Heart answered, "Weepest thou?  
Worthier cause for passion wild  
If I had not taken the child.  
And deemest thou as those who pore,  
With aged eyes, short way before,—  
Think'st Beauty vanished from the coast  
Of matter, and thy darling lost?  
Taught he not thee—the man of eld,  
Whose eyes within his eyes beheld  
Heaven's numerous hierarchy span  
The mystic gulf from God to man?  
To be alone wilt thou begin  
When worlds of lovers hem thee in?  
Tomorrow, when the masks shall fall  
That wizens Nature's carnival,  
The pure shall see by their own will,  
Which overflowing, Love shall fill,  
Tis not within the force of fate

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<sup>329</sup> Keane, Patrick *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of all our Day."* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005.



The fate-conjoined to separate.  
But thou, my votary, weepst thou?  
I gave thee sight—where is it now?

Akin to the Self, or Genius that instructs, the deep Heart is the voice of an Over-Soul-like consciousness. Unsurprisingly, Emerson dramatizes a communion with this form of consciousness to mollify his grief. It is as early as the end of Stanza Two where we read the emotional heart of the poem—Emerson projecting onto his son a representation of the “budding man” whose loss makes “Nature, Fate, men, seek [him] in vain.”:

The gracious boy, who did adorn  
The world whereinto he was born,  
And by his countenance repay  
The favor of the loving Day,—  
Has disappeared from the Day's eye;  
Far and wide she cannot find him;  
My hopes pursue, they cannot bind him.  
Returned this day, the South-wind searches,  
And finds young pines and budding birches;  
But finds not the budding man:  
Nature, who lost, cannot remake him;  
Fate let him fall, Fate can't retake him;

Nature, Fate, men, him seek in vain.

While taking place within the tradition of New England theodicy going back to Anne Bradstreet's elegies for her grandchildren, this portion of the poem also conjures with language familiar to Emerson's essay "The Poet," where Emerson "seeks in vain" the poet he is describing.

Written two years after Waldo's death, "The Poet seems on one hand to resemble earlier works like "The American Scholar (1837)," and "The Divinity School Address (1838)," where heroic individuals are generated to overcome social and theological complacencies. Some interpret "The Poet" as an attempt to "offset the gathering darkness that follows 'Experience.'"<sup>330</sup> And yet "every transcendental flight" is subsequently "denied or negated."<sup>331</sup> The problem, as Emerson laments in the essay, is

We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await.

The rhetorical stance of calling out for the great leader, the great teacher, or the great poet, is typically Emersonian. Emerson's poet—his "true Poet—is the Christ-like hero whose logos breaks our chains and allows us to 'mount above these clouds and

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<sup>330</sup> Porte, *Representative Man*, 189.

<sup>331</sup> Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style*, 120

opaque airs' in which we normally dwell."<sup>332</sup> In the middle of stanza five of "Threnody," Emerson shows us how much he hoped for his son to become such a figure:

Not mine,—I never called thee mine,  
But Nature's heir,—if I repine,  
And seeing rashly torn and moved  
Nor what I made, but what I loved,  
Grow early old with grief that thou  
Must to the wastes of Nature go,—  
'Tis because a general hope  
Was quenched, and all must doubt and grope.  
For flattering planets seemed to say  
This child should ill of ages stay,  
By wondrous tongue, and guided pen,  
Bring the flown Muses back to men.  
Perchance not he but Nature ailed,  
The world and nor the infant failed.  
It was not ripe yet to sustain  
A genius of so fine a strain,  
Who gazed upon the sun and moon  
As if he came unto his own,  
And, pregnant with his grander thought,  
Brought the old order into doubt.

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<sup>332</sup> Porte, *Representative Man*, 189.

Characterized in “Threnody” as the child who might “stay the ages” with “wondrous tongue” and “guiding pen,” Waldo is here depicted as Emerson’s great childhood fantasy for himself—the boy who hoped to “Witch the world with noble penmanship,”<sup>333</sup> as Emerson put it in his teenage journal. As a child, Emerson sought refuge in literature, and fantasized that by becoming poet-orator, he could achieve what Stephen Whicher called his “Dream of Greatness.” As an adult, Emerson learned to take comfort in philosophical idealism, and “Threnody,” “Experience,” and even the earlier *Nature* all show how the aspirational strain of Emerson’s thought defended him against grief. In mythicizing Waldo, Emerson tried to *incorporate* him, as he incorporated Charles in *Nature*, because the one thing he needed in order to live, as Whicher noted, was philosophical optimism; he was the oyster making the pearl from the irritating grain of sand. The gesture represents the Emersonian means for coming to terms with loss, and is his substitute for Anne Bradstreet’s heaven. But the effect is a monumental egotism, where others are seen entirely in relation to the process of one’s own soul-growth.

The death of Waldo reactivated the childhood pain that Emerson sought to come to terms with not only by erasing the past, as he had always done, but also by subsuming suffering, grief, and chaos (the family situation) into a benign cosmic unity that neutralized them. One of Emerson’s attempts at imaging his painful reactions to his son’s death was his “dramatiz[ation] of sentimental risk” in “Experience’s” image of a “swimmer in trouble.”<sup>334</sup> In Emerson’s swimmer-in-trouble allegory, several sentences after those composed about his son, he wrote: “a sympathetic person is placed in the

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<sup>333</sup> (*JMN* 1:36)

<sup>334</sup> Ellison, “Tears,” 144; (*CW* 3:29).

dilemma of a swimmer among drowning men, who all catch at him, and if he give so much as a leg or a finger, they will drown him.”<sup>335</sup> A far from gracious image, what comes across in this figuring are the dangers of sympathy—how it threatens to drown and thereby end the life of the sympathizer. Interestingly, the image of the swimmer has a strong psychic echo with a story Emerson shared with his daughter.<sup>336</sup>

Emerson’s bathhouse episode—his own childhood swimmer-in-trouble story—is a frequently referenced story in Emerson’s biography, as it is one of the few that features his father. As previously recounted, the salt baths were part of a cure for the rheum and Emerson’s father threw him into the water against his will. As a child, Emerson coped with the situation by hiding.<sup>337</sup> The endangered sympathizer in “Experience” is advised to not “accept another’s work,” or “another’s facts,” as it is a “main lesson of wisdom to know your own from another’s.”

To survive, one must reject contact with others. In those instances where Emerson relented, tragedy followed. His response was similar to his childhood experience: get far away from the water and hide. The swimmer imagery of “Experience” is traceable to the loss of his son.

The water and a fixation upon the last breath are depicted in Emerson’s letters immediately after Waldo’s death:

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<sup>335</sup> (CW 3:47).

<sup>336</sup> In Emerson’s idiom, the image is a psychic “remainder” that he described in his essay “Intellect”: “In every man’s mind, some images, words, and facts remain, without effort on his part to imprint them, which others forget, and afterwards these illustrate to him important laws.” *Essays, First Series* “Intellect”

<sup>337</sup> “I did not like it,” Emerson told Ellen, “and when he called me I heard his voice as the voice of Lord God in the garden, and I hid myself and was afraid.” “What” *HMS* (quoted in Barish, 27.)

He gave up his innocent breath last night and my world this morning is poor enough....shall I ever dare to love anything again. Farewell and Farewell O my boy! Alas! I chiefly grieve that I cannot grieve; that this fact takes no more deep hold than other facts, is as dreamlike as they; a lambent flame that will not burn playing on the surface of my river. Must every experience—those that promised to be dearest & most penetrative,—only kiss my cheek like the wind & pass away?<sup>338</sup>

The grief expressed here is similar to what Emerson had written when his first wife died. The complaint is that Emerson can't feel the reality of the loss—that he is “cursed,” to use Whicher's language.<sup>339</sup> In his journals, Emerson also tells us, “What [Waldo] looked upon is better, what he looked not upon is insignificant,” a remark that is also strikingly similar to what he would write to his second wife, Lidian, regarding Ellen's death: “When she left this world, I valued every body who had seen her, and disliked to meet those who had not.”<sup>340</sup> He framed the loss this way to intensify the tone of tragedy, if not the feeling of it.

Alice Miller observed that everyone has a “concealed inner chamber” of childhood drama that contains “unmastered aspects of childhood suffering” that only one's own children gain access to.<sup>341</sup> The fact that Emerson's swimmer story is one that he divulged to his daughter corroborates Miller's observation, as do several other remarks

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<sup>338</sup> (L 3: 8-9).

<sup>339</sup> For Emerson, Whicher tells us, “the grief that he cannot grieve is...a form that grief takes, and not the least painful; as he says, he feels cursed.” Emerson does not actually write the he feels cursed though he does reference Southey's poem “The Curse of Kehama.” Whicher, *Anthology* 491

<sup>340</sup> (L 4: 54)

<sup>341</sup> Miller, *Child*. 25-26.

that Emerson made to his children regarding childhood and children. Importantly, Miller is not merely stating that one's children are the only people who have verbal access to stories of suffering. She also explains that children gain access to unmastered aspects of childhood suffering by being made to experience them, as well, in their own childhoods—the suffering is unconsciously passed on to the next generation for one's progeny to master. Because of his early death, this passing on was not completed with Waldo, as much as it would have been Emerson's other children. Waldo did not, in his short life, master the projections of Emerson's unmastered childhood suffering. Instead, reminiscent of Ellen, Waldo's post-mortem image was used for Emerson's avoidant strategy of obviating reality through representation.

Emerson's second son Edward, perhaps enviously, observed that, "a very little child always had the entrance and run of [Emerson's] study," and when the "young guests came he always made them at ease, found out what interested them, and talked of that as if they were his equals, but in a way that set them to thinking." What comes immediately after Edward's initial observation gestures toward the sub-textual story, those unmastered aspects of suffering in Emerson's identification with the child: "One rule he held to faithfully—never to talk about himself," or by extension, his feelings and affections.<sup>342</sup> In light of Miller's theory, it appears that Emerson unconsciously gave his son Edward access to the experience that he himself had been so troubled by: the alienation that comes with not talking about himself. Conversely, Emerson's lavish attention to his grandchildren suggests a compensatory act, a belated attempt to master the suffering that Emerson endured from parental lack of interest. The source of

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<sup>342</sup> P. 167, 171

suffering, experienced in Emerson the son and continued by Emerson the father, came from an inherited detachment and reticence.

“Tragic catharsis,” Kenneth Burke wrote, “relies on a principle of transformation that comes to a focus in *victimage*.” As Burke suggests, the “tragic pleasure requires a symbolic sacrifice—or, if you will, a goat.”<sup>343</sup> Perhaps it is too much to suggest here an archetypal association between Emerson, Waldo, Abraham, and Isaac, but what can be said here, and what Burke helps us to see, is that it was part of Emerson’s discipline as a writer to victimize his emotional bonds to people. Burke takes us to the end of the chapter on “Discipline” from Emerson’s *Nature*, shows us these traces of victimage, and here we see clearly what Emerson felt he had to do in order to become what he was:

When much intercourse with a friend has supplied us with a standard of excellence, and has increased our respect for the resources of God who thus sends a real person to outgo our ideal; when he has, moreover, become an object of thought, and whilst his character retains all its unconscious effect, is converted in the mind into solid sweet wisdom,—it is a sign to us that his office is closing, and he is commonly withdrawn from our sight in a short time.<sup>344</sup>

Here we read the early manifestation of Emerson’s notion of representative men: that though people may start out as friends, and may initially exist on the personal plane, they are mostly useful as suppliers of a standard. A real person will become an object that

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<sup>343</sup> Burke, Kenneth. “I, Eye, Ay—Emerson’s Early Essay on ‘Nature’: Thoughts on the Machinery of Transcendence.” *The Sewanee Review*, 74, Autumn, 1966. 875.

<sup>344</sup> (*CW* 1: 63).



converts into some form of wisdom, and then it will be time for the person to go. In other words, friends serve the individual as Emerson's representative man serves the development of the race. People, in their most personal register, become sacrificed to the higher understanding, what Emerson called Reason. In part, this strategy of impersonalizing the personal was a defense, a way of explaining past losses so that Emerson could avoid his repressed self-blame. Pain from his personal losses became subsumed in his philosophy (literally, his love of wisdom), of which Emerson was dimly aware when he wrote to his wife Lidian not two weeks after his son's death, "Well is this to punish my philosophy?"

Emerson's philosophy, at least as it pertained to grief and loss, served to keep him from becoming too emotionally attached to anyone new. This psychic defense would no doubt trouble his future friendships. When he asked his friend Margaret Fuller, "Shall I ever dare to love anything again?" he knew the answer, intuitively, and was, in effect, notifying her not to expect much from him.<sup>345</sup> Likewise, he forewarned his friend Thomas Carlyle: "You can never know how much of me such a young child can take away."

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<sup>345</sup> (*L* 3: 8).

## **Chapter Seven: The Child as Friend and Mentor**

“How can I hope for a friend to me who have never been one?”<sup>346</sup> When Emerson entered this question in his journal on May 28th, 1839, he was fresh from two meetings of the Transcendental Club, one at Cyrus Bartol’s house on May 15th, and the other at George Ripley’s house in Boston, on May 22nd. He was also working on an essay that he called “Offsets,” which would eventually become his essay “Compensation.” “I am hard at work on my Essay on Offsets,” he wrote to his brother William, “but we have had much company lately & it gets on not very fast.”<sup>347</sup>

It is instructive that the portion of “Compensation” that deals with the theme of friendship evolved in a period of engagement-crowded, mostly unfulfilling experiences in the company of others. One thing it shows is how far the adult Emerson had come from being the boy who felt overmastered in society; it also shows that Emerson still bridled in the company of others even if he sometimes felt superior to them. “Emerson was far from being satisfied with this Conversation,” observed frequent Transcendental Club attendee Bronson Alcott in his journal on May 3rd, 1829. “He said the people were stupid.”<sup>348</sup>

The friendship portion of Emerson’s “Compensation” comes close to commemorating the third anniversary of his brother Charles’s death. Emerson felt that he

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<sup>346</sup> (*JMN* 7: 204)

<sup>347</sup> (*L* 2: 201)

<sup>348</sup> (3562.127).

would never have a better friend than his own younger brother,<sup>349</sup> whom he alludes to in the passage:

The compensations of calamity are not to be found by the Understanding suddenly but require years of time to make them sensible. The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, seems unmixed loss, but it commonly operates revolutions in the way of life, breaks up a wonted occupation, or household, or style of living, & allows the formation of a new one more friendly to the growth of character. It permits or constrains the formation of new acquaintances & the reception of new influences that prove of the first importance to our later years.<sup>350</sup>

Implicit here is the Coleridgean distinction, central to Emerson's mature thought, between the mundane province of Understanding and the ideal realm of Reason. Though it goes unnamed in the passage, Reason exists as a future state: the compensations of calamity "require *years of time* to make them sensible" [emphasis added]. Compared to Emerson's more immediate reactions to the calamity of Charles's death, Emerson's essay reads like a bromide for the feeling self—a kind of "time heals all wounds" approach to interpersonal loss.

Only his letters reveal the personal register of the loss. Writing to his wife from New York immediately after his brother's death, Emerson observed how Charles had a soul "so costly & so rare that few persons were capable of knowing its price." He then

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<sup>349</sup> "When one has never had but little society—and *all that society* is taken away—what is there worth living for?" (*L* 2: 19)

<sup>350</sup> (*JMN* 7:201).

added, in an admission that showed the inveterate pull that Charles had on his life, “I determined to live in Concord, as you know, because he was there, and now that the immense promise of his maturity is destroyed, I feel not only unfastened there and adrift but a sort of shame at living at all.”<sup>351</sup>

The shame that Emerson felt immediately after Charles’ death likely had to do with the sense of psychic conflation he often felt with his brother. He confessed to long-time friend and correspondent Thomas Carlyle, while grieving Charles’s death, “we made but one man together.”<sup>352</sup> Some of Emerson’s authority, at least by Emerson’s own reckoning, resided with Charles, and could not be adequately separated from him. Writing to his aunt, Emerson admitted,

In him I have lost all my society. I sought no other and formed my habits to live with him. I deferred to him on so many questions and trusted him more than myself that I feel as if I had lost the best part of myself.<sup>353</sup>

Emerson would never rely on or defer to any other friend more than he did with Charles. In his 1835 journal, he asked himself, “Who is capable of a manly friendship?” Suggestively, his answer came by way of a conversation he recorded with Charles: “Very few. Charles thinks he can count five persons of *character*.”<sup>354</sup>

This emphasis on manly friendship is a predilection that helps readers to understand why Emerson was rather better at playing the role of mentor than he was at

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<sup>351</sup> (*L* 2:20).

<sup>352</sup> *E-C Corr*, 148.

<sup>353</sup> (*L* 7:259).

<sup>354</sup> (*JMN* 5:38).

playing the role of friend. Interpersonal relationships, even with females like Margaret Fuller, did not often inspire Emerson to risk his authority. Caroline Sturgis, who revived feelings in Emerson that he had not had since his first marriage with Ellen Tucker, is the exception. Preferring younger colleagues (Fuller was seven years Emerson's junior, Thoreau, fourteen) the role that Emerson played in each of their lives seemed to rely on the distance that these years between them helped to create. Yet when Emerson's authority was challenged, as it would be with Thoreau, Fuller, and to a decidedly more erotic degree by Caroline Sturgis, Emerson showed a tendency to diminish himself in response. Near the end of his career, Emerson's literary executor James Elliot Cabot noted that "In his notes upon himself Mr. Emerson wrote, "My only secret was that all men were my masters. I thought each who talked with me older than I."<sup>355</sup> Emerson's need for uneven interpersonal interaction—to be old to the youth, and, as he would be in "Self-Reliance," young to the authority—is the principle psychological orientation that connects his ideas of friendship, and mentorship.

"Throughout his career, Emerson wrestled with the problem of friendship."<sup>356</sup> As a teenager, long before he had any real friends and well before his relationship with his younger brother Charles blossomed, Emerson recorded in his journal a longing for friendship accompanied by his realization that it did not yet hold a palpable reality for him:

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<sup>355</sup> See Cabot's notes to the *Riverside Edition*.

<sup>356</sup> Steele, *Transcendental Friendship*. 122

Friendship is something very delicious to my understanding. Yet the friends that occupy my thoughts are not men but certain phantoms clothed in the form & face & apparel of men by whom they were suggested & to whom they bear resemblance.<sup>357</sup>

The spectral quality of friendship that Emerson felt in his youth was the product of an apparent anxiousness about the receptiveness of others. Akin to what now might be called “social anxiety disorder,” much of Emerson’s youthful doubt related to his sensitivity to his impoverished upbringing. His brothers William, Edward, and Charles shared this background, but none seems to have reacted with the social uneasiness that Emerson did. Environment alone cannot account for why Emerson seemed so saddled by an impoverished sense of self that dogged him in his youth. But it was there nonetheless. In another teenage journal entry he confesses: “When I consider my poverty & ignorance, & the positive superiority of talents, virtues, & manners, which I must acknowledge in many men, I am prone to merge my dignity in a most uncomfortable sense of unworthiness.”<sup>358</sup> “Merge” is an interesting verb in this context—suggesting that young Emerson had a rather negative association to making contact. How he dealt with his sense of unworthiness, along with his fear of merging is addressed as the journal entry continues:

But when I reflect that I am an immortal being, born to a destiny immeasurably high, deriving my moral & intellectual attributes directly

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<sup>357</sup> (*JMN* 3: 25).

<sup>358</sup> (*JMN* 2: 192).

from Almighty God, & that *my existence & condition as his child*, must be forever independent of the control or will of my fellow children,—I am elevated in my own eyes to a higher ground in life & a better self esteem.<sup>359</sup> [emphasis added]

This childhood enabling myth that Emerson used to maintain a sense of personal integrity amidst society marks the difference between himself and his brothers. There is no evidence that William, Edward, or Charles had anything like this kind of sense of interior privilege, or soul destiny. Upon perusing Charles's journal after his death in 1836, what surprised Emerson most was his brother's hidden melancholy, and Charles' lack for his own enabling myth. Charles's journal showed Emerson "a nocturnal side which his diurnal aspects never suggested," Emerson wrote, "they are melancholy, penitential, self accusing; I read them with no pleasure."<sup>360</sup>

It was poignant to discover that his brothers, particularly Charles, suffered silently and seemingly without enabling myths, while Emerson's myth of his destined soul girded him against socially-inspired melancholy and alienation. The myth stood behind moments in Emerson's essay on "Friendship" like: "Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person hypocrisy begins."<sup>361</sup> To be independent of the control or will of fellow children is also the likely psychological nexus in which Emerson was able to befriend and influence the often off-putting, independent Henry Thoreau, a junior colleague of Emerson's who harbored a greater sense of social alienation than Charles, and even Emerson, himself.

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<sup>359</sup> (*JMN* 2: 192).

<sup>360</sup> (*JMN* 5:152).

<sup>361</sup> (*CW* 2: 119).

Emerson's relationship with Thoreau has been well documented. "For the most part," as Lawrence Buell observed, "the Emerson-Thoreau relation has been assessed as a unilinear affair: Emerson the influencer, Thoreau as object of influence."<sup>362</sup> Yet while this version of the dynamic of their relationship has received some critically useful revision by Buell, and also Harmon Smith, one area in which the unilinear model still holds involves Emerson's influence on Thoreau as a writer.

Some rather startling evidence of this fact comes from Thoreau's neighbor Franklin Sanborn, who claims that shortly before his death Thoreau had told him that during the 1840's he had destroyed much of his poetry at Emerson's prompting.<sup>363</sup> "The exact date of this episode has not been established, but the evidence points to its having occurred not long after his return to Concord from Staten Island" around the year 1843.<sup>364</sup>

"Aware that he had 'awakened a great hope' in Henry Thoreau, Emerson felt a strong responsibility toward him."<sup>365</sup> Beaming with a kind of fatherly pride in Thoreau, in 1841 Emerson wrote to Margaret Fuller that "H.T. is full of noble madness lately," and that he "hop[ed] more highly on him than ever." Yet Emerson admitted, in a prophecy of his feelings to come that "nearly all fine souls have a flaw which defeats every expectation they excite."<sup>366</sup> The failing that the young Emerson first saw in himself, and which he saw too in Charles as he perused his journal, would also be seen in admiring youths like Thoreau.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Buell, *Emerson* 297.

<sup>363</sup> Sanborn, Franklin. *Henry D. Thoreau*, Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1882. 286-87

<sup>364</sup> Smith, 95.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid*, 95. (*L* 2:447); (*JMN* 8:257)

<sup>366</sup> (*L* 2:447).

<sup>367</sup> In his letters to his fiancée Elizabeth Hoar, Charles was able to discuss a "spot" on his soul in a way that he could not with his brother. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, three years before his death, he wrote: "Sometimes it seems to me as if I had done very wrong ever to ask you to tie your fortunes to



In 1841, when he wrote to Fuller in her capacity as an editor of *The Dial*, Emerson seemed content to have awakened a great hope in another. And his 1844 essay “The Poet,” from *Essays, Second Series*, paints a portrait of this sensitive and trustworthy influencer upon reality, who is less a writer and more a man who lives and loves in harmony with Nature:

every man is so far a poet as to be susceptible of these enchantments of nature: for all men have the thoughts whereof the universe is the celebration. I find that the fascination resides in the symbol. Who loves nature? Who does not? Is it only poets, and men of leisure and cultivation, who live with her? No; but also hunters, farmers, grooms, and butchers, though they express their affection in their choice of life, and not in their choice of words.<sup>368</sup>

Some of this material bears a resemblance to Thoreau, a daily figure around the Emerson household whom Emerson admired not only for his love of nature, but also for the easy grace he showed with his physicality. Part hunter, butcher, and farmer, Thoreau seemed to straddle the physical and metaphysical realities with his interests and abilities, and this is a likely reason why Emerson needed Thoreau to become a writer. Giving him

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those of one who has so little to offer or promise as I. Few people sympathize with me. Almost none love me. Some sprite blew cold on my cradle, & I carry the atmosphere through my life... You do not know how fearful I sometimes am that there is not in me that which can make you happy. Am I not of too frigid & insulated a temper? You do not tell me so, but it me be you have felt it. Can you love me as I am, trust me for what is to come? Ah if you can, you may set a new light in my firmament, & call up my new faculties within my soul.” See Bosco, Ronald A. and Joel Myerson. *The Emerson Brothers: A Fraternal Biography in Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 284.

<sup>368</sup> (W 3:15).

writing projects, encouraging him to go to New York, not only to tutor his brother's son William, but also to go about the business of a writing career, Emerson helped Thoreau professionally, but he also seemed emotionally invested in his success.

As Robert Milder has shown, "the same month Thoreau went to reside with Emerson" in 1841, "*The Dial* published an essay of Emerson's that reads like a prospectus for the Walden experiment and an abstract of the chapter 'Economy.'" The essay, "Man the Reformer," showed how "Emerson liked to generalize about the times from the experience of his young disciples," while it also showed the bidirectional influence between Thoreau and Emerson.<sup>369</sup> Milder also points out that the essay "cites three (unnamed but identifiable) lives," one older than him, two younger, which proved what Emerson's essay calls the "infinite worthiness in [man] which will appear at the call of worth."<sup>370</sup> Appraising and then announcing the worth of his contemporaries was a typical Emersonian strategy, allowing him to participate in reform, but not entirely risk an investment of self. The lives Emerson cites in "Man the Reformer," "a sincere wise man and friend" (Bronson Alcott), "a poet" (Ellery Channing), and a "conscientious youth who is still under the dominion of his own wild thoughts, and not yet harnessed in the team of society to drag with us all in ruts of custom" (Thoreau), each constellated aspects of Emerson's own sense of self.<sup>371</sup> But as a projection of self onto another inevitably leads to disappointment, for even one's friends cannot carry one's thoughts into action, Emerson was effectively setting himself up to abandon, and be abandoned by, his friends and mentees.

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<sup>369</sup> Milder Robert. *Reimagining Thoreau*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 18.

<sup>370</sup> (CW 1: 156)

<sup>371</sup> Milder, 19.

Years later, when Emerson complained in “The Poet,” “I look in vain for the man whom I describe”<sup>372</sup> it was clear that Emerson had given up some hope in Thoreau. Looking in vain for the great man, the representative man or, as Emerson calls him in “The Poet,” the “complete man” was the pathological condition of Emerson’s life.<sup>373</sup> In “Man the Reformer,” as Milder has read it, “the role Emerson assigns to the reformer” is “substantially that of the man of letters in ‘The American Scholar,’” though in “Reformer,” Emerson “links the cultured hero to the specifically Thoreuavian ideals of re (and de-nunciation), asceticism, bravery, celibacy, and secular sainthood.” Yet the fantasy of the great man who would come to fix the problems of the world exists throughout Emerson’s oeuvre. In “Threnody,” we even read how Emerson wished his own son to pick up the role that Emerson seemed to spend his career calling out for. But what interests us here regarding Emerson’s relationship to Thoreau is the phenomenon of Emerson trying to project his fantasy upon an initially willing pupil, who, for his own reasons, resisted the projection.

Perhaps Thoreau began resisting the projection even before Emerson did, as suggested by Thoreau’s journal in 1840, almost a full year before he moved into the Emerson residence:

For the most part I find that in another man [Emerson?] and myself the keynote is not the same—so that there are not perfect chords in our gamuts. But if we do not chord by whole tones, nevertheless his sharps are sometimes my flats, and so we play some very difficult pieces together,

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<sup>372</sup> (CW 2: 18)

<sup>373</sup> (CW 2: 13).

though the sameness at last fatigues the ear. We never rest on a natural note—but I sacrifice my naturalness and he his. We play no tune through—only chromatic strains—or trill upon the same note till our ears ache.<sup>374</sup>

Not surprisingly, both Emerson and Thoreau eventually felt alienated from one another. Sameness of thought and aspect, which Thoreau shows awareness of in his journal passage, first gives rise to the potential projective fantasy—giving another what you may most admire in your ideal self. Yet when psychic projection fails to take, as all projections inevitably do, the resultant interpersonal tension, despair, and estrangement frequently finds manifestation in complaining about others, which Emerson would do quite a lot of in his essays of the 1840s.

Emerson's complaint in "The Poet" —"I look in vain for the man whom I describe"—meant that he did not see this poet among his contemporaries. Small wonder that Thoreau burned his own verses, under the weight of Emerson's lofty expectations for the poet. Emerson's early admiration of Thoreau's literary ability was aimed rather aptly at one of Henry's earliest verses "Sympathy," hailed by Emerson as "a beautiful poem," among the "purest strain & the loftiest, I think, that has yet pealed from this unpoetic American forest."<sup>375</sup> But when Emerson's sympathy disappeared, Thoreau's poetry merely had "rude strength," and was decidedly "poetry of the second degree."<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, ed. John C. Broderick et al. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981- . 192.

<sup>375</sup> (*JMN*, 7:230-31).

<sup>376</sup> (*JMN*, 8:257).

And so it was with Ellery Channing, “Thoreau’s best friend and sibling rival for Emerson’s attention”<sup>377</sup> whom Emerson initially championed in *The Dial*, claiming that the “Muse...has found a voice in the cold Cisatlantic State.”<sup>378</sup> But this enthusiasm was frosted over several months later when Emerson mused in his journal that Channing was “a very imperfect artist, and as it not seems, will never finish anything.”<sup>379</sup> There were other poetic flickers to whom Emerson had warmed and cooled, including Jones Very, Christopher Pearse Cranch, and Charles King Newcomb, all of whom “initially inspired Emerson to enthusiasm,” though they “each later brought disappointment.”<sup>380</sup>

Eventually, Emerson admitted that Newcomb was the “greater genius,” but this admission came late in Emerson’s life, remembered as a recognition he secretly shared with his 1840s confidante, Caroline Sturgis:

There are better pleasures than to be first. I keenly enjoyed Caroline’s pointed remark, after we had both known Charles Newcomb, that “no one could compare with him in original genius,” though I knew that she saw, as I saw, that his mind was far richer than mine, which fact nobody but she and I knew or suspected. Nay, I rejoiced in this very proof of her perception. And now, sixteen years later, we two alone possess the secret still.”<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Milder, Robert “On Creating an Unusable Past.” *American Literary History* 15 (3). London: Oxford University Press, 2003., 581.

<sup>378</sup> “New Poetry,” *Dial*, I, 222 Oct., 1840).

<sup>379</sup> (*J* VII: 468-69).

<sup>380</sup> Moss, William “So Many Promising Youths”: Emerson’s Disappointing Discoveries of New England Poet-Seers. *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1 Mar., 1976. 46-64. Hereafter cited in the footnotes as Moss.

<sup>381</sup> (*JMN* 14: 279).

In a later passage from his journal, which finds Emerson seeming to write to Sturgis, he repeated the secret: “How strange that Charles King Newcomb, whose secret you & I alone have, should come to write novels.”<sup>382</sup> Given Emerson’s lack of respect for the novel, coupled with the fact that he wrote this reminder in his journal and not to Sturgis herself, the journal entry points toward the fact that while Emerson claimed to “keenly enjoy” Sturgis’s estimation, the idea that she appraised Newcomb a more original genius than he was bridled him. Admiring Sturgis’s ability to see “clearly & steadily through veils,”<sup>383</sup> Sturgis’s authority with Emerson seemed to have much to do with her ability not to see him as an ultimate authority. Looking *past* Emerson, or even *through* him, appears to have absolved Sturgis from Emerson’s typical pattern with young disciples: excited elation to inevitable disappointment.<sup>384</sup>

Yet what Emerson likely saw in these youths, both in his moments of hope and in his bouts of repudiation, was the unrealized potential of himself. “Experience” from 1844’s *Essays, Second Series* is explicitly aimed at Emerson’s disappointment with youths, but it is hard not to read the essay’s complaints without registering the fact that some of what Emerson is complaining about an aspect of his own dormant creativity:

We see young men who owe us a new world, so readily and lavishly they promise, but they never acquit the debt; they die young and dodge the account: or if they live, they lose themselves in the crowd.

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<sup>382</sup> (JMN 15: 8).

<sup>383</sup> (JMN 9:16).

<sup>384</sup> Moss, 47.

The passage recalls Charles's death—"the immense promise of his maturity" that would not be allowed to fulfill its destiny. But as previously noted, "Experience" is also the essay that deals with the death of Emerson's son Waldo, so the disappointment registered here covers some broad psychological terrain.

Emerson seemed to want to parent young writers through his praise, perhaps as a projected attempt to parent himself, or to transfer to them what he realized he (or his son) could now never accomplish. But the pressure was hard on his pupils. Writing to his wife, Emerson's poetic mentee Ellery Channing complained how he often felt reduced "under the unsparing hand of his terrible master."<sup>385</sup> Seeing himself more as a John the Baptist figure, rather than the redeemer himself, Emerson's poetic stance in his essays became the stance in which he would learn to engage his protégés.

It is worthwhile to compare an earlier work like 1837's "American Scholar" against a later one like "Experience," if only to measure how much Emerson's stance toward the social scene developed. In "The American Scholar," Emerson begins, as Harold Bloom notes, "with 'the old fable' of One Man," taken from the "vision of a primordial being [in] Plutarch's Platonizing essay on 'Brotherly Love'."<sup>386</sup> For Emerson, the One Man is the whole being that existed in a golden age before society had fragmented men into specialized careers:

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man, —present to all particular men only partially...you must take the

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<sup>385</sup> Ellery Channing to Elizabeth Hoar 1857. printed in Dedmond, Francis B. "The Selected Letters of William Ellery Channing the Younger, Part Two." in *Studies in the American Renaissance 1989*, ed. Joel Myerson Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990. 236-37.

<sup>386</sup> Bloom, Harold. *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. 235

whole society to find the whole man. Man is not farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all...The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, —a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man...The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees...his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm.<sup>387</sup>

While “The American Scholar,” purports to be about the vocational and intellectual division of labor—as Emerson expresses it, Man “metamorphosed into a thing, into many things”—it also reads as a fantasy of social integration based upon personal integration. The One Man concept of original completeness is a logical and natural preoccupation for a writer who was religiously bent on the theme of psychic completeness and harmony of the individual self. The absence of the male authority figure was a prominent feature of Emerson’s earliest years. This absence influences Emerson’s “American Scholar,” where Emerson was speaking to a group of young male graduates from Harvard, one of whom was the young Henry Thoreau. The One Man fantasy, and Emerson’s use of it as an idea to motivate the youth, is a compensatory figuration, a conjured version of an integrated masculine role model that Emerson never really had, but had long dreamt about.

What is most odd about Emerson’s concept of completeness, of One Man, was that it also toyed with the idea of incorporating gender unity—a combination of the

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<sup>387</sup> (CW 1:87)



masculine and the feminine. In his journal of June 14, 1842, between the publication of *Essays, First Series* and *Essays, Second Series*, Emerson observed,

A highly endowed man with good intellect and good conscience is a Man-woman and does not so much need the complement of woman to his being as another. Hence his relations to the sex are somewhat dislocated and unsatisfactory. He asks in woman, sometimes the woman, sometimes the man.<sup>388</sup>

The likely influence here is Margaret Fuller, who explicitly developed the idea in *Woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Yet the hermaphrodite figure is an ironic symbol for Emerson to conjure within this context, as it shows him enacting a fantasy of complementariness in a period of his life wherein his own marriage was not especially strong. Interestingly, this is also a period in Emerson's life when he is most surrounded by young women, many of them known to him through Margaret Fuller. Earlier (1836), and perhaps out of developing disinterest in the exclusively male company, Emerson had opened the Transcendental Club to a few gifted women.

As a joining figure, the hermaphrodite came to mind for Emerson as a repairing deity, allowing him to again re-invest himself in the fantasy of the "highly endowed man with good intellect and good conscience" in a time when his marriage was enduring the troubles that inevitably come when a couple grieves the loss of their child. In a later entry, he would put it more succinctly: "The finest people marry the two sexes in their

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<sup>388</sup> Whicher, *Anthology* 219. (June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1842).

own person. Hermaphrodite is then the symbol of the finished soul.”<sup>389</sup> Yet despite his joining fantasy, it is not one that incorporates joining with his wife. As Emerson confesses, “his relations to the sex are somewhat dislocated and unsatisfactory.” Ergo, “The finest people *marry* the two sexes *in their own person*” [emphasis added]. Emerson’s wish to marry the woman inside himself was, presumably, inspired by a disappointment in his marriage to the woman outside himself. Yet the origin of the word hermaphrodite (in Greek myth, it is the child of Aphrodite (love) and Hermes (communication)) reveals just what Emerson lacked and yearned for, though he did not realize it: to be a child who was loved and included in intimate communication.

Emerson’s ideas on love and friendship, each expressed in the essays “Love” and “Friendship” are striking and unusual in their emphasis on essential human solitude and the sublimation of the personal into the spiritual. In “Love,” Emerson recognizes how “passion rebuilds the world for the youth. It makes all things alive and significant.” But the passion, as it often ends up being for Emerson, is aimed away from people and toward “Nature,” which

grows conscious. Every bird on the boughs of the tree sings now to his heart and soul. The notes are almost articulate. The clouds have faces as he looks on them. The trees of the forest, the waving grass, and the peeping flowers have grown intelligent; and he almost fears to trust them with the secret which they seem to invite. Yet nature soothes and

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<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 219. (April ?, 1842).

sympathizes. In the green solitude he finds a dearer home than with men.<sup>390</sup>

Emerson's ideal friendship also swerves from the actual human friend. In "Friendship," Emerson's question becomes, *why do friends have to be very close at all?* Familiarity, he seems to suggest in the essay, dulls the chance for friendship's more purely idealistic manifestation:

Why should we desecrate noble and beautiful souls by intruding on them? Why insist on rash personal relations with your friend? Why go to his house, or know his mother and brother and sisters? Why be visited by him at your own? Are these things material to our covenant? Leave this touching and clawing. Let him be to me a spirit. A message, a thought, a sincerity, a glance from him, I want, but not news, nor pottage. I can get politics, and chat, and neighborly conveniences from cheaper companions. Should not the society of my friend be to me poetic, pure, universal, and great as nature itself?

Framed as a question, the answer is a foregone conclusion for Emerson, whose friendships, he complained in his journal, seemed always distant, and at an arm's length away: "Most of the persons whom I see in my own house I see across a gulf. I cannot go to them nor they come to me. Nothing can exceed the frigidity & labor of my speech with

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<sup>390</sup> (CW 2: 278)

such.”<sup>391</sup> As with most enabling myths wrought in youth, the myth Emerson had created to protect himself from merging with society became disabling in his adulthood.

“Nothing would be so grateful to me as to melt once for all these icy barriers” he wrote in his journal regarding his friends, specifically Fuller.<sup>392</sup> But as Emerson committed himself to the belief that “nearly all fine souls have a flaw which defeats every expectation they excite,” his friendships became sacrificed to the ideas he had about friendship.<sup>393</sup>

“We shall one day talk with the central man,” Emerson observed in his journal in 1846, “and see again in the varying play of his features all the features which have characterized our darlings, and stamped themselves in fire upon the heart.” Clearly a hopeful fantasy that unifies Emerson’s own artistic, spiritual, and literary influences, the journal entry is also a declaration of escape from the plane of actual human interaction. The remoteness that Emerson’s own friends and acquaintances felt from him was a result of Emerson’s literary enabling fiction that created the central man. But crucially for Emerson, this man was not actual, and had never been actual throughout his entire life. Emerson’s central man ideal made him a central man in the eyes of his admirers, but it allowed Emerson himself to derogate the domestic and personal manifestations of the man. “As the discourse rises out of the domestic and personal,” Emerson continues in his journal entry,

and his countenance waxes grave and great, we shall fancy that we talk  
with Socrates, and behold his countenance: then the discourse changes,

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<sup>391</sup> (*JMN* 7: 301).

<sup>392</sup> (*JMN* 7: 509).

<sup>393</sup> (*L* 2:447).

and the man, and we see the face and hear the tones of Shakespeare,— the body and the soul of Shakespeare living and speaking with us, only that Shakespeare seems below us. A change again, and the countenance of our companion is youthful and beardless, he talks of form and color and the riches of design; it is the face of the painter Raffaele that confronts us with the visage of a girl, and the easy audacity of a creator. In a moment it was Michael Angelo; then Dante; afterwards it was Saint Jesus, and the immensities of moral truth and power, embosomed us, and so it appears that these great secular personalities were only expressions of his face chasing each other like the rack of clouds. Then all will subside, and I find myself alone. I dreamed and did not know my dreams.<sup>394</sup>

Emerson's flitting and flickering image of the central man, useful as it was as an enabling myth that allowed him to write, ultimately disabled him from overcoming the pathology of his "cold pedantic self" in his personal life. The promise that he had made to himself in his youth of becoming that central poet-orator who would "shove all usurpers from their chairs by electrifying mankind with the right tone, long wished for, never heard," went unfulfilled.<sup>395</sup> This meant that a tone of unfulfilled promise dominated his sense of youthful friends, acquaintances, and humanity, more generally. The promise of youth allowed Emerson to dream, but it did not make him capable of actually experiencing his dreams. Projecting the promises of his lost youth onto his friends failed too, for the tragedy of youth is that it is a state of hope that can only be

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<sup>394</sup> (*JMN* 8: 141).

<sup>395</sup> (*JMN* 8: 176).

fulfilled after its disappearance. Emerson experienced the disappearing youth in himself, his brother Charles, his friends, and most tragically of all, his son Waldo. But his only defense against these losses was the recourse of the literary moralist: to make the once living—but now dead—particular live in the universal generalities of his writing.

Emerson's peremptory verdict towards the close of his essay "Friendship" linked writing with friends specifically, and, given his own perceived failures as a friend, not a little tragically:

I do then with my friends as I do with my books. I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them. We must have society on our own terms, and admit or exclude it on the slightest cause. I cannot afford to speak much with my friend. If he is great, he makes me so great that I cannot descend to converse. In the great days, presentiments hover before me in the firmament. I ought then to dedicate myself to them. I go in that I may seize them, I go out that I may seize them. I fear only that I may lose them receding into the sky in which now they are only a patch of brighter light. Then, though I prize my friends, I cannot afford to talk with them and study their visions, lest I lose my own.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> (CW 2:126).

## **Chapter Eight: Emerson and the Eternal Child**

Writing of (and from) the vision of the child reaches a natural limit with the onset of old age, when looking forward to a future self—the new teacher, the Poet, or the Great Man—loses its power to imaginatively enable. With old age, every prophetically oriented writer must face the Mosaic dilemma of not seeing the Promised Land of which he had been preaching. In his final essay, written in the last book that did not require collaborative assistance, Emerson spoke of old age in terms that dramatized the quickness with which time passes when measured against one's own eternal self-sense:

Time is indeed the theater and seat of illusion: nothing is so ductile and elastic. The mind stretches an hour to a century and dwarfs an age to an hour...That which does not decay is so central and controlling in us, that, as long as one is alone by himself, he is not sensible of the inroads of time, which always begin at the surface edges. If, on a winter day you should stand within a bell-glass, the face and color of the afternoon clouds would not indicate whether it were June or January; and if we did not find the reflection of ourselves in the eyes of the young people we could not know that the century-clock had struck seventy instead of twenty. How many men habitually believe that each chance passenger with whom they converse is of their own age, and presently find it was his father and not his brother whom they knew.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> “Old Age” from *Society and Solitude*

Chiefly, Emerson is addressing the oddity one feels late in life when the difference between one's self as a youth, and one's self as an old man seems not to amount to anything defining; the persistence of the feeling of selfhood, Emerson stresses, is what's defining. In particular, the image of the bell-glass and its hermetic sealing off of the outside world—the world of feeling—dovetails suggestively with the “reflection of ourselves in the eyes of the young people.” His soon-to-be collaborator and literary executor James Elliot Cabot glossed this passage thus, “In his notes upon himself Mr. Emerson wrote, ‘My only secret was that all men were my masters. I thought each who talked with me older than I.’”<sup>398</sup>

There is a strange conflation in Emerson's identification with the child and his view that the great men of history were a youthful assemblage. The psychological tendency to simultaneously venerate and regress his literary precursors was something that Emerson had taken up early in his career. In “The American Scholar” (1837), perhaps the apotheosis of his prospective orientation to the future, Emerson observed, Meek young men grow up in libraries believing it their duty to accept the views of Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote those books.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> See Cabot's notes to the *Riverside Edition*.

<sup>399</sup> “The American Scholar,” *Lib of Am* 1983, 57.



The imagery established in the opening line emphasizes youth in the men who study Cicero, Locke, and Bacon—these men are described as being in the process of growing up. Yet the revelation here is that Emerson was completely fabricating a fantasy when he wrote that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were no more than young men themselves when they wrote their great works.

Cicero was a lawyer and statesman whose career as a public orator did not receive much recognition until his late thirties. The works Cicero is most known for, his *Ethical Writings*, were completed when he was sixty-two years old. He recorded other treatises later, but there is nothing remaining from antiquity that can be attributed to his youth. John Locke held a government post after graduate school and practiced medicine in his thirties. Locke's first work was published when he was in his late forties, with the bulk of his writing accomplished during his fifties and sixties. Francis Bacon had a career in law and government before publishing his first essays at age thirty-three. He was fifty-nine when he published his great *Novum Organum*. Emerson read and dutifully accepted books written by men well beyond the growing-up stage, certainly not meekly sequestered in libraries. That Emerson needed to publicly assert that Cicero and Locke and Bacon were just boys like me—or in a conspiratorial gesture to the young college graduates he enjoyed lecturing, boys like us—uncovers a childish ego that distorts reality to make it hold his projections.

Maintaining his mythology of the visionary youth, even when facts did not support it, must have reassured Emerson that he could achieve his great works, even if he was still not done growing up. Interestingly, the three figures Emerson cites were all politicians first, presumably with considerable social skills and drive to engage in public

life. That Emerson is a person who publicly praises withdrawal from the social sphere and privately confesses that he finds society daunting can be no coincidence. These men must have been examples to him of individuated adulthood that he felt compelled to regress into juvenile status, to allow himself to maintain his fantasy of the extraordinary wholeness of the child. In that act of characterizing the men as young, he also seeks to *characterize* himself.

Representing the self as a textual equivalent—a character that could be read for its largely hidden authenticities—is a view of the self that Emerson shared with Freud. In a phrase of Emerson’s that could have easily been Freud’s, Emerson claimed, “I read man in his remoter symbols.”<sup>400</sup> Freud’s secular mythology of the self was built upon his sense of the familial matrix, the tri-partite myth that Deleuze and Guattari have called “Daddy-Mommy-Me.”<sup>401</sup> Both thinkers posit a secret self that is of interest, as it is a position that requires a literary technology of articulating selfhood— subtext creates the metaphorical opportunity for subconsciousness.

Emerson’s literary methodology with respect to the latent self helps to explain why he so often privileges characterization as both an explanatory cause and effect. An Emerson essay that deals with this squarely is his essay “Character” from *Essays 2<sup>nd</sup> Series* (1844), which shows us precisely how Emerson thought of the secret self:

It is conceived of as a certain undemonstrable force, a Familiar or Genius,  
by whose impulses the man is guided by whose counsels he cannot impart;  
which is company for him, so that such men are often solitary, or if they

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<sup>400</sup> (*JMN*, 5: 138).

<sup>401</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983. 51.

chance to be social, do not need society but can entertain themselves very well alone.

Both the Genius and the Familiar are human figurations for character and their importance for Emerson as ideas has a long history—dating back to an early life without male authority figures. But Emerson’s next sentence in the essay suggests that his association with the Genius/Familiar is linked psychologically with his own sense of literary talent: “The Purest literary talent appears at one time great, at another time small, but character is of a stellar and undiminishable greatness.” By comparing literary talent with character in this declaration, Emerson attempts to give the privilege to character, and his argument for its “undiminishable greatness” is done in the effort of suggesting his own belief that character stands outside the purview of social propriety and literary taste. In his next observation, “what others effect by talent or by eloquence, this man accomplishes by some magnetism,” Emerson deliberately mystifies character—equating it with magnetism, a trope that conjures primacy with a popular nineteenth century figuration for Magic (i.e. the mesmerist). Yet while Emerson uses this familiar, and culturally relevant, trope from his own times, he does not give the reader any example of a character from his times. There is not one personal character that Emerson employs in his essay that does not come from reading.

The opening sentence of “Character” immediately establishes the specifically literary grounds upon which his notion of character is formulated. “I have read,” Emerson writes, “that those who listened to Lord Chatham felt that there was something finer in the man than any thing which he said.” The opening ends in a declarative and generalized

definition of character: “This is that which we call Character,—a reserved force, which acts directly by presence and without means.” Populating the space between his opening sentence and the definition itself with a host of historical and literary characters—all of which had a power whose largest part was latent—Emerson gives us Mirabeau, makes reference to The Gracchi, Agis, Clemones, and other Plutarchan heroes; Sir Phillip Sidney; the Earl of Essex, Sir Walter Raleigh; Washington, and Schiller; arguing that his list consists of men of “great figure and few deeds.” It is hard to accept that men famously of means such as Sidney, Raleigh, and Washington accomplished few deeds and only acted “directly by presence and without means.” And yet Emerson’s confident, boldly declarative tone here disguises another logical inconsistency that exists between his method of explanation and his subject. He explains to us that his subject, “character...acts directly by presence and without means,” but his method of explaining this subject is exclusively readerly. Emerson stresses *presence* in his definition of character, but his definition of character is predicated not upon being with the person, but rather upon the distancing technology of reading and writing.

Throughout much of Emerson’s canon the argument by example is his preferred (and almost exclusive) method of argument. What makes this form of argument interesting within the context of defining character is that Emerson’s argument is a mimetic recapitulation of the definition, which is to say that Emerson’s definition of character is a readerly characterization. With such a literary approach, compounded by a need to bend the facts to his ideas, Emerson’s examples come to us, inevitably, somewhat fictionalized (regardless of his disdain for the novel as an art form). This makes Emerson’s contention that his men of character are of “great figure and few deeds”

interesting for several reasons, the first of which is related to Emerson's fixation on the representational figure and not the action-oriented deed. Why does Emerson equate character with the figure and not the deed? The answer lies in recognizing the marked differences between a nineteenth-century vision of character and more contemporary visions.

In her study of middle-class culture between 1830-1870, Karen Haltunnen notes that the nineteenth-century vision of character, which privileged Lockean psychology (and not our own more predominantly Freudian view), saw "character [as] a lump of soft wax," making the individual "completely susceptible to any impressions" that may be stamped upon them by society.<sup>402</sup> This character idea, as Haltunnen explains it, had special repercussions with respect to youths, inspiring a whole genre of conduct manuals that were aimed specifically at edifying the young person's character. One author of such a manual, David Magie (whom Haltunnen quotes) provides an exemplary illustration of the nature of this literary phenomenon. Magie writes, "everything leaves its impress on the young: the countenances they look at, the voices they hear, the places they visit, the company they keep, and the books they read."<sup>403</sup> Clearly, what is being spoken to here is a deeply felt anxiety regarding the susceptibility of the youthful character to the developing dangers wrought by the nineteenth century's new cityscape, and Haltunnen's study provides a detailed account of how the burgeoning American marketplace provided a literary market for manuals like Magie's. But for reasons that have largely to do with the culturalist approach to her subject, Haltunnen entirely ignores Emerson's essay on

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<sup>402</sup> Haltunnen, Karen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture, 1830-1870*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). 4.

<sup>403</sup> Magie, David. *The Spring Time of Life; or, Advice to Youth*, Haltunnen, 9.

“Character,” which is an interesting omission, because the essay stands in a provocative relationship to the nineteenth century characterological milieu.

Both in “Character” and throughout his journals, Emerson, unlike the authors of the conduct manuals, tended to spiritualize character, seeing it as a soul-like entity that was distinguished by its ability to resist any outside influence. “Character,” he writes in the essay, “is the impossibility of being upset,” a definition that is almost diametrically opposed to the vision of nineteenth-century character as Haltunen describes it, and as we will later see, opposed to Emerson’s own view of the daemon. His significant suspicions with respect to society, coupled with his religious belief in the absolute integrity of the self, forged in Emerson a resistance to believing in a self that was a mere product of its surroundings. On the other hand, he had no difficulty in seeing the self as a product of the divine:

They cannot come at their ends by sending to Congress a learned, acute, and fluent speaker, if he be not one who, before he was appointed by the people to represent them, was appointed by Almighty God to stand for a fact,—invincibly persuaded of that fact in himself,—so that the most confident and the most violent persons learn that here is resistance on which both impudence and terror are wasted, namely faith in a fact.<sup>404</sup>

As relevant for our times as it was for Emerson’s, this declaration triangulates the crucial aspects of Emerson’s belief as it pertains to the actuality of character in the social milieu. Emerson’s penchant for the mystical and his compulsion to revise biography dovetail

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<sup>404</sup> (CW 3:58)

with his religious upbringing and lead him to assert that the man of Character is a handpicked representative of Almighty God. The undeniable danger of a God-chosen representative in command of a nation, as history has shown, is that such a man may advertise his faithfulness, but as a mere servant, he rarely ever admits responsibility.

While Emerson was probably trying to explain the mystery of temperament, which does not seem a matter simply of nurture and experience, the idea of “being chosen” is monumentally important to a child’s psyche, and crucial to understanding Emerson’s impulse to simultaneously venerate and regress his literary precursors. The elderly Emerson’s confession to Cabot that his only secret was that all men were his masters, and that each who talked with him was older than he helps us to see the ulterior, imaginal psychic registers that imbued Emerson’s literary project with such force. A child’s orientation to *daemon* is Emerson’s psychic secret.

The daemon figure is part of a myth that supports the concepts of fate, destiny, and calling, themes that Emerson worked consistently into his literary work.<sup>405</sup> Likely, Emerson discovered the myth first in Plutarch’s *Morals*, and later from his reading of Plato’s *Republic*. But as an origin story about the self, the myth of the daemon stands between both the psychological and religious views, a place where Emerson himself often stood. Harold Bloom suggests “that the Bible, Shakespeare and Freud show us caught in a psychic conflict, in which we need to be everything in ourselves while we go on fearing that we are nothing in ourselves.” By attributing responsibility for one’s

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<sup>405</sup> The notion first proposed by Stephen Whicher that Emerson “acquiesced” to fate in the later half of his literary career has long been a myth within Emerson criticism. But as Michael Lopez has argued, “Fate,” or “the doctrine of use” was “an essential tenet of [a] philosophy of power Emerson had been articulating and refining essay after essay, from the beginning of his career.” See Lopez, Michael. “The Conduct of Life: Emerson’s Anatomy of Power” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 26.

actions to an external power, one is activating the fear of being nothing in oneself. The payoff for this angst is the denial of personal inadequacy, by claiming that one's actions in the world are not one's true self, the spirit is.

Emerson is a heroic figure for Bloom, who claims that "Emerson dismisses the fear [of being nothing], and insists upon the necessity of the single self achieving a total autonomy, of becoming a cosmos..."<sup>406</sup> Considered as a psychological defense, Bloom's assessment is not wholly inaccurate, but Emerson himself was slow to arrive at this ability to imaginatively dismiss and did not employ it consistently. The prominent Western wish to be everything and fear being nothing required that Emerson adapt the mythical fantasy of an eternal tutelary daemon, an accompanying entity that is not part of the soul or psyche itself (the same concept was called genius by the Romans and guardian angel in the Judeo-Christian tradition).<sup>407</sup>

An early Emerson essay composed when he was seventeen years old features this daemon figure, though Emerson's early essay derogates it, calling it an "artifice" and a "belief of the times."<sup>408</sup> Eventually titled "On the Character of Socrates," the original title for this essay was "Labor on Genius," a designation that connected the daemon with genius explicitly. Presumably, Emerson changed the title so as to better suit the contest for which the essay had been composed. But what he called character in the title of this essay became, as we shall see, Emerson's adult term for his version of the daemonic myth.

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<sup>406</sup> Bloom, Harold. "Emerson: Power at the Crossing" *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Lawrence Buell New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993. 149.

<sup>407</sup> Emerson knew and used all three of these terms, though his likely source for most of the material on the Greeks is Basil Kennett's "The Lives and Characters of the Ancient Greek Poets, 1697, 119.

<sup>408</sup> (*JMN* 1: 29)



Over time, Emerson became more and more intrigued by and invested in the notion of the daemon. He wrote in his journal in 1828, “We are all attended by this daemon. We are acquainted with that signal which is as the voice of God.”<sup>409</sup> This description exposes an unconscious substitution, as Emerson used the same words to describe his father (the voice of God) in his anecdote of the salt baths he took in boyhood. It fits with Emerson’s preoccupation with secret parenting thoughts that Emerson was using the daemon figure as a substitute for a paternal presence. The daemon concept allowed Emerson to remain in a child state, where he did not actively direct his own life, but instead passively submitted to an abstract authority. In 1834, he wrote in his journal in an atypical moment of self-address, “Can you believe, Waldo Emerson, that you may relieve yourself of this perpetual perplexity of choosing?...I cannot but remark how perfectly this agrees with the Daimon of Socrates...”<sup>410</sup>

Emerson’s internalized, though incomplete, father image alienated him from communal relationships and trapped him in his literary ambitions. Because he felt himself to be an outsider, Emerson tried to psychically align himself with a male figure on the literary plane. A particularly resonant figure in this respect is Socrates, who, like Emerson, was criticized for being a corrupting influence on the young. Emerson writes of Socrates again in *Representative Men*, where he touches on the strength of the daemon figure as a decider of success:

Socrates declares that if some have grown wise by associating with him, no thanks are due to him; but, simply, whilst they were with him they

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<sup>409</sup> (JMN 3:107)

<sup>410</sup> (JMN 4:264)

grew wise, not because of him; he pretends not to know the way of it. “It is adverse to many, nor can those be benefited by associating with me whom the Daemon opposes; so that it is not possible for me to live with these. With many however he does not prevent me from conversing, who yet are not at all benefited by associating with me. Such, O Theages, is the association with me; for, if it pleases the God, you will make great and rapid proficiency: you will not, if he does not please. Judge whether it is not safer to be instructed by some one of those who have power over the benefit which they impart to men, than by me, who benefit or not, just as it may happen.” As if he had said, “I have no system. I cannot be answerable for you. You will be what you must. If there is love between us, inconceivably delicious and profitable will our intercourse be; if not, your time is lost and you will only annoy me. I shall seem to you stupid, and the reputation I have, false. Quite above us, beyond the will of you or me, is this secret affinity or repulsion laid. All my good is magnetic, and I educate, not by lessons, but by going about my business.”<sup>411</sup>

What is particularly interesting in this characterization of the daemon as the figure responsible for the success or failure of an enterprise is that it conveniently excuses the man from personal accountability. Nothing could be more attractive a stance for a childish ego than to be able to point to something else while claiming, “I didn’t do it; it wasn’t me.”

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<sup>411</sup> (CW 5:66-67)

Emerson may have first encountered Socrates through Plutarch—an historian with a questionable adherence to facts—but surely in an essay in *Representative Men* titled “Plato; Or, The Philosopher,” one should expect to see Emerson acknowledge the Platonic view of the daemon. Perhaps Emerson had not extensively read the works of Plato, or perhaps he misread Plato, but in either case, Emerson neglected to address the philosopher’s decidedly less credulous vision of the daemon. Plato, in fact, along with his student Xenocrates, held that the daemon was an extremely unreliable guide that must be tolerated, even placated, but not trusted, as the daemon often acted with evil intent.<sup>412</sup> Furthermore, a case has been made that Plato did not mean to claim that Socrates was guided by a daemon at all—that as Plato recorded him, Socrates did not speak of being guided by a daemon, per se, but by a daimonion, a “divine something,” like an inner voice of conscience or intuition.<sup>413</sup> Clearly, Plato did not approve of the passive acceptance of daemonic influence that Socrates may or may not have practiced, but Emerson did not acknowledge Plato’s call for personal accountability and judgment.

So why would Emerson be so willing to expound on the blessings and wise nobility of daemonic guidance in his later years, when he had dismissed it in his youth? The common analysis is that Emerson, in his youth, was under the influence of Unitarian rationalism, while he broke free from that view as he adopted the transcendental view, with its romantic, revelatory orientation to reality. This is certainly true on a superficial level. Yet on the psychological level, there is more involved.

Socrates, as described in the essay “Socrates,” is young Emerson’s rationalist hero—a man who seemed to achieve “moral perfection” not through revelation but

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<sup>412</sup> Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion* Harvard University Press, 1985. pp. 179-81.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

through reason. In the essay, Emerson suggests that Socrates was a product of his time. This is a departure from the concept of the adult Emerson in which heroes work outside of historical forces—or more specifically, they cause historical forces, which is what Emerson’s 1835 Biography lectures argued. But in 1850’s *Representative Men*, Emerson comes to argue that great individuals are the consummate expression of the historical moment, with their gifts for carrying history forward and with their symptomatic faults (e.g. “History is the biography of a few important men.”) Perhaps Socrates paralleled young Emerson’s unconscious understanding that he, himself, was capitulating to social pressures to be a rational thinker—in keeping with what Lawrence Buell once called “the culture of Unitarian liberalism,”<sup>414</sup> which privileged reason over revelation. Yet, the adult Emerson believed that great, representative men cause history, but only as vessels of the daemon, and not because of the will or gifts of the men themselves.

Young Emerson’s original interest in Socrates becomes apparent in his description of Socrates as a victim. “In Athens,” he wrote, “learning was not loved for its own sake but for sinister ends.”<sup>415</sup> Emerson’s Socrates stood against this sinister Athenian sophistry, and suffered death for his stance. We have already seen that the romance that Emerson’s immature mind had with outsiderism (with both his faith and his earliest social milieu) was emboldened by literary associationalism, and it became Emerson’s discipline as a writer to victimize his emotional bonds with people. But here we see young Emerson struggling with the figure of Socrates, who gives the authority of his choices to neither reason nor revelation, but instead to a daemon. Psychologically,

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<sup>414</sup> Buell, Lawrence. “Emerson in His Cultural Context” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Lawrence Buell, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993.

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<sup>415</sup> (JMN 2:215).

Emerson wanted desperately to associate with this figure, but he discredited the daemon, because the young Emerson wanted to believe that men are the sources of their own achievements, if only society lets them. This fit with his juvenile ambitions to create works of greatness, which he expected he would be able to accomplish as long as society did not interfere. His young dismissal of the daemon as a rhetorical tactic fits with his projective view of the great man he will some day be.

As time went on and Emerson was not maturing to psychic adulthood in quite the way he had fantasized, he began to look for new cosmologies to fit his arrested state. Emerson's inherited form of Christianity had long conflated the daemon with the devil, the demonic.<sup>416</sup> His self-conscious proposal of his adult allegiance to the Devil's party as a "Devil's child," in his essay "Self-Reliance" was Emerson's attempt at signaling this private communion with the daemon, while unconsciously acknowledging his desperate need to be parented and ushered into adulthood. But as Emerson well knew, his "one doctrine" of the "infinite of the private man" would shock his audience the "moment [he] called it Religion."<sup>417</sup> The shock value was necessary as an adolescent attempt to separate from society, which he had positioned as a surrogate parent in his attempt at individuation. With no father to rebel against, he had to rebel against social custom, instead.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Nietzsche, Jane Chance. *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975.

<sup>417</sup> (JMN 7:342)

<sup>418</sup> In our era, it is practically expected that youth will rebel against society, but up until Emerson's time, such behavior was almost unthinkable. It may be that Emerson and his transcendental companions were the source of what has become a commonplace ethos in American youth culture, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries where fathers have become increasingly absent.

Emerson's imaginative investment in literature as religion helped his shift in allegiance to occur, as literature has long celebrated the Genius as a tutelary entity. Karl Kerényi described the Roman literary view that a man has a genius resident in his forehead, while a woman has a corresponding Juno or Genia in her eyebrows.<sup>419</sup> Emerson's original contribution to ideas was to conflate the privileged vision of the child with the daemonic tutor, as a way of bringing about the therapeutic end he called Self-Reliance. The irony is that the daemonic trope is no example of self-reliance at all. What it is, however, is a fine explanation a man in his later years can summon to account for the difference between his youthful ambitions and his actual accomplishments, of which he was perpetually dissatisfied.

The daemon concept was another projective tactic in Emerson's examination of the self. The conundrum of the unindividuated psyche is that it is both fragmented and merged: parts of the self are projected into the outer world, while at the same time, the ego cannot see its own limits and assumes that external people, events, even the figure of god, are part of itself. A passage in "Self-Reliance" shows us the manner in which Emerson's concept of Genius fed his ego's tendency to merge and made him unable to recognize the uniqueness of the Other:

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent

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<sup>419</sup> Kerényi, Karl. *The Religion of the Greeks and Romans*, trans. Christopher Holme. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1962. 232-33.

conviction and it shall be the universal sense...and our first thought is rendered back to us by trumpets of the Last Judgment.<sup>420</sup>

Emerson described an appealing sentiment, popular among New Age philosophers, that all living beings are the same underneath it all. However, Emerson's own personal, domestic life exposes a problem in his logic. The problem is an extreme egotism that is not quite the same as a recognition of commonality amongst brethren: "your own thought...is true for all." This belief eliminates the need to learn the thoughts of others; one only needs to ask oneself. Certainly, this was how Emerson operated when dealing with society. Emerson expressed an enduring self-centeredness that related directly to the Child.

The thrust of this child fixation can be seen as early as the teenage Emerson's rumination on Alexander I, which began this study. Emerson's fawning admiration of the youthful Alexander as one who "met the grandeur of circumstance with which God ha[d] surrounded him" (Alex I was also called "Alexander The Blessed) led Emerson to a philosophical spirit that owed a debt to Alexander's namesake and precursor in Antiquity, Alexander the Great.<sup>421</sup> James Hillman theorizes that Alexander the Great experienced an "indescribable longing for something beyond, a longing that carried him beyond all borders in a horizontal conquest of space."<sup>422</sup> Emerson's psychic longing was not expressed geographically. Instead, it was personal and cerebral, and it demanded a peopling of Emerson's consciousness that he would have been at home calling

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<sup>420</sup> (CW 4:122)

<sup>421</sup> (JMN 1:16)

<sup>422</sup> Hillman, James. "Pothos: The Nostalgia of the Puer Eternus," Reprinted in *Senex and Puer* Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman Number 3 Putnam, Connecticut: Spring Publications, 2005. pp.182-83.

compensation. This peopling of Emerson's imagination, as we have seen throughout this study, is as available in Emerson's juvenilia as it is in later works like *Representative Men*. Our modern awareness of psychic strategies like denial and compensation help us to see how Emerson could dismiss the potent Western narrative of the fallibility of the individual that moves through Shakespeare and the Bible. Ancient Greek tragedies warn against *hubris*, which leads me to believe in the fallacy of self-reliance. Fantasies of self-reliance came from the conflict of not knowing the self's place in the world. To cope with (or even avoid) this psychic conflict, Emerson's psyche was in thrall of what Marie-Louise von Franz called the "Puer Aeternus," the eternal child.

A largely negative psychic phenomenon in von Franz's characterization,<sup>423</sup> the affect of the puer has more recently been seen in relation to a dichotomy wherein the puer interacts with its archetypal opposite: the senex (the old man). Emerson never quite found a way to integrate the senex archetype because he had early equated it with a disabling authoritarianism. For Emerson, senex consciousness had an almost exclusively negative valence, and it inspired puer-inflected literary reaction in him. Where senescent pressures attempt to control and limit the psyche, the puer will become more disorderly, confrontational, incorrigible. It is the relationship of the domineering, order-exacting elder and the rebellious, chaotic, impulse-driven child. "As the senex is perfected through time," Hillman observes, "the puer is primordially perfect."<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Von Franz admits to this negative characterization. Speaking of her work on the *puer* as an examination "of the main features of certain young men who are caught up in the mother complex and...identified with the archetype of the *puer*," she also confesses, "I have given a mainly negative picture of these people..." see Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* Zurich: Spring Publications, 1970. 4

<sup>424</sup> Hillman, *Blue Fire* 228.



Hillman maintains that the puer is an aspect of psyche that is constellated in every individual. Archetypes like the senex and puer are ideas that become manifested in individual lives and in culture. In archetypal psychology, however, any *identification* with an archetype is lethal, as it will subsume the Self. The phenomenon of identifying with an archetype is what the Greeks called *hubris*—thinking that one is part of some greater god-like consciousness, rather than one being among many, accountable for one’s acts. The archetype is a pre-defined mode of being. It does not customize itself to fit the particular personality or preferences of the individual. To be under the sway of the archetype is to be lost behind a mask—it removes the person from personal interaction. Thus the puer’s “face is universal, given by the archetype, and so it cannot be faced, confronted in personal *Auseinandersetzung*. It has a pose—phallic warrior, pensive poet, messenger—but not a persona of adaptation.”<sup>425</sup> In other words, to identify with the child-like puer is to be trapped inside the puer’s costume, unable to express the true Self, disconnected from actual human companionship—to be *impersonalized*.

Hillman’s characterization of the puer recalls Lawrence Buell’s observation regarding Emerson’s “sense of personality withheld from the persona,” and how it “evoked strikingly disparate reactions” upon his audience. “Authenticity purified of quotidian personality was exactly what Emerson sought.”<sup>426</sup> Hillman’s puer consciousness, specifically the eternally impersonal aspect of it, also helps us to psychically contextualize Emerson’s archetypal orientation to the individual—the curiosity with which we began our study:

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<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>426</sup> Buell, *Emerson* 313.

In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all. Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal. In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God.<sup>427</sup>

Here Emerson's imaginative move from childhood, to personhood, to impersonhood, traces the typically puer trajectory. In the post-Jungian view, the impersonal God Emerson speaks of is the archetype. The puer is the third party that is present in all his conversations. It would seem that he finds the puer's presence comforting, even as he is experiencing its interference between himself and others (and misdiagnosing it, at that: "Persons acquaint us with the impersonal"). As Emerson seeks to impersonate the child, impersonate the poet, his relationship to the world becomes impersonal. This is what makes the seduction of the archetype lethal to the Self. With a child's ease, "a nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner" as Emerson puts it in "Self-Reliance,"<sup>428</sup> the puer dismisses the fear of being caught in a "need to be everything in ourselves while we...fear that we are nothing in ourselves."<sup>429</sup> But Emerson can do this, like the puer does, only by the eternal pose—the pensive poet, who makes eternally valid statements in the literary manner that Emerson would come to call, by turns, Genius, daemon, character, or the *infinitude* of the private self.

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<sup>427</sup> (CW 5: 147).

<sup>428</sup> (CW 3: 11).

<sup>429</sup> Bloom, "Emerson: Power at the Crossing." 149.

One need look no further back than our two most recent presidential elections to come to the realization that the prescience and power of Emerson's vision of the representative leader remains relevant to our own America. Something happens to the Emersonian secret self as it moves out of the literary milieu and into the social one—even more critically, when the secret self moves into the public milieu. It becomes a dangerous and petulant puer in need of a responsible and guiding adult. What Emerson received, was an oppositional, chiding senex.

It was Emerson's encounters with the senescent archetype first in his father, then in his quixotic, demanding aunt, then in the repressive culture of New England itself that led Emerson to unconsciously run to the sanctuary of the puer. If Emerson had received more nurturing, encouragement, and protection in his actual life, he would not have been left defenseless when the archetypal senex arrived to corroborate Emerson's introjected image of his criticizing, cold, and eventually absent father. Without experience of a valued Self, from a loving Other, the psyche migrates to the archetypal plane. In Emerson's case, the migration occurred on literary soil. On the archetypal plane, only the puer has the power to defy the senex, thus Emerson saw the puer in every reading of a representative man. Emerson wrote of his allegiance to the puer in his vision of the child, but we see now that the Child was a hiding place.

An 1837 journal entry makes Emerson's psychic vulnerability clear:

The boy is allowed to be ignorant & helpless because of the tacit appeal to what he shall be & do. Then comes the young man, the young woman; they have studied much Latin and German, but do not know the meaning

of this sentence, and are ashamed to use the dictionary, or to say “I do not know.” Consent to be despised as ignorant now, and boldly *appeal to the Future, still*. You are old if you reckon the short human life but if you compare your years with the eternity into which you advance, to your extreme youth this unskilfulness [sic] will seem very reasonable. And this I think is the reason why Genius is said to retain the feelings & freshness of Childhood, because to it the horizon does not shut down a short way before the eye, but opens indefinitely. [emphasis added]<sup>430</sup>

Here we see that Emerson’s impulse to compare himself with eternity and claim extreme youth is tied to a profound feeling of shame. He is ashamed that he does not know enough, the criticism his father once made of the young Ralph. Emerson saw that when we are children, we are supposed to be forgiven for being ignorant, and Emerson most desperately needed to be forgiven—forgiven for failing his father by not being perfect (recall that he said of himself that he was “silly”), for not being good enough to receive his parent’s love.

Freud argued that pathology stems primarily from the father, where Jung put more emphasis on the mother. Emerson suffered on both counts. In a cold home, Emerson’s nurturing came from books. The great tragedy of being raised by literature, however, is it maintains the façade of perfection. Emerson read biographies and made much of the “moral perfection” of his role models. What Emerson failed to see is that literary representations are heavily edited—the errors, the mess of life, are excised before the reader can ascertain them. By making literary figures his examples, Emerson had

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<sup>430</sup> (JMN 5:403).

created an impossible standard for himself. The only way he could find to excuse his failings was to remain locked in childhood. Thus, he made a devil's bargain with the puer. This only served to perpetuate his loneliness and alienation, though he had quite a successful career as a writer. Because of his standards of perfection—because of the spectre of the senex—his achievements were never enough. He condemned himself, then found countless ways to explain how he was not ultimately responsible.

And why is Emerson's psychological orientation relevant to twenty-first century readers? It is because of his influence on the American concepts of the individual, of society, and of leadership. Emerson has offered American culture a particularly passive and childish approach to public life, which has cascaded exponentially into a culture that deifies the self above others, that seeks instant gratification, that abdicates responsibility for its own troubles and alienates more and more of the world community. In an assertion that precedes certain infamous statements of President George W. Bush (e.g. "I'm the commander, see—I don't need to explain"), Emerson writes of elected men in his essay "Character" that they,

do not need to inquire of their constituents what they should say, but are themselves the country which they represent; nowhere are its emotions or opinions so instant and true as in them; nowhere so pure from a selfish infusion. The constituency at home hearkens to their words, watches the color of their cheek, and therein as in a glass, dresses its own.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> (CW 3: 56).

This realization came from Emerson's observation of public assemblies, which he claimed "were pretty good tests of manly force." But in our own time, when these public assemblies are presented through the pervasive medium of television, the color of the cheek of our representatives is an even more persuasive glass. Emerson's privileging of eloquence and oratory perhaps seems far less crucial to our times as we move more toward the image, and further away from the word, but the eloquent, oratorical tradition lives on in the appeals of propaganda and advertising.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is easier to see that Emerson did not entirely realize that reading and seeing are two different modes of negotiating reality. Given our own more psychologically (and spectacularly) interfused orientation both to ourselves and to our world, it is also easier to see that by privileging the vision of the child, Emerson had abandoned the adult's responsibility to negotiate reality by all means. Emerson's singular perceptual commitment to his own fragmented reader's eye is why his vision of the Self is, and was, ultimately not vision enough.

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